

## The Roundtable: Can Wedge Survive Another Poor Start?

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Saturday, April 07 2007 7:00 PM -

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The Indians season has started, although slowly thanks to no cooperation whatsoever from Mother Nature. The team has begun the season 2-1 after terrible starts to the past three seasons under manager Eric Wedge, who is in the last year of his contract with the team. We all know Wedge is under the microscope this season. But can he survive another bad April and May? This is the question we asked our roundtable this week.



*“The Roundtable” is a regular weekly Sunday feature that will continue throughout the year covering hot topics surrounding the Browns, Buckeyes, Cavaliers, and Indians. One question. Several different answers from TheClevelandFan.com panel.*

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The Indians season has begun. While Mother Nature has not cooperated and temporarily slowed the start of the season to a halt, the Indians got off to a good start in Chicago this past week winning two of three games from the White Sox in the Windy City.

But, although the Indians won two of the three games, it was the way they lost the last game that had many fans banging their heads against the wall. Once again, the Indians failed to execute late in getting bunts down, moving runners over, and playing good defense, etc. Meanwhile, the White Sox put on a clinic on how to manufacture runs scoring three times without getting an RBI hit.

It is games like this that will go a long way at determining Wedge’s fate with this organization beyond this year. Wedge’s contract runs out after this season, and while the Indians hold two club options on Wedge for 2008 and 2009, they have decided to hold off on a decision to pick one or both up until after the season.

In recent years, the Indians have gotten off to such poor starts in April and May, that they have had to scratch and claw in June and July to even be in shouting distance of first place in the division in August. Will Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro be patient if the Indians get off to yet another poor start? Or, what if the execution on this team is still lacking, when does he – or will he – point the finger at Eric Wedge? TheClevelandFan.com panel opines...

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**Steve Buffum:** □ It's not the record by itself: it's if the team gets off to the same poor start

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by playing the same way and making the same mistakes. If the baserunning is like last year ... or the defense is like last year ... or if new guys like Barfield and Marte carry themselves the same way Peralta and Belliard did ... then and only then could Wedge have a problem.

For better or for worse, Wedge and Shapiro being on the same page philosophically creates an environment in which the only cardinal sin is an inability to adapt to something obvious and unignorable. Losing can be for any number of reasons, many of which can be attributed to "fortune." But the WAY the Indians play is significantly at the feet of Wedge: only if we lose a lot and look uninspired, unprepared, and disengaged while doing it is he in any trouble.

For what it's worth, I don't see that from the first three games.

**Tony Lastoria:** It goes without saying that Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro and Manager Eric Wedge have been joined at the hip since Wedge was appointed as the Tribe skipper back in November 2002. Shapiro doesn't view Wedge as a hired hand, but instead he views Wedge as a business partner, and in this thing together. They both share a virtual identical vision on how the baseball team should be run, as well as with their core values. When Shapiro hired Wedge after the 2002 season, it was with the intent that both he and Wedge were in this for the long run.

Under The Reign of Wedge, Shapiro has had no problem firing other coaches on Wedge's staff when needed. Before Wedge's debut season started in 2003, he was not happy with pitching coach Mike Brown, so Shapiro let him go and replaced him with Carl Willis from the minor league system. In 2005, when the offense went through a first half slump, Eddie Murray was eventually let go and the Indians replaced him from within with Derek Shelton.

In the past, Shapiro has been prudent and quick to pull the trigger when other changes to the coaching staff were needed. The question now is, can Shapiro push personal feelings and a strong friendship to the side and make what would be a tough decision in firing Eric Wedge? I believe he can.

It may not matter if the Indians get off to a cold start, or if they get off to a hot start then fizzle late. All that will matter is this entire season is an ongoing evaluation of Eric Wedge. He will not be fired in-season unless the team implodes, but this team is one of the most talented teams in baseball, so if once again they fail to meet expectations the blame has to fall squarely at Wedge's feet.

**Gary Benz:** □ When I first considered this question, the answer was easy. No.

But given what took place during the last week of spring training, now I'm not so sure. While GM Mark Shapiro signed a new 5-year contract, no similar extension was offered to Manager Eric Wedge. The two are no longer joined at the hip. Wedge is now existing on the hope that his worst-case scenario is that the Indians exercise the first of their two one-year options they still hold on him.

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Frankly, I think this may prove to be one of Shapiro's most shrewd moves to date. By deliberately severing the tether he had with Wedge, he has created a situation for the first time in which Wedge has reason to feel like he needs to be successful in order to retain his job. This may be the first year in which we'll really see what kind of manager Wedge really is. While it is unlikely that Shapiro would yank Wedge mid-season for a slow start, not getting out of the gate quickly is likely to be a huge factor in whether or not he'll be retained next year and/or offered a long-term contract. How Wedge reacts to having this sort of pressure for the first time remains, for me, one of the most intriguing subplots of the entire season.

