

Unfortunately, an offseason's worth of separation from last October's failure hasn't helped C.C. Sabathia very much. His first three 2008 starts have been miserable. The offense bailed him out on opening day, but two starts against the Athletics have earned him two losses and raised his ERA to 11.57. Is it merely a hangover from his unforgettably forgettable postseason, or is there more to it than that? This topic is the basis of Erik Cassano's latest effort for us.



Ever since C.C. Sabathia arrived in Cleveland eight years ago, his ability to handle pressure has always been red-flagged.

It's not that C.C. has a weak stomach or lives in fear of being the guy in the spotlight's glow, it's that how he deals with acute pressure seems to be, at times, self-destructive.

All throughout his professional career, and probably his entire life, C.C. has struggled to keep his emotions in check. Some professional athletes' competitive nature lead them to keep a cool, collected demeanor under pressure. In Cleveland, you'd probably immediately think of John Elway surgically removing the Browns from Super Bowl XXI with an assassin's calm. Some athletes get goal-focused tunnelvision, like Michael Jordan with his long list of game-winning shots.

Then there's C.C., who too often falls victim to his own frustration when adversity rears its head in a pressure situation. His performance in last year's playoff run is only the highest-profile example in a career that has been plagued with streaky performance.

When C.C. becomes frustrated, it immediately becomes evident on the mound. The methodical approach to pitching that he finally mastered in last year's Cy Young Award-winning season goes out the window. He either becomes a thrower, attempting to gas every hitter with 97-mph heat, or he becomes a 300-pound Charles Nagy disciple, nibbling at the corners with off-speed stuff. Neither approach works very well.

Unfortunately, an offseason's worth of separation from last October's failure hasn't helped C.C. very much. His first three 2008 starts have been miserable. The offense bailed him out on opening day, but two starts against the Athletics -- one of which was in Oakland, near his hometown of Vallejo, Calif. and a place where he perpetually struggles -- have earned him two losses and raised his ERA to 11.57, the worst of any Indians starter, including Paul Byrd (11.05).

Is it merely a hangover from his unforgettably forgettable postseason, or is there more to it than that?

Unless you're in C.C.'s inner sanctum, it's difficult to say what's really eating at him. But I don't think it has anything to do with facing Manny Ramirez and David Ortiz in the ALCS.

C.C. is facing pressure, yes. But this is a whole different kind of pressure. It's the pressure of a free-agent-to-be star pitcher who just watched Johan Santana get traded to the Mets and sign a contract extension worth nearly \$140 million over the winter. It's the pressure to get that kind of deal for himself, his family and his agents. And the only way he's going to be worth Santana-type money is to go out and dominate like he did last year.

This is pressure, but it hits far closer to home than toeing the rubber in a playoff game. This is the chance to obtain an amount of money so vast that virtually everyone in his immediate and extended family would be free from financial want for generations to come.

When Santana signed his contract extension, you can bet it sent shockwaves through the C.C. camp. Suddenly everyone close to him had a barometer for how much he's going to be worth in free agency, and now he feels the need to live up to that barometer.

There are more factors at work here than just C.C.'s performance. If the Yankees

are desperate enough for pitching this winter, they might still hand C.C. a record deal. But there is always that chance that his performance this season could mean a swing of tens of millions of dollars in the money he'll be offered.

Based on the terse, sarcastic answers C.C. offered for [a story in The Plain Dealer](#) on Sunday, his frustration is thinly-veiled. His answers to pointed questions about whether his contract situation is gnawing at him smacked of a man shaking off medical help after hurting himself:

"To put extra pressure on yourself [because of the next contract] makes no sense. This game is hard enough to play as it is. I've never been a guy to put that type of pressure on myself."

Sorry, C.C., I'm not buying it. Your career has provided too much evidence to the contrary when it comes to how you handle pressure. And I'll go so far as to say I'm sympathetic. I don't know what it's like to be the meal ticket for your entire family, close friends, and a nice, fat commission for your agents, so I'm not going to be the one to say that you need to suck it up and just play ball. It's almost certainly not that simple.

But I will say that it's kind of disheartening to know that the pressure you feel is not the pressure of winning a World Series for the Indians. It's the pressure to get out of Cleveland, out of the clutches of an organization that can't and won't offer you record money, and into the waiting arms of a well-endowed big-market club.

But if C.C. is feeling this kind of pressure before he even signs on the dotted line, I certainly won't envy him when and if he's in the center of the diamond at the Yankees' new stadium next opening day, wearing pinstripes, an eight-figure contract in tow and the eyes of the world on him.