

## What To Watch For

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Tuesday, June 30 2009 7:00 PM -

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While it's technically true that more than half the season still awaits us (HOORAY!), the real truth lies in the fact that prior to the Trading Deadline at the end of July, the seeds for 2010 and beyond may be sown in terms of management, players, and organizational approach. The tone of the moves (or non-moves) that occur over the next month then, will go a long way in determining whether contending in 2010 is remotely feasible and what players will be involved in next season, as well as who will be filling the names of said players into the lineup card. Paulie talks about what we might see in his latest piece.



At the risk of bowing to the ESPNification of sports news with that title (of which I recently heard Fox Sports' Andrew Siciliano refer to as "Bristol Red", which has a nice Kremlinesque feel to it in terms of dictating what's relevant to the average consumer by packaging sports information in neat little packages because the average sports fan can't handle much more), with the 2009 season over before July 4th, it struck me how the next month may reveal quite a bit in terms of how this organization views the near future and who is involved in that future.

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The biggest question that will be answered in the next month is whether Wedge makes it past the All-Star Break as there is a point after which the firing of Wedge doesn't really differ that much from waiting until the off-season to do so. Whether he stays or whether he goes, however, is suddenly intrinsically connected to Shapiro and the power that he wields in the organization as Shapiro has repeatedly (and surprisingly, publicly) come out in defense of Wedge and calling a firing of the manager a "cop out" as blame falls on more shoulders than just Wedge's.

While that is certainly true, what Shapiro has done is painted himself into a corner in terms of his relationship with Wedge and put his own standing in the organization out there as a result. By not just publicly backing Wedge (which would have been the trite "vote of confidence" that so often precedes a firing) with the "we think he's doing a good job" nonsense, Shapiro stated that "winning is an organizational result", meaning that he's putting himself into the same boat as Wedge, sink or swim...almost to the point that it could be viewed as the two of them representing a package deal.

The wisdom of this strategy can certainly be debated as a very real scenario emerges in which Shapiro pleads his case to the Dolans to keep Wedge and they overrule him, believing that a change in field management is one way to stop the bleeding. If that happens, Shapiro's power in the organization immediately (and very publicly) diminishes considerably as his hand-picked manager that he backed through some very troubling times has been fired, despite his public protests, and the freedom which the Dolans reportedly allow him in terms of decisions would almost certainly be cut considerably as a by-product, even if it is just seen that way in the public arena.

Of course, there is another scenario that could play out that would end just as badly if Shapiro pleads his case to the Dolans to keep Wedge and they do, with more of the same putrid results continuing as the season goes on and even into next. Suddenly, Shapiro has lumped himself into the "organizational result" of failure, right alongside the manager whose job he pleaded to save. Maybe Shapiro's head doesn't hit the chopping block immediately, but again his power diminishes considerably, perhaps even more than the first scenario as Shapiro's pleas to keep Wedge result in more losses (whether they're Wedge's fault or not), fan apathy, and the sense that the Dolans waited too long to make a change.

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Of course, the only other possible scenario that emerges is that the Indians (suddenly and miraculously) start their annual second-half push with Wedge at the controls. Whether this is simply another case of too-little, too-late or not, it gives the Shapiro-Wedge dynamic the ammunition to live another day, pointing to the "fact" that the team, once healthy and whole, met or exceeded expectations placed upon it as the season started.

This final scenario feeds into another point of interest over the next month or so as the Indians are beginning to get healthy and the lineup is close to looking as it did on Opening Day (with options still being available from AAA) while the likes of Westbrook and Laffey may emerge from rehab starts to re-join the rotation. What I'm getting at here is that there may be a point sometime in July when the Indians team looks like it was designed to look when Spring Training broke (minus DeRosa), with the talent from the minors arriving as players like Westbrook return to put the roster pretty much in line with where it was designed to be when all of the best-laid plans were still in play.

So the question becomes - how does THAT team play?

