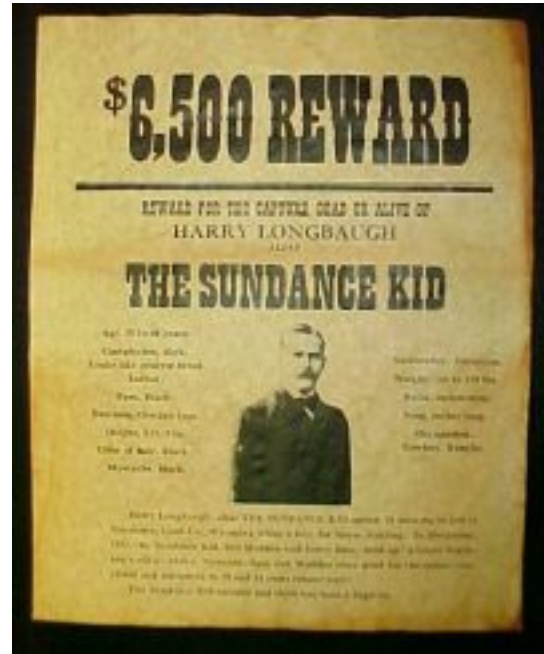


In team sports, you're supposed to win and lose as just that -- a team. No one takes all the credit when times are good, and no one shoulders all the blame when times are bad. But the '08 Indians have a slew of individual players who are vastly underperforming, the ringleaders whose poor performances are conspiring to put the Tribe's '08 season in cement shoes at the bottom of the Cuyahoga River. In his latest column, Erik Cassano looks at the 10 players most responsible for the Indians poor start to the season.



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If you can't give the Indians offense credit for anything else this year, you can at least give them credit for that. They are most definitely losing as a team. The bullpen is a close second in the "suck for one and suck for all" department.

But even within the throng of low batting averages and smattering of high ERAs, there are a number of exceptional offenders, the ringleaders whose poor performances are conspiring to put the Tribe's '08 season in cement shoes at the bottom of the Cuyahoga River.

For these guys, reaction should be swift and corrective measures decisive. With June arriving at the start of the week and the White Sox heating up, time is running short. The roles these players fill are too important to keep wasting at-bats and innings on their struggles. To save the season, either they're going to have to shape up, or Eric Wedge and Mark Shapiro are going to have to lock them up and

throw away the key, as they did with Cliff Lee a year ago.

Here are the 10 biggest offenders this season.

10. Joe Borowski

CHARGE: Driving 80 in a 95 zone

JoBo sought treatment for his waning fastball, and converted his first save situation since re-emerging from the rehab abyss. That corrective measure saved him at least three or four spots on this countdown. But it wasn't enough to get him completely off the hook.

The mere fact that the Indians wasted all of spring training and the first few weeks of the season waiting to see if JoBo's 82-mph fastball would miraculously improve doesn't speak well for the organization's judgment or Borowski's accountability.

VERDICT: He stays as the closer. He's the best option available. With beer goggles -- OK, maybe whiskey goggles -- he might look even better.

9. Franklin Gutierrez

CHARGE: Playing defense like Ben Wallace. Playing offense like him, too

There is no question Gutierrez is an exceptional athlete. He can cover ground with the best of them in right field, and his arm isn't too shabby, either.

Unfortunately, for a club in the beef-before-speed American League, Gutierrez plays like a displaced center fielder. Which, when you get right down to it, he is.

VERDICT: If he were a center fielder playing between two 40-homer guys, his offensive shortcomings could be overlooked. As a right fielder, his game screams "late-inning defensive replacement." He probably has a nice career ahead of him ... as a fourth outfielder.

8. Andy Marte

CHARGE: Felony hype

Maybe he isn't being played enough. Or maybe two winters ago the Red Sox sold the Indians a bill of goods after the Braves sold the Red Sox a bill of goods. Whatever the case, Marte looks overmatched as a major league third baseman.

As long as Wedge insists on playing Casey Blake and Shapiro insists on keeping Marte on the roster, third base is going to be a jumbled mess.

VERDICT: Sentenced to six months of hard time, to be served in mothballs.

7. Casey Blake

CHARGES: Being an excellent teammate, a great clubhouse presence and giving it 110 percent every time he steps between the white lines

A guy this awesome shouldn't be hitting .216 with three homers near the end of May.

