

C.C. Sabathia is gone to Milwaukee. And with Monday's trade, the circle of life for a midmarket baseball team goes on. Yet it's hard to find fault with the way the Indians' brass handled C.C. because ... well, this is supposed to happen. As long as baseball continues to operate without a salary cap, this will happen. Teams like the Indians will be forced to let go of players like C.C. Erik Cassano talks about it in his latest.



C.C. Sabathia is gone to Milwaukee. And with Monday's trade, the circle of life for a midmarket baseball team goes on.

Star players develop, star players eventually get traded for prospects who hopefully become stars themselves, who in turn, will likely get traded for more prospects. And on it goes.

If it didn't involve ripping out the guts of your favorite team every four-to-six years, it would almost be a thing of beauty in its cyclical wholeness. Like watching leaves bloom in the spring, shade the summer ground, change color and fall as the cool weather arrives.

But it does involve ripping out the guts of your favorite team periodically, so there

is considerably more bitterness involved than when viewing a phenomenon of nature.

The Indians just kicked out a major support from under their team on Monday. Initially, it's a setback. In this "next step" year, after going three wins deep into an ALCS they should have won, we were expecting Mark Shapiro's decision to hold onto C.C. to be one that paid off. We expected the best starting pitching in baseball, an effective bullpen and at least a decent offense. What we got is a team that, unless their fortunes get significantly better in the second half, might begin a long freefall toward the neighborhood of 100 losses.

We now get a starting rotation fronted by Cliff Lee and the currently-injured Fausto Carmona, neither of whom have yet proven that they can carry the title of "ace" over the long haul.

We get a team full of more question marks than ever, with the possibility of a return to contention in the near future in a state of full-scale limbo. Above all, we are now a fan base that has been thoroughly shaken and stirred, our confidence in the Tribe's leaders waning - something that will show up in the team's gate receipts.

Yet it's hard to find fault with the way the Indians' brass handled C.C. because ... well, this is supposed to happen. As long as baseball continues to operate without a salary cap, this will happen. Teams like the Indians will be forced to let go of players like C.C.

John Hart, Mark Shapiro and any other Tribe executive who oversaw C.C.'s drafting, minor-league progression and major-league ascension to Cy Young Award winner did exactly what they were supposed to do. They identified top-notch talent, secured said talent in the draft, groomed the player to arrive in the major leagues in a relatively short period of time and then gave him the freedom to develop his skills.

The fact that C.C. pitched well enough to price himself out of the Indians' range is actually a testament to his development and the way the Indians handled him the past 10 years.

It's the perplexing puzzle of midmarket and small-market baseball. Successful teams develop players that they sooner or later will have to let go. It seems contradictory that a team would want to develop players they ultimately will not be able to keep, but in the confusing world of baseball finance and politics, that's actually a sign that an organization did right by a given player.

If you are interested in the Indians contending anytime in the next five years, you should hope that Carmona, Lee, Grady Sizemore and Victor Martinez also continue to develop into players the Indians will have a hard time keeping. The Indians aren't going to win unless those players developing into the kind who can command eight-figure annual salaries on the free agent market.

And when the ends of their contracts approach, as with C.C., one or more of them will likely get dealt for prospects.

Want to blame Larry Dolan for being too cheap to pony up some real money to keep C.C.? Want to blame Shapiro for wrapping up too much money in mediocre veterans, thereby toying with the vast financial reserves the Indians could have used to lure C.C. into signing an extension? That's fine by me. Lay blame wherever you want to.

But the Twins and Athletics also parted ways with their staff aces last winter in trading Johan Santana and Dan Haren. The Indians aren't only not alone in their plight, they're in good company. The Twins and A's are widely considered model small-market franchises, and even they weren't immune to casting a stud pitcher adrift.

In Oakland's case, Haren was the third ace pitcher GM Billy Beane has traded away, along with Tim Hudson and Mark Mulder.

Anyone think Beane does a bad job running the A's? They challenge for October baseball more years than not.

No one in this corner is trying to say that it isn't miserable to watch a drafted-and-groomed ace pitcher walk away, either through trade or free agency. It happened once before in this decade when Bartolo Colon was shipped to Montreal in 2002. That, of course, came on the heels of Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome leaving via free agency. After a while, you just want to throw up your hands and tell the Tribe to give you a call when they decide they want to hang onto some of these guys instead of taking massive steps backward every few years.

But these are the facts of life for a team like the Indians. You groom your players and hope that they become good enough to command more money than you can pay them. Take the bargain price while you can get it, and let the rich teams lavish your former prodigy with the untold riches your team could never offer.

It's not an Indians problem or a Twins problem or an A's problem. It's a baseball problem. A lot of Cleveland fans cringed when LeBron James mentioned that Brooklyn - the future home of the Nets - was his favorite borough in New York. I cringe when I think of what would probably happen if the NBA were run like Major League Baseball, with no salary cap and a competitive structure that makes winning a lot easier for the teams with the most money. The Cavs would have been forced to do with LeBron what the Indians just did with C.C. There would have been a zero percent chance the Cavs would have been able to keep LeBron if the Knicks or Nets could offer him tens of millions of dollars more over the life of a contract.

But the Cavs can offer LeBron the most money per the NBA's collective

bargaining agreement, so the Cavs have more than a puncher's chance to keep the heart and soul of their franchise, proving once again that the NBA, for all of the off-court antics of some of its players and the ongoing Tim Donaghy scandal, is still the best-run league in sports.

Want to make baseball fair? Create a system like the NBA has, one that rewards good drafting and front-office brains, instead of who has the deepest pockets. Give small-market teams the best chance to keep the talent they draft and cultivate.

Until that happens, we in markets like Cleveland are going to have to accept prospects or draft picks as our lone form of compensation for watch our best baseball players move on to bigger, better and richer things. It's going to be as matter-of-fact as the Sun rising in the east tomorrow morning.

If it's any consolation, the small-market Brewers will have the next crack at winning something with C.C. before the big-market boys get their mitts on him. But, like the Tribe, the Brewers will also have to bid C.C. farewell sooner rather than later.

By Opening Day 2009, C.C., our homegrown workhorse, will be just another overpaid big-market trophy awash in a sea of other overpaid big-market trophies. It was his destination all along.