

It's still early, and baseball careers normally aren't defined over the span of one month, so it's easy -- prudent, even -- to take Cliff Lee's fast start with a wait-and-see grain of salt. After all, we've seen it in baseball more times than we can count: Today's headliner is tomorrow's forgotten footnote. But even if you're still cooling your heels and not joining a "Cliff for Cy Young" campaign just yet, you should still take special notice of Lee's historically dominant 2008 start.



It's still early, and baseball careers normally aren't defined over the span of one month, so it's easy -- prudent, even -- to take Cliff Lee's fast start with a wait-and-see grain of salt. After all, we've seen it in baseball more times than we can count: Today's headliner is tomorrow's forgotten footnote.

But even if you're still cooling your heels and not joining a "Cliff for Cy Young" campaign just yet, you should still take special notice of Lee's 2008 start.

Why? He's been good through his first four starts. Very good. Historically good. And with his April performance he is casting away the demons that haunted him in 2007, a season that might have had him questioning his place with the Indians, maybe even his place in the game.

First things first. Let's establish just how far Lee has come from the doldrums of last year. In his first four starts, he has compiled a 4-0 record and 0.28 ERA. He's surrendered 11 hits and two runs all year. Only one of those runs was earned, hence the ERA that fits neatly onto a microscope slide.

Batters might as well be coming to the plate with toothpicks slung over their shoulders when Lee is on the mound, because those big sticks of lumber they usually carry aren't doing them any good. Contact hitters, power hitters, it doesn't matter. They've combined to amass a .109 average off Lee so far.

Hitters' approaches haven't mattered either. Swing aggressively? Lee has 29

strikeouts. Stay patient? He's only walked two batters all year.

The last pitcher to be so dominant over his first four starts was Roger Clemens, who posted an identical 4-0 record and 0.28 ERA in 1991. Clemens ultimately ended up with an 18-10 record and 2.62 ERA, and cruised to the Cy Young Award with 119 voting points and 21 first-place votes.

Time will tell what is in store for Lee during the remainder of the '08 season. There will be time for analyzing that later. Because this fantastic April that Lee has authored isn't really about his stat line or where this month will stand among the greatest pitching months in baseball history.

It's about the redemption of a man who, less than a year ago, didn't even belong on the Tribe's big league roster.

Last year, Lee was shelved with an abdominal strain in spring training. The injury took several months to heal properly, and when he returned to the rotation in May, he was firmly out of sync. The problems snowballed from there.

With control and command that had already been compromised by injury and lack of practice, Lee's historical penchant for giving up hits and runs in bunches seemed to become a monster he couldn't control. He made mistake after mistake over the plate, and hitters knocked the stuffing out of whatever came from his left hand. He was on pace to set career highs for hits and runs allowed if the plug hadn't been mercifully pulled on his spot in the rotation after 16 starts.

But the damage had been done by season's end: A 5-8 record with a 6.29 ERA, and Lee's pitching reputation in shambles. Making matters worse, his temper got him into trouble at least twice.

In May, he engaged in an altercation with Victor Martinez following a start in Texas. Lee beaned Sammy Sosa on the night when the Rangers were celebrating Sosa's 600th career home run. Martinez reportedly took exception to the beaming, and the confrontation led to a team meeting after the game.

After getting shelled by the Red Sox at the end of July, Lee was roundly booed by the Jacobs Field crowd upon being lifted from the game in the fifth inning. His frustration boiling over, he sarcastically tipped his cap to the crowd. The next day, he was sent down to Buffalo and wouldn't see the big leagues again until rosters

were expanded in September.

With the emergence of Fausto Carmona and, to a lesser extent, Aaron Laffey, many fans thought Lee was expendable this past winter. Message boards across the Internet were alive with trade scenarios that could have sent Lee packing to any one of a number of destinations across the country. The overarching theme: We don't want a pitcher who stinks up the joint, then gets mad when we boo him. Send him to the National League, where he can face eight-man batting orders.

But in an offseason during which the Indians infamously did next to nothing to improve the team from the outside, Lee was among the non-moves.

Mark Shapiro and his brain trust, almost to a fault, don't want to trade away pitching. It's maddening at times, especially when you know a pitcher might be able to buy Shapiro the power-hitting corner outfielder his team so desperately needs. But, like it or not, there is more than just a little wisdom in that approach.

When confronted on the subject of why he hangs onto pitchers, even at the expense of improving the offense, Shapiro has two case studies he can point to now. In Carmona and Lee, he has two prime examples of patience paying off.

Perhaps Shapiro was lucky in both instances. Or perhaps he knows that in this world of baseball, redemption is just a year, or a week, or even a start away.

Cliff Lee knows that for sure.