VERDICT: Sentenced to six months of community service helping little old ladies cross the street.

6. Asdrubal Cabrera

CHARGE: Attempting to legally change his surname to Mendoza

Unfortunately, his .184 batting average through Wednesday means he's looking up at the Mendoza line. We probably saw a drop in offensive production coming from Cabrera. No one is confusing him with a late-90s Omar Vizquel, except maybe in the field. But when Mike Rouse can point and laugh at your batting average, that's sad.

VERDICT: A shuffle off to Buffalo appears inevitable.

5. David Dellucci

CHARGE: Taking advantage of a general manager's weaknesses

How dare you, David Dellucci! You knew Mark Shapiro had no willpower! You knew you had the grit and hustle and not-talented-enough-to-be-arrogant appeal to make Shapiro and Eric Wedge swoon.

You are a grinder, Dellucci. And knowing that, you flaunted your grinderous grind erosity in front of Shapiro and Wedge. Shapiro couldn't resist. He gave you a multiyear contract. Now Wedge is hopelessly lost in your gaze, drooling over your ability to wring every last ounce of game out of your limited frame.

Oh, you are one slick .227-hitting grinder, Dellucci. If Trot Nixon were as slick as you, he'd still be here tossing pies.

VERDICT: Can I go throw up now?

4. Jhonny Peralta

CHARGE: Providing false statistics

He has 11 home runs. Somehow that is indicative of just 19 RBI and a .225 batting average as of Thursday. Peralta has made a career so far of taking big-swing gambles. But if a 30-homer season yields less than 60 RBI -- as Peralta is on pace for now -- it sure doesn't say a lot for his hitting approach.

VERDICT: I could ask the Tribe to banish him to the trading block, but Peralta

could bounce back with .290 and 85 RBI next year. So it's probably best to hang onto him until you can sell high.

3. Ryan Garko

CHARGE: Strike zone amnesia

Maybe Garko needs to see Peralta's much-publicized Lasik doctors. Somewhere between last year and this year,

Garko

forgot how to identify a pitch as a strike, which is generally the barometer that tells a hitter whether or not to swing at said pitch.

Like Pronk Lite, Garko has morphed from a disciplined hitter to a hacker, getting himself out by taking fruitless rips at letter-high fastballs and sliders two feet off the plate. Hitters like that are a pitcher's best friend. They get themselves out.

VREDICT: He's already getting his punishment, losing at-bats to light-hitting but better-fielding Michael Aubrey.

2. Rafael Betancourt

CHARGE: Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory

At least the '08 bullpen isn't quite the mine field the '06 version was. Rafael Perez and Masa Kobayashi have provided a serviceable tandem to get games from the starter to Borowski.

But the part that is struggling is big. It's Senor Slo-Mo himself, Rafael Betancourt, who was toting a 5.56 ERA as of Thursday.

Betancourt was supposed to be the workhorse of the bullpen, the tried-and-true setup man who could work two stellar innings today, then come back tomorrow and wriggle out of a bases-loaded, one-out jam. But so far, all Betancourt has delivered with any regularity is disappointment.

Though there are positives to the Tribe's bullpen, a struggling Betancourt hinders the late-inning relief situation in no small measure.

VERDICT: Some time in long relief should take some pressure of Betancourt. If not, there is always the DL stint-rehab appearances approach.

1. Travis Hafner

CHARGE: Impersonating a designated hitter

Hafner is flat-out killing the offense. He knows it, everyone in the Tribe organization knows it, and the fans sure as heck know it. On the heels of a fat contract extension, Hafner has turned from a beast-like combination of Jim Thome's power and John Olerud's bat control to Dave Kingman, minus the home runs.

Whispers of steroid abuse are fluttering around the Internet. Whether you subscribe to conventional explanations or fancy yourself more of a conspiracy theorist, the bottom line is this: Hafner has an arthritic right elbow, and ongoing shoulder problems in the same arm. The injuries have slowed his swing, compromised his power and apparently disturbed his once laser-accurate hitting eye.

Hafner still shows flashes of the type of hitter he was from 2004 to '06, but they are few and far between. And the Indians, who put so much stock in Hafner's ability to be the guy who could carry their offense for the next five years, are feeling the pain in a big way.

VERDICT: Shut him down, send him soul-searching, whatever you need to do to give him every chance to get healthy and get his confidence back. Because the Indians are stuck with him and that massive contract.