

## Lingering Items - Man At The Top Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Is it possible that a team with the reigning Cy Young award winner in its midst doesn't have an ace on its pitching staff? That's the burning question that the Cleveland Indians are facing with less than two weeks before the season starts. In the latest edition of Lingering Items, Gary hits on Cliff Lee's shaky spring, as well as Tony Grossi's recent interview with Browns President Mike Kennan.



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Cliff Lee, the putative number one pitcher on the Indians' staff, has looked like anything but an ace in spring training. While that isn't necessarily cause for great concern, the fact that he has been getting shelled most of the spring is raising a few eyebrows among the likes of manager Eric Wedge, general manager Mark Shapiro and, frankly, most of the rest of the league.

Lee came out of nowhere, literally, to win the Cy Young last year. His 2007 was nothing short of a disaster. It was a combination of physical injury and mental duress that made Lee a very shaky "yes" to make the team last season. While his spring 2008 wasn't anything great, his contract and his track record gave him the edge for the last starting spot.

It proved to be faith rewarded. All Lee did was out-pitch CC Sabathia and the rest of the major leagues. It was one of the most surprising and satisfying

season-long performances by any player in any sport wearing a Cleveland uniform ever.

Lee is a well-grounded player. He is mostly unemotional and seems to accept with equal aplomb the ups and downs that baseball delivers on a daily basis. Like golf, baseball is a game predicated more on failure than success. For a pitcher, far more balls are hit than are missed. For the hitter, far more balls are caught than not. To play and prosper at the highest levels, it is absolutely imperative that a player have the gift of perspective and the emotions of Bjorn Borg. Lee is that kind of pitcher.

But if there is one area of concern about his spring, more so than last spring, is the fact that he entered it lacking the hunger of last year. He was no longer fighting for his professional life but instead attempting to prepare himself to be "the guy," a role he's never occupied in the major leagues.

Lee was successful last season mostly because he had pinpoint control from almost the first pitch of the season until the last. He also benefited for most of the season from the simple fact that more eyes were on Sabathia. To the extent a pitcher carrying a miniscule ERA for an entire season can fall under the radar, Lee was that pitcher.

This season will be far different. There is no Sabathia. It's Lee and a bunch of question marks. To put it in perspective, remember Lee was the last pitcher to make the team last year. Scott Lewis is this year's Lee. Lee now finds himself having to serve as the role model, the stopper and the stud for a pitching staff that will be watching his every move. It's far more pressure than he's ever been under.

Sabathia was always being groomed as a number one starter. That's never been true of Lee. Indeed, it's unlikely Lee ever saw himself in that role. Based on his spot in the rotation, though, that's exactly where he finds himself. He'll be

relegated to taking on the other team's number one starter nearly every time out. That's even more pressure.

Lee's effectiveness is dictated by his control. His career has been the base case for what it looks like when control comes, goes and comes again. And that was without any of the added responsibilities.

That's not to say that Lee's lackluster spring is the result of his inability to cope with his new role. It may be simply the result, as he said, of using spring training this year to work on certain aspects of his game rather than trying to replicate an actual start. But time is starting to run short. He has one more start this spring. He doesn't need to be great. He doesn't even need to prove he was a worthy recipient of the Cy Young. He just needs to start showing that he's the guy that can step up and lead a starting pitching staff that for the first time in years doesn't have an obvious leader.

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It was nice to see someone associated with the Cleveland Browns actually sit down and give a somewhat comprehensive interview. It wasn't general manager, George Kokinis or head coach Eric Mangini, both logical choices. And it wasn't the increasingly more mysterious owner, Randy Lerner. It was Mike Kennan, the team's new president.

[Tony Grossi's interview](#) had some interesting moments and Grossi hit Kennan with some pretty pointed questions, including questions related to the Browns' spending to upgrade the Berea complex to meet Mangini's needs while simultaneously laying off a boatload of low paid employees.

I thought Kennan came off pretty well in the interview overall. I do think he's understandably downplaying what looks to be a hard economy for the Browns.

There are several loges unsold that will go unsold. There will be plenty of season ticket holders that won't be able to re-up. Sponsors will be lost. And this would be true even if this was a winning team, or at least a potentially winning team. The economy has had that kind of effect. On top of that, if Mangini can't come in and immediately turn things around, 2010 isn't going to be any better either on the business side of the operations.

But all that aside, the one thing that did come out of the interview was a clarification of the Browns' organizational chart. Essentially, Lerner has three direct reports: Keenan, Kokinis and Mangini. It's a somewhat atypical arrangement in that on most teams the head coach reports to the general manager. It's also fairly typical for the general manager, in turn, to report to the club president. Thus the Browns are bucking some trends in that respect as well.

That doesn't mean that there's inherently anything wrong with Lerner's org chart but it does signal in a significant way that he plans to stay far closer to the team than perhaps he was just a year ago. By having the three top operational employees in the organization report to him, Lerner doesn't have a choice but to stay closely connected. If he maintains the kind of distance he's been used to maintaining, then the organization is headed for potentially destructive and unresolved infighting sooner rather than later.

Any business is an amalgamation of the people running it. When they get along, org charts are irrelevant. But when disputes arise, org charts become a necessity. If a consensus can't be reached, someone has to call the question. Consider, for example, how this could play out on draft day.

Presumably, Kokinis is in charge of the draft. Mangini is certainly going to have a prominent role in which players are selected as well as what kind of deals may be swung. But what if they end up in a legitimate disagreement that they can't resolve themselves? By vesting himself with the final word, given how he's arranged the offices, Lerner will make the call. If he sides with Kokinis, Mangini will be upset and vice versa. The more something like this plays out, the pricklier

the atmosphere inside Berea will become.

It would be interesting to know why Lerner willingly put himself and his team in this kind of position when it's a role he seems uniquely ill-suited to take on. Why is it that he believes this is the best path forward for his team? Kennan could have been asked those questions, but his answers would have been speculative. They really are better left for Lerner. The problem, though, is Lerner's not talking these days so, as with so much associated with the Browns these days, it's up to the fans to fill in the blanks.

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If Kellen Winslow thought leaving Cleveland was going to be his ticket to a new contract, then he better think again. [According to reports out of Tampa Bay](#), new general manager Mark Dominik is in no hurry to give Winslow a new deal, much to the chagrin of Winslow's new agent, Drew Rosenhaus.

Apparently Dominik is concerned about Winslow's longevity, which would hardly be a surprise except for the fact that he traded for Winslow in the first place. The Browns got a second round pick in this year's draft and a fifth round pick next year from the Buccaneers. That may not seem like much but it is enough to suggest that the Buccaneers see Winslow sticking around for awhile anyway.

Winslow never is going to make back all the money he lost because of his foolish foray into stunt motorcycle riding. He can hire 10 Drew Rosenhauses and they'll never be able to get him the kind of contract that a relatively injury-free career would have delivered.

There were rumblings that one of the reasons the Browns parted with Winslow now is that they had no intention of extending his contract and no appetite for a potential holdout. Kokinis may not have gotten as much as some fans would have

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liked for Winslow, but considering the business problems he divested himself of, it's doubtful that Kokinis is second-guessing himself either.

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With a playoff season that nearly rivals the length of its regular season, basketball is in the position of straddling both the football and the baseball seasons. This year could bring the real possibility of the Cavs playing into June and the Browns, with heightened interest due to a new regime, starting about a month after that. The Indians have about a month to prove themselves to the fans. Thus, this week's question to ponder is simple: Will anyone even notice the Indians this year?