



If I had just one wish as a sports columnist, it would be to write with the absolute clarity and sense of purpose of Jason Whitlock. He doesn't duck important issues, particularly when race is involved. He doesn't adhere to conventional wisdom or anyone's party line and doesn't write to meet anyone's expectations but his own. Time and again he'll be on the opposite side of where you'd thought he'd be on a particular issue and where you might be. When you're finished, he'll change your mind.

His recent column on Jay-Z's entrée into the world of sports as an agent is brilliant in both its simplicity and logic. Jay-Z may be a cultural phenomena, Whitlock argues, but that doesn't qualify him to represent athletes. More to the point, Jay-Z only trusts his musical career to the best in the music business. Athletes like Kevin Durant and Robinson Cano should do likewise, meaning trust their athletic careers to the best in that business instead of a wanna be athlete living vicariously. It's such a solid, simple view that it reveals, in clear sentences contained in short paragraphs, the illogic of Durant firing his current agents only to be represented by Jay-Z. It can't and won't end well.

But this isn't a fan letter about or to Whitlock. It's more to emphasize that issues of race and politics and business and sports occasionally intersect and when they do sorting through them is tricky business. The issues reveal themselves often enough that there's no need to contrive them, except if your the Plain Dealer's Bill Livingston.

Livingston never met a sentence he couldn't torture or a thought he couldn't mangle. It's usually best to ignore him, like his bosses do by relegating him to the back pages of the sports section waiting out his retirement. Occasionally Livingston gets lucky, the Indians are off, the Browns and Cavs aren't doing something stupid, and there's a big hole to fill on the front page. When

that harmonic convergence occurs, we're left with a column from Livingston like last week when he kind of sort of defended celebrity chef Paula Deen's blatant racism by ham handedly using the Gordon Gee situation as a counterpoint, as if the situations are at all similar.

To put Deen and Gee in the same column is idiotic. One is a racist and a hypocrite. The other wears a bow tie.

Deen's in trouble because she couldn't bring herself to settle a lawsuit/shakedown brought by someone who had the goods on her. Now she's really paying because, well, she said what she said. Yea, the legal system sucks sometimes. Yea, the woman and her attorney were engaged in a legal form of extortion. But ultimately Deen brought on her own demise because she hasn't the good sense to understand that by not purposely escaping the vestiges of a racist upbringing you're damned to repeat them.



When it comes to Gee, what he said and did can't credibly be argued as even remotely similar. Making jokes at the expense of the boobs that run Notre Dame or mocking the modest academic achievements of certain SEC schools is a weird thing for a college president to do in any context but it isn't racism or hypocrisy. It's just an uber geek unable to read the room.

The implication that Gee escaped his foibles as Deen is being unfairly punished given her recent change of heart is so off the mark that it makes you wonder if anyone at the PD bothered to even try to edit the column. Gee was forced to retire. His income, always less than Deen's, was impacted. Deen fell further because she had much further to fall. Ohio State is as big of academic platform as anyone could want but it pales in comparison to the platform that Deen used very profitably to push her lard-based recipes on the public while hiding both the diabetes

that her cooking style induced and the fact that once diagnosed she became a paid spokesperson for the pharmaceutical industry while still pushing the country toward obesity.

A sports columnist works best when he or she can take sports related events and find their inner truths in the context of a larger world. That's Whitlock's unique talent and Livingston's biggest problem. With the Plain Dealer going to a mostly internet based platform, Livingston will now be forced to compete almost directly with Whitlock. I suspect his retirement, like Gee's, will be forced and will be soon as well. Good riddance.

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The Indians have been one of the consistently worst teams in major league baseball the last 10 years. Their attendance has been at or near the bottom in each of those years. Some may see cause and effect but not club president Mark Shapiro. He sees a different truth, one that requires no introspection on the failures of his front office reign.



Whether you view Shapiro as incompetent or unfairly hamstrung by cheap owners is probably missing the point. Shapiro is a survivor of the first order because the chief skill he possesses is the ability to sell his genius to a gullible ownership that has bought everyone of his excuses without question or exception.

In a column in Crain's Cleveland Business, Kevin Kelps unwittingly falls victim to Shapiro's snake oil charm by advancing a Shapiro theory that the Indians' attendance hasn't really tanked, it's been market corrected. Under the Shapiro theory, per Kelps, the Indians' sell out streak and

attendance in the early 2000s was the result of a new stadium and a lack of competition from the Browns. The loss of corporate backers that have moved out of town, increased competition from the Browns (as if) and a recession have all served to create a new normal where the Indians will be one of the worst draws in baseball because, well, they just will be because, I guess, we suck as fans.

Like most Shapiro theories, it has enough truthiness to pass muster among gullible owners and columnists. But what's far more fascinating is the utter lack of blame that Shapiro places on himself and his charges in building one of the worst teams in the league, year after year. The underlying message from Shapiro is that wins and losses aren't all that relevant to attendance. Market size and competition within that market is what matters most.

What's interesting about that theory is that it's merely a rehash of what pre Jacobs field/Jacobs ownership tried to sell as well as if baseball games are to be enjoyed on their individual merits, like any other form of entertainment. They, like Shapiro, sold that yarn because they couldn't do what it really took to boost attendance: spend. If fans are spending their discretionary cash on anything but the Indians, then that's the Indians' fault, not the fans.

There are true baseball fans among us but they are and always will be a minority here and elsewhere. Baseball, like other major league sports, is not a collection of individual games but a pursuit with an overarching story, like a movie. Brad Pitt can open a movie based on his name but he can't make it profitable if the movie sucks. Movie studio execs wouldn't argue that the paying public should just be grateful to attend movies without regard to whether or not it's entertaining so why should a baseball exec like Shapiro?

The Indians lousy attendance is directly and almost perfectly correlated to their performance. It's true that a particular game might be entertaining but most fans are tourists and not natives and so when they spend their money they want to maximize the chance that the product they'll see will be entertaining. A team that loses more than it wins doesn't maximize the odds the average fan needs to make the investment and if there's one thing we know about the Indians of the last decade it's that they lose more than they win.

Shapiro has strangely held on to a job in which he's been abjectly unsuccessful for most of it, assuming you judge success by wins and losses. He's not come close to building or sustaining a team that is more likely than not to win day in and day out. He's facilitated an ownership group that has repeatedly disappointed its fan base by refusing to make the needed investments

despite promises to do so.

All I hear right now is that the Dolans did spend in the offseason. They did. But it doesn't vitiate the previous decade when they didn't. The indifference of fans now is that they already have the singe marks from the previous times they got too close to the flame. You can't blame them for wanting to see more from a team and a franchise then a starting pitching staff that can't go 6 innings on a nightly basis.

Shapiro is smart enough to know that he's selling a load of crap and smart enough, hopefully, to not actually believe that load of crap. The truth is that the potential of this market is known and it's much higher than what we're seeing now because the team has been so bad. Is it as high as it was in 2001? Perhaps not. But this town has more than demonstrated it will pay up and show up when given a consistent reason to do so. Shapiro has more than proven an inability to give the fans their reason and the only ones who truly don't get that simple point are the most important: the Dolans.

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