



Monday night's Indians-Tigers game was one of those moments that often lead to other moments. One of those moments that you -- down the road however far -- realize was the finger that flicked the first domino.

It's only the first week of August. There is still a lot of baseball left to be played. The Indians were still only four games out as of Tuesday morning. They're in the thick of the wild card chase. They still have another series left against the Tigers, at the end of the month in Detroit.

And yet....in those moments of postmortem lucidity, when you look back at what this season ultimately became, you can't help but think you might finger Monday's game as the point when the division slipped away. The point when the Indians went from a fight for homefield advantage in the division series to, at best, the wild card and a first-round date with the Red Sox, who won six of seven against the Indians this year.

The Indians came into this week absolutely needing no worse than a split with Detroit. Maintain your three-game deficit, and the division is still quite winnable. Let Detroit take three of four, and their lead swells to five games. Let them come into your house and sweep four games from you,

and their seven-game cushion all but signals the end of the division race.

Jhonny Peralta's 50-game doping suspension and Miguel Cabrera's bum hip would seem to work in favor of the Tribe's chances of at least clawing out a split. But the concrete evidence of the season series to date (a 9-3 Tigers advantage), and the Tribe's often-combustible bullpen, can rot wood faster than you can build a raft out of it.

Monday's game was a winnable game. More than that, it was a game they should have won. It was a game they needed to win. It was an important confidence-boosting toehold to carve in the midst of the torrential, scalding lahar the Tigers had poured out upon the Tribe thus far this year.

When the Tigers took three of four from the Tribe in early July, you could make the case that Detroit had successfully gotten in Cleveland's head. The Tigers' beefy offense is enough to send shivers down the spine of just about any opponent. But the way the Indians melted like Velveeta in the microwave in losing eight of their last nine to Detroit would seem to indicate another level of intimidation.

But that was a month ago. Plenty of time for the Indians to clear their heads and reset themselves for a final push in the last two series against Detroit. And through eight innings, it looks like the Indians had smacked the cobwebs out of their skulls. Corey Kluber looked masterful in holding the Tigers off the scoreboard through seven-plus. Joe Smith finished off the eighth, and the Indians entered the ninth inning with a 2-0 lead.

On came Chris Perez, the Tribe's always-volatile, often-polarizing, never-a-dull-moment closer. Somehow, since returning from a DL stint in late June, he had managed to convert 11 straight save chances, all the while dealing with the fallout from drug charges, stemming from the reported undercover delivery of marijuana to his house in early June.

But toking up was among the least of Perez's problems Monday night. The sporadic nature of save chances, combined with a thin setup corps, had forced Terry Francona to go to Perez perhaps a bit more than he would have liked.

Monday was Perez's eighth appearance in 11 days. That included two sets of back-to-back-to-back games. He was credited with either the save or win in every game he had appeared in since July 27 against Texas.

Perez's command tends to fade in and out from pitch to pitch, batter to batter. You could call him "effectively wild." But as soon as he threw a few pitches to Prince Fielder, Detroit's leadoff hitter in the ninth, you could tell that the recent workload had taken a toll.

Perez did manage to snap off a crisp slider to Fielder, but his fastball looked fat and flat, and prone to drifting. Fielder, with one of the best hitter's eyes in the game, managed to stay with an outside fastball and deposited it just inside the foul line in deep left for a leadoff double.

Perez always makes your stomach dance to his beat, but there was something wrong beyond the protracted angst typically wrought by a Perez save.

One batter in, and you could easily see that he didn't have it tonight, and he wasn't going to find it. Not with an exhausted arm, against this heavy Motown artillery.

Victor Martinez followed with a sharp single to left. Fielder looks and runs like an elephant, but he was able to rumble home with the run that broke the shutout.

Every brain wave you could possibly send in the direction of the third-base dugout at Progressive Field was imploring Francona:

"Get Perez out of there! Get him out NOW! You can't squeeze this save out of him! Don't try! This game is too important tonight – go against the book and take him out!"

But as the old saying goes, managers who listen to fans are doomed to sit in the stands with them, and Francona would have to be the one to look Perez in the face and tell him "I can't trust you to finish this game off tonight."

Perez has 124 career saves and an all-star appearance that say he *can* close the game out. What message does it send to the team if Francona pulls Perez with the save still intact? What message does it send if he inserts Cody Allen with the save still intact, and Allen blows it?

There are so many ways it could go wrong. But it was going wrong – horribly wrong – with Perez out there, flailing away at Detroit’s heavy lumber with his exhausted chicken wing.

Perez walked Andy Dirks. Still nobody out. Allen was warming up in the bullpen at a furious pace. But the save was still out there if Perez could wriggle off the hook somehow.

But Perez didn’t have a deeper reservoir of energy or resolve to tap. Not on this night. When Alex Avila deposited a three-run homer in the stands to put the Tigers ahead by the final margin of 4-2, it was a realization of the inevitable.

If Monday’s game indeed flicks the domino line that ends the Tribe’s hopes of a division title, we might look back and realize it was Francona, in a rare instance of bad judgment, who cost the Indians their shot.

Francona likes to pride himself on managing with his head, not his heart. But perhaps Francona’s heart won out on Monday, and he couldn’t bring himself to quick-hook his all-star closer when the game was still in hand. Perhaps he was concerned about wearing the goat horns if he left the game in Allen’s hands, and Allen failed him.

There really was no sunshine-bathed route for Francona to take. Every path had thunderclouds. But the darkest path was to let an exhausted Perez continue to twist in the wind toward the inevitable outcome.

Francona tried to squeeze one inning too many out of Perez, and he got burned. Hopefully the scorch-marks aren’t still visible in late September, but as Yogi Berra was once purported to have said, “It gets late early around here.”