

Maybe that's what happens when you're a billionaire.

Maybe last week when Tom Golisano rolled out phrases like "tremendous progress" and "hard not to get excited", confusion had set in. For it was his multi-billion dollar company Paychex recently that announced its third quarter revenues had jumped almost 20 percent, and overall net income was up a lousy 13 percent.

Instead, it was Golisano sitting at a yet again prematurely-darkened HSBC arena, musing on his first year of owning the Buffalo Sabres. But that's the way it seems to be with the Irondequoit native. It's always been a mystery why, after three tries and literally hundreds of millions of his own dollars, few people in New York ever took him all that seriously as a gubernatorial candidate.

A cross between Horatio Alger and Don Quixote, Golisano seems eminently likeable, gregarious, philanthropic. Shortly after saving the hockey franchise and community cornerstone – for that is surely what he did – his depreciating humor went on display. "First of all I want to thank all of you who voted against me in last November's election," he told an assembled group of media, Sabres employees and well wishers. The audience laugh was as nervous as it was hearty, until he clarified, "Because if I had been elected, I wouldn't be here today."

Last week's press conference designed to spin a positive perception of the recently completed Sabres season again offered an enlightening peek at why – despite an inordinate amount of seemingly built in advantages – Golisano often can't get past enigmatic, much less electable.

For instance, he doggedly insisted on placing the Sabres recently concluded season in the context of the last 12 months, forgetting that for most, sports isn't an investment of dollars, it's an investment of emotion. It was alienating to a large percentage of fans, few of who would use the word "tremendous" in any analysis of the team's current situation. He even took swipes at the media for pointing out that progress aside – and certainly there was progress – the bigger picture still left the Sabres on the golf course and not the ice rink in April.

Surprising because while Golisano might be new to hockey, he's hardly a sports rookie. He once had a tryout for the Cleveland Indians. About 18 months before plunking down plenty for the team, he made an offer to donate millions to upgrade athletic facilities at the University at Buffalo. Problem was, the idea came less than three months before his last bid to be the state's CEO, and included one ludicrous caveat, that the university change its name. No, he wasn't hoping for Golisano College, he'd settle for New York State University.

Unlike other political maverick wanna-bes, it was hardly as frightening as Ross Perot, who in the middle of a presidential campaign became convinced aliens were going to disrupt his daughter's wedding. There's comfort in knowing he's never professionally wrestled. And to be sure, Golisano has magnanimously and with fewer strings attached donated tens of millions of dollars to colleges and institutions. He has been more than generous in promising payment, albeit delayed, of some \$2.5 million owed unsecured creditors left holding empty bank bags from the John Rigas disaster. Players refer to him publicly as Tom. When was the last time you remember Eric Moulds referring to the man who signs his paycheck as Ralph?

Yet, like some of his comments last week, and his ill-advised UB offer, sometimes his actions and words are far too easily interpreted as disingenuous, detached and even desperate. Most time you get the sense he'd be a great guy to have a beer with; but it's hard to shake the thought that at some unexpected moment, he'd have no reservations about gladly having you wear it too. The past 12 months have been as much about us evaluating him, as the other way around.

It's unlikely Golisano would make a fourth run at the Governor's mansion. He's not threatening one, maybe because it's hard to imagine where yet another try would end up any differently than the first three. Inevitably, in the end, there's a maddening misstep or miscalculation that in minutes muddies what should otherwise be pretty clear water.

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*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at [www.wnynewspapers.com](http://www.wnynewspapers.com). Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)*

