

Five wins in seven games normally doesn't save a season. But for the Indians, the past week might have been a light-bulb moment for the team's movers and shakers. In the hierarchy of revelations, it wasn't Moses climbing the mountain to see God speak through a burning bush, but it was significant nonetheless: Healthy guys should play. Injured guys should sit. In his latest, Erik Cassano talks about the Indians decision to have Victor and Hafner play, and consequently struggle, through major injuries.



About a week ago, the Indians were left for dead. Coming off yet another dismal road trip, they were eight games back and fading fast. The punch was gone from the lineup, as Travis Hafner was in the midst of his rehabilitation odyssey, while Victor Martinez was just beginning his.

Jake Westbrook was out for at least one calendar year. Fausto Carmona still hadn't returned from a hip injury. Asdrubal Cabrera had lugged his sub-.200 batting average back to Buffalo, and his replacement, Josh Barfield, was shelved with an injured finger days later.

Like vultures swirling over a soon-to-be dead desert mammal, scouts from other teams were lining up to gauge the specifics on C.C. Sabathia, who appeared headed out the door sooner rather than later as Mark Shapiro, it seemed, would be forced to bail out on this sinking season.

But then, a glimmer of hope. The Tribe, sans the heart of their order, sans their Nos. 2 and 3 starters, with Jamey Carroll acting as a 5'-10" gauze pad over the bleeding abrasion that second base had become, rattled off five wins in seven games, slicing their division deficit to five and a half games as of Monday.

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Healthy guys should play. Injured guys should sit.

For most of the season, the Indians' decision-makers seemed to operate under the assumption that whatever their injured players -- Hafner and Martinez in particular -- could give them was better than not having them available at all. Shapiro and Wedge were very slow to put their two sluggers in sick bay because, quite honestly, where else was the run production going to come from? It's a legitimate question, at least to look at the Tribe's lineup on paper. So they opted for the macho "suck it up, fight through it and play ball" route. We all know what happened. The strategy backfired like a Model T.

Hafner, with a arthritic right elbow and a shoulder injury that had been veiled from the public until he actually went on the disabled list at the end of May, was hitting at a .217 clip with four homers and 22 RBIs when the Indians finally decided enough was enough.

Martinez had been battling a sore hamstring all season. But it was his right elbow that likely drained his home run power (again, a secret the Indians guarded until he was placed on the DL) and ultimately put his season on ice. Martinez underwent arthroscopic surgery to remove bone chips from the elbow and will likely miss 6-to-8 weeks.

Keeping Martinez and Hafner in the lineup for so long was in character for Wedge and Shapiro, historically a pair of ultra-conservative baseball minds who would rather stay the course and plow through adversity than make radical changes. But as the Tribe's season foundered, their collective hand was forced. It turns out, the moves they were so reluctant to make were the best moves to make for the sake of the season.

Freed from the burden of having to stick with Hafner and Martinez, wasting at-bats on their injured limbs, nursing them along as the pair tried to get healthy and work through the mental static that accompanies any prolonged slump, Wedge was able to turn to the healthy guys left in his clubhouse and ask them to carry the load. So far, it has worked.

Youngsters such as Ben Francisco and Shin-Soo Choo have responded well to increased playing time, both hitting well over .300. Ryan Garko has shown signs of life batting cleanup. Grady Sizemore has raised his average to nearly .270 and is on a 40-homer pace. Casey Blake, the Tribe's best clutch hitter all year, is inching his batting average through the .250s and is tied with Sizemore for the team RBI lead.

And Carroll, who just completed a 14-for-22 homestand, gets a special mention.

What happens when you add a competent offense to good starting pitching? You tend to win. The Indians are 8-7 in June as of Monday. Not something to get too worked up about, but it's at least a trend in the positive direction.

None of this should be interpreted as a statement of belief that the Indians are a better team without Hafner and Martinez. They're better off without their current injuries clogging the lineup, but there is no question that the Tribe won't be whole again until those guys are back, healthy and producing at a high level. But the moral of the story is, if you're going to try and win a baseball game, put your best team on the field, and seldom does your best team include a guy with a bum shoulder and a guy with bone chips in his elbow.

Facing how-many-ever weeks without Hafner and Martinez is a risk for the Tribe, but it might end up being a risk that saves their season, particularly as they square off against the weaker, non-Arizona-Diamondbacks portion of the NL West over the next two weeks.