

Meet The New Wedge, Better Than The Old Wedge

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Sunday, October 14 2007 7:00 PM -

When Mark Shapiro hired a 34-year old, untested, porn stache laden Eric Wedge back in 2002 ... like alot of Tribe fans, Nick Allburn was leery about the decision. From 2003-2006, the hiring continued to look questionable in spots. But Nick has really liked what he's seen from Wedge as of late, and talks about the evolution of Eric Wedge the manager in his latest effort for us.



Mark Shapiro hasn't always been such a popular guy in the Forest City. Flash back to 2002, Shapiro's first season as general manager, when he really began to leave his mark on the team.

The Indians had fallen out of contention, prompting Shapiro to consummate what remains the most poorly-received trade of his tenure: the famous Bartolo Colon trade. Less than two weeks later, the Sultan of Stutter, Charlie Manuel, was sacked.

Joel Skinner was named interim manager, replacing Manuel for the duration of the season. The following winter, Mark Shapiro hired Eric Wedge, then the manager of the AAA Buffalo Bisons, to permanently replace Manuel as Tribe skipper.

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The move made little sense to many, myself included. At the time, Wedge was only 34 years old, and a relative unknown with no big league managerial experience. Personally, I was puzzled by the move.

Joel Skinner seemed the far more logical choice; he was more experienced, knew the Indians' farm system (he too had worked his way up managing Tribe farm teams), and had already managed the Indians well for half a season. The fact that Skinner stayed on as third base coach after Wedge was named skipper says something about both Skinner's commitment to the Cleveland organization, and Mark Shapiro's political skills.

To this day, I don't understand why Shapiro chose Wedge over Skinner. Maybe they have the same birthday, maybe Shapiro found Wedge's strange facial twitches endearing, or perhaps it was Wedge's tremendous singing voice... Regardless, Eric Wedge was Mark Shapiro's guy.

Although I believed Skinner should have been our man, I was willing to wait and see how the decision would play out. After all, I knew there was a good reason that Mark Shapiro, not yours truly, was running the show. The die had been cast, and Eric Wedge was the new chief.

So I waited and saw, and waited and saw. From 2003 to 2006, Eric Wedge's managerial style caused me irreparable psychological damage, manifested in nightmares, seizures, and at least seven rage blackouts.

I've never taken issue with how Wedge runs the clubhouse, because that is undoubtedly his strength. Wedge keeps the players focused and even-keeled, effectively preaching the "one game at a time" concept. For the most part, Wedge's approach to mentally preparing the players is successful.

Wedge's Achilles' heel has been his management, and often lack thereof, during

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the games themselves.

Prior to 2007, I took issue with the vast majority of Wedge's in-game managerial decisions. Whether it was his refusal to manufacture runs and sacrifice bunt, or his disregard for pinch running and defensive substitutions in the late innings, Wedgie and I didn't see eye-to-eye.

And how many times did Wedge leave a struggling starting pitcher in for one batter too many? The answer lies merely in counting the fist-sized holes in my wall.

But throughout this magical 2007 season, most of Wedge's deficiencies as a manager have been rectified. I don't know if it was divine intervention or an impromptu visit from the ghost of Casey Stengel, but Eric Wedge has changed the way he manages.

Good coaches adjust to the strengths and weaknesses of their players, and Eric Wedge's style has changed in accordance with this concept.

Grady Sizemore has developed into a premier base-stealer, and Wedge turned him loose this season, allowing Sizemore to steal a career high 33 bases. Furthermore, Wedge has become a proponent of stealing with a runner on first and two out; a low risk, high reward scenario that has frequently benefited the Indians this season.

We all remember Aaron Boone, who Wedge started at third base daily for almost two years, all while Boone sported a glove that was questionable (at best) and an OPS that hovered around or below .700. This season, Wedge has hitched his wagon to young, inexperienced players like Franklin Gutierrez and Asdrubal Cabrera, leaving experienced, albeit less talented vets on the bench, and its yielded dividends. Cabrera was arguably the most crucial catalyst for the Tribe's

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impressive late August and September hot streak.

Wedge has also come around on the concepts of making defensive substitutions late in ballgames, and pinch running in potentially tying, go-ahead, and insurance run situations. Just look at Saturday night's game, when Wedge didn't hesitate to substitute pinch runner Josh Barfield for Travis Hafner in the late innings, or to swap out the plodding Trot Nixon for the faster Jason Michaels in the eleventh inning.

As for the removal of starting pitchers, Wedge has become quicker with the hook now that several reliable arms have established themselves in the bullpen. Saturday's game provides another perfect example: after a shaky four innings from Fausto Carmona, Wedge pulled Carmona at the first sign of trouble in the fifth. Old Wedge might not have made that move.

And as for the ultimate hot button issue, sacrifice bunting, when the situation has presented itself, Wedge has dabbled in that, as well. Hearken back to the second game of the ALDS, the 11 inning thriller against the Yankees, when Wedge ordered the Tribe to sacrifice bunt **four times!** That has to be some kind of career high. If Old Wedge's demise has been rumored prior to that contest, it became official when Kenny Lofton crossed the plate to score the winning run in the bottom of the eleventh.

Wedge's willingness to reinvent his managerial style has been one of the most important, and most overlooked factors in the Tribe's October push.

As crazy as it sounds, I, like many other Friends of the Feather, now find myself agreeing with the lion's share of Eric Wedge's decisions on the diamond. This is irrefutable proof that even in the warmth of an Indian Summer, Hell has indeed frozen over.