

What in the sam hell has happened to Honny Peralta this year? After hitting .292 with 24 HR's and playing a capable SS last year ... Peralta is now a hack in the field, hitting .250, and damn near leading the league in whiffs. And he's a less than odds on favorite to be this teams SS in 2007. In his latest, Papa Cass examines the enigma that is Honny Peralta.



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It's hard to tell what's gotten into Jhonny Peralta this year.

The Peralta who was driven to succeed a year ago has been replaced with a character who plays lax defense at baseball's most important defensive position, and is hitting nowhere near enough to offset the shaky glove work.

All in all, it looks like his competitive fire went out and he has no idea how to restoke it. Or he doesn't really care about restoking it.

Peralta's limp season is not lost on Tribe manager Eric Wedge, who is making his shortstop a favorite lightning rod for public criticism. After Thursday's series-losing loss in Oakland, Wedge laid Peralta open in the media again.

"The way he's playing shortstop right now is just not getting it done," Wedge told The Plain Dealer.

Wedge took particular umbrage to a Marco Scutaro infield single, which Wedge said Peralta should have been able to make a play on. The single helped ignite an Oakland rally that eventually put the Athletics up 4-1.

"Yeah, he should have made that play," Wedge told reporters. "I'm tired of talking about the guy. We've challenged him ... He has to make that play. We've challenged his pregame preparation, his first-step quickness ... He's going to have to do better to be the defensive shortstop we