With a rotation of Lee, Westbrook, Laffey, Huff, and maybe Carmona...with a bullpen with Wood and a healthy Betancourt at the back end, and with every significant member of the lineup (allegedly) healthy and ready to play every day, what will that team do?

If the hope was that the 2009 team could stay close enough (they couldn't) until Westbrook was healthy and LaPorta, Huff, and the like were ready to help, now that those things are happening, what does this team look like and what does it portend for 2010...is it really the possibility of contending next year?

This leads us to the next pertinent question that will find an answer in the next month, which is whether the Indians are legitimately considering trading Cliff Lee and what it would tell us about how the organization feels about their chances to contend in 2010. According to Fox Sports' Ken Rosenthal ( [via a video](#) ), the Indians are INDEED listening to offers for CP Lee, who Rosenthal's sources tell him is as good as gone from the North Coast after the 2010 season, intent on testing the FA waters.

This certainly represents a sharp departure from what we've previously read in terms of the Indians having to be "overwhelmed"; to consider trading a

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season and a half of Lee at a wildly affordable price...or does it?

Isn't this just a toe in the water to see if a team would be willing to part with some valuable pieces for Lee? Rosenthal states that the Rangers are a team that could match the Indians' demands with Neftali Feliz and Derek Holland being the type of high-end pitching prospects either in AAA or MLB that the Indians are reportedly asking for. But if this is the case and this is allegedly what the Indians are looking for in return (and I can't imagine that Rosenthal came up with the Rangers or these names out of thin air, or with the names of Tommy Hanson and Clay Buchholz in his previous piece), what does the inclusion of players who would still be cutting their teeth in MLB in 2010 tell us about the Front Office's expectations for 2010?

It would be folly to assume that if the Indians traded Clifton Phifer for pitching prospects (whether they were purported to be of the "can't miss" variety or not) and not players that immediately slot into the front of the rotation, that 2010 would be nothing more than another "year to build upon". That is, let's just say for a moment that the Indians traded Lee for Neftali Perez and Derek Holland, two starters under the age of 22 who are either in AAA or are in MLB. While that certainly adds impact arms to the system at the upper levels, look at what it does to the 2010 rotational mix without Lee:

Westbrook  
Laffey  
Carmona  
Huff  
Perez/Holland

Does that look like a rotation designed to compete in 2010...or more like a group of young pitchers (save Westbrook) that will need to mature as a rotation to contend in 2011 and beyond?

The question that's going to be answered if the Indians move Lee, and for what, is whether the Front Office is pointing at 2010 as a legitimate year to contend or if they're dealing or are they looking at the team as it's presently constructed and imagining a longer timeframe?

While you're thinking about that, take a look at this quote from Shapiro in [an excellent piece by Jerry Crasnick of ESPN in which he dissects what has gone](#)

### [wrong for this organization since the 2007 ALC](#)

S:

*&quot;I truly believe in my heart that we're going to be back in the playoffs again in the next three years...As much as I feel [the fans'] pain, I can't get caught up in the emotion of the history here. I don't believe we're going to be a bad team. I don't believe this is the beginning of another 40 years of losing. I believe this is a bad season. That's what it is.&quot;*

Look past the histrionics of &quot;feeling pain&quot; and &quot;a bad season&quot; for a moment and look at the most important aspect of this piece. Now, realizing that Shapiro has already learned his lesson on putting specific dates on a return to anything after fans held the &quot;we'll contend in...&quot; over his head after the Colon deal, what can be gleaned (if anything) from this &quot;we're going to be back in the playoffs again in the next three years&quot;?

Obviously, for him to say &quot;we're going to make the playoffs next year&quot; is a foolish statement to make, but is this a glimpse into the mindset of the Front Office as it stands today?

