

Another one of our new bloggers we're featuring here on Da Blurbs, Erik Cassano is a great writer that has previously penned for the PD Sunday Magazine, as well as Crain's. His first contribution here asseses the mess the Indians have on their hands as they stand at 24-26, 10 1/2 games behind Detroit, and 9 games behind the White Sox. *Vist The Papa Cass weblog at <http://papacass.blogspot.com/>*



OK, Dayn Perry of [FoxSports.com](http://foxsports.com), I admit it. You are a total sage.

Everything you said about the AL Central prior to the season has come true. The Tigers are the surprise team of baseball. The Indians are one of baseball's biggest disappointments. And, yes, Jhonny Peralta is dragging his bat around like a sack of bricks in Year 2 A.O. (After Omar), just as you predicted.

Sorry, Dayn. I got too mouthy. Tell me where I can buy a nice, thick, juicy fillet of crow.

But even after polishing off my crow with a side of rice pilaf and glass of Chateau 36 vintage white wine, the misery doesn't end. As an Indians fan, I still have to endure four more months of this dog vomit we are referring to as a baseball season.

Today's 11-0 pasting at the hands of the White Sox drops Cleveland's record to 24-26. Because they share a division with the torrid White Sox and Tigers, that drops the Indians to 10 1/2 games off the pace in the Central, nine back in the wild card.

We said at the outset of the season that a fast start was key for the Indians. That didn't happen. Because the Indians don't really have a team staple to rely on, like the starting pitching of a year ago, the odds of them making another fantastic second-half comeback are far less than last year.

We're 50 games in to the 2006 season. Four games away from the one-third mark of the season. What you see from the 2006 Indians is probably what you are going to get. The White Sox aren't going to fall back. The Tigers might cool off, but if the Indians are 10 or 15 games under .500 when that happens, it won't matter.

Since we can't busy ourselves with a pennant race, let's busy ourselves doling out blame. What role did the team's leaders have in what is fast becoming a lousy season?

Mark Shapiro

For the first time since his rookie offseason of 2001-02, it appears the Indians GM had a bad offseason this past winter. Very few of his moves are bearing fruit so far, which is unlike Shapiro.

1) He misfired on free agent Bob Howry, figuring he could place the workhorse reliever on the back burner to chase after overhyped closer B.J. Ryan. But Howry pulled the rug out from under everyone by quickly signing with the Cubs, and that set a domino effect in motion.

Ryan took the Tribe's free dinner, then quickly bolted to Toronto for a record deal. Trevor Hoffman took a look at the Indians, but probably never seriously considered signing here.

That left Shapiro with Bob Wickman and no set-up man to replace Howry.

2) Shapiro tried to go the bargain basement route that had served him so well in recent years. But the scrap heap additions of Danny Graves and Steve Karsay were miserable failures. Neither one is with the team anymore.

3) The starting pitching additions of Paul Byrd and Jason Johnson have proven to be far weaker links than Kevin Millwood and Scott Elarton were last year. Byrd has started to pitch better, but Johnson is beginning to show it's no coincidence that he has pitched almost exclusively for bad teams in his career.

4) The Coco Crisp trade finished the implosion of the bullpen by dropping David Riske and Arthur Rhodes from the roster. Arriving to replace them was Guillermo Mota, who would be fine if you could just rewind his body to 2003, when he was a dominant reliever for the Dodgers. Now, he's just old.

5) The Shapiro-acquired left field tandem of Todd Hollandsworth (minor-league deal) and Jason Michaels (acquired from the Phillies for Rhodes) has been a non-factor. The best that can be said of the pair is they hustle. As far as stats go, let's not broach that.

Eric Wedge

I am beginning to feel the same way about Wedge as I felt about former Cavaliers coach Paul Silas: he might have been right man for the job at the time he was hired, but to truly vault the team to the upper tiers, they'll need somebody better-equipped for the job.

The White Sox's Ozzie Guillen and the Tigers' Jim Leyland are prime examples of what a manager should be. Guillen is abrasive, but has charisma to spare. Players respond to that. Leyland is a baseball guru who teaches players the right way to play, then intimidates them into playing that way everyday.

Wedge is neither. A talented orator, yes. But orator-coaches are better suited for football, where games are the product of a weeklong buildup. The best baseball managers get consistent focus out of their teams day to day, week to week. Obviously, Wedge isn't getting consistent focus out of his team.

Wedge gets a lot of flack for his miscalculations on the field. But he made one severe miscalculation heading into the season. He let the Indians believe they are better than they are. They apparently came north with the idea that they are an elite team, forgetting that they are still a shoestring-budget team that will never show up and out-talent anyone without trying.

Now, the Indians are finding out how difficult it is to turn on the afterburners two months in.

Wedge has preached not getting too high or low every season. He might have let this team get too high in spring training.

The team's veterans

Who in the clubhouse is capable of pulling this team up? I don't see anyone.

There is a noticeable lack of veteran poise within the Indians' roster. All the players you'd expect to step up as leaders are having no effect: Aaron Boone, Victor Martinez, Travis Hafner, C.C. Sabathia, Paul Byrd, Bob Wickman, Guillermo Mota, Jason Michaels.

Nobody is reigning this team in and pointing it in the right direction. Whether it's a lack of charismatic personalities or whether players simply don't want to speak up, at times it seems like the Indians are 25 guys with 25 different goals.

This is where the Indians really miss Kevin Millwood, who was, in a lot of ways, the glue that held the rotation together last year.

Larry and Paul Dolan

I am not going to criticize/analyze the pocketbook of the Dolans. That's been done ad nauseum. What I am going to criticize is the culture of tentativeness the Dolans are growing.

The Dolans have done some important things right as owners. They pumped money into the farm system. They let Shapiro and his baseball people run the show. They have signed young players to long-term contracts. But when it comes to making decisions, the Dolans prefer glacial time. That means, many times, the Indians fail to answer the door when opportunity knocks.

The Dolans want to make sure that the club is absolutely, positively, 100 percent, without a doubt making the right move when money is committed to a player. That's a good practice for a midmarket team. But it needs to happen sooner. If the Indians had acted swiftly and decisively to re-sign Bob Howry, a lot of the tangles the offseason produced could have been avoided.

We're not talking about matters of national security here. We're talking baseball. Sometimes a hunch is as good as computer quantification.