**Jarad Regano:** With contract extension talks on hold until the end of the year, it is obvious that Eric Wedge will be enjoying less of a free ride than at any previous time during his tenure. I still feel that unless the Indians fall flat on their face in April and May, we will see Wedge survive the 2007 season. At that point, though, another missed playoff appearance would probably signal the end of the Wedge era in Cleveland.

While I have never been a Wedge loyalist, I have always been of the opinion that he is third in line when it comes to blame as to the state of the current Indians. The Dolan's have not committed enough monetarily to be a playoff team (last in the Central in payroll), and GM Mark Shapiro has failed to add the pieces within his limited budget to compensate for that. Per usual in baseball, though, the manager will ultimately be the first scapegoat. I see that happening sometime this October.

**Cris Sykes:** I don't think it makes any difference if the Indians start 12-1 or 2-10 for Eric Wedge's job security. He isn't going anywhere until after this season, if he goes anywhere at all.

First is his friendship with Mark Shapiro. They are very close and Shapiro is not the guy who is going to bail out on his friend and fire him in the middle of a season. He has stuck with him to this point, so what is one more season.

Second would be the Indians have turned things around after a bad start before for Wedge, so that is always in his back pocket. With the implementation of the wild card in Major League Baseball, nobody is totally out of the race until some time in July, so for the Indians to play bad enough for Wedge to get fired would be pretty difficult.

Finally, Dolan is not paying a manager to sit at home. It was like pulling teeth to get him to eat the cash on Jason Johnson's contract, so how bad would Wedge have to be to equal Jason Johnson status? Pretty flippin' bad.

**Jeff Rickel:** A strong start to the season is not necessary for Wedge to keep his job, as much as it pains me to say it. Shapiro is unlikely to dump the manager unless the Tribe starts out extremely poorly - on par with a usual Royals start through May. Even with Showalter on board, I don't see Shapiro turning very quickly on Wedge. While Shapiro and many others are convinced this team is talented, the window for the Indians is just opening and urgency may not be as high as it should be.

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If the season gets out of control early and the ship is not righted then Wedge would be up for the chop. April and May do matter, but a mediocre start can be bested when the season has 162 games. A slow start coupled with a hot July, August, and September that leads to a playoff berth would not be enough for Wedge to manage himself out of the Tribe's future plans. A playoff berth of any kind would certainly guarantee a return of Wedge barring a Grady Little sized blunder in the postseason.

Horrific start excepted, Wedge will be here throughout the season and is guaranteed the job in the future if he wants it if the Tribe can get to 90 wins. A slow start doesn't preclude that. If the Indians decide to emulate the 1899 Cleveland Spiders early on then Wedge will be thrown to the curb quickly.

**Erik Cassano:** □ Knowing the Indians front office and their penchant for decision-making that sometimes borders on paralysis-by-analysis, I can't see Eric Wedge getting fired at any point this season, at least based purely on his win-loss record.

The only way Wedge doesn't make it through the season is if there is some kind of rank-and-file meltdown in the clubhouse and Wedge, as the saying goes, "loses his team." But that's pretty far-fetched. Though I sometimes question Wedge's ability as a day-to-day leader, I can't see him completely losing his grip on his team. He's far too calculating in his managerial approach to let that happen.

As has almost always happened during the Dolan-Shapiro regime, I'd expect the front office to go through a detailed postmortem analysis should the Indians once again falter this season, then make a decision on Wedge's future.

So to answer the question, a shaky April and May could contribute to Wedge's demise as Indians manager, but not until the front office sees how June, July, August, September and October play out. It's not right or wrong. It's just the way they do things.

**Todd Dery:** □ We all know, the baseball season is a marathon, not a sprint. If you remember two years ago, the Astros were considered a dead entity in early June after stumbling out of the gate 15-31. They made quite the turn around and made it all the way to the World Series.

So with that said, I don't believe Eric Wedge must have a strong April and May to save his job. Where he must be strong is at the end of the season. Wedge's teams have been notorious slow starters, and with the strength of the Central Division, winning games against the Tigers, Twins, White Sox, and especially the Royals is of the utmost importance. Winning two of three in Chicago is a good start. The Indians MUST be contenders or Wedge won't be around to see 2008. I believe he knows it.

Wedge's managerial decisions leave a lot to be desired, as does his often aloof personality with the media. But he likes it that way. He seems to have a thick skin, which is a trait needed by any successful manager. He is also a very stubborn man, which hasn't endeared him to the fans either. Add in the fact that he hasn't taken the Indians to the playoffs during his

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tenure, and he is definitely on the hot seat this year. But he is Mark Shapiro's guy. He gets the entire season to prove himself. If the Indians fade out early as they did last year, he will be out at season's end.