That is, there seems to be two camps of thought that are developing in their perception of the Indians - one camp perceives the Indians to be miles away from competing and advocates re-tooling for the 2011 season, when the likes of LaPorta, Huff, Rondon, Santana, Brantley, and Weglarz are all ready to contribute and feel that augmenting the team, with that date in mind, is the direction to go while the other camp sees a team that isn't too far away from contention in 2010 with a healthy and deeper rotation, a lineup that would boast impact players at multiple positions, and a bullpen that...well, could the bullpen really be any worse.

Which camp is the Front Office in?

Whether or not CP Lee is an Indian on August 1st is going to go a long way in revealing their feeling as there's no question that Lee is a vitally important piece to the team in terms of competitiveness for 2010 and (unless the Indians are netting a front-of-the-rotation starter that can be considered their ace from the moment he dons a Tribe uni...which is the ideal) him not being at the top of the Tribe rotation in 2010 means that the idea of Indians' contention in 2010 is pretty far-fetched...to the tune of the Indians' starters not named Cliff Lee compiling a 6.27 ERA and a 1.61 WHIP this year over 62 starts and 326 IP.

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Here's the rub in this whole Clifton Phifer situation though - we all know he's leaving after 2010 and while the reaction to losing an elite starter via trade a full year and a half prior to him being a FA is going to be severe, it's not as if Lee is a fan favorite like, say Victor (also a FA after 2010 after his club option is picked up) is and while his worth to the competitiveness to the team is unquestioned, the overall sentiment that Lee can't wait to get out of Cleveland and that he's not exactly a warm and fuzzy guy is pretty all-encompassing just from watching his demeanor. So...do the Indians strike when the iron is hot and there is a year and a half of Lee to offer at a wildly affordable rate, do they wait to see how the 1st half of 2010 progresses before making a decision, or do they simply risk watching Lee walk away after 2010 with nothing coming back to the organization in return more than a compensatory draft pick?

Back to 2010 though - if these two schools of thought exist, one that thinks the team is years away from contending and should cash in ALL their chips now to get ready for 2011 and one that thinks that this team is a couple of tweaks away from contending, in what likely figures to be another weak AL Central next year, where do the people whose opinion matter (the ones making the decision) reside?

Whether or not Cliff Lee is traded in the next month will probably be the best indication of such as, sure, the Tribe could trade Lee in the off-season - but if you're talking about maximizing return to ready the team for a run AFTER 2010, now would be the time to strike. If they do strike though, and don't get a legitimate replacement for Lee in the rotation for next year, 2010 immediately becomes a non-factor.

Beyond what happens to Wedge and Lee and (gasp) Victor before the end of the month, the most telling action taken by the organization will be how they handle what could be called their "middle tier" of MLB talent and the players below them. Players like Garko, Frisco, Sowers, and Shoppach have now all had significant amounts of time to establish themselves in MLB and each has done so with varying degrees of success. How the Indians handle playing time for these players (when players like LaPorta, Brantley, Huff, Torregas, and Santana are getting closer to being ready to legitimately contribute consistently on the MLB level...or at least get the chance to do so if they haven't already) as the season winds down will be telling as it will again foretell how quickly the Indians want to ingratiate their young talent into the mix at the expense of players that may have value to a MLB club, just not as much more than a minor complementary part.

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Certainly, the possibility exists that the Indians get aggressive with their youngsters and look to move a player like Garko, Shoppach, or The Frisco Kid in an attempt to add more pitching regardless of level, but that brings up the final question that will be answered this month - how deep will this swath go in terms of players being traded? Pavano seems like a certainty to be moved and maybe a player like Betancourt (who the team holds a \$5.4M option on for next year) could be shopped once he's healthy (or at least approached about adding another guaranteed year to spread out that money), but how aggressive will the Indians be in adding the arms that are so desperately needed? Will they simultaneously play the role of buyer and seller to take advantage of the market and add arms for what could be termed &quot;expendable&quot; talent?

It's one of many questions that figures to be answered in the next month, which could see a new manager, a GM with reduced power, a glimpse into whether contention in 2010 is seen as a possibility by the Front Office, and an idea of what players the organization should be on the field on August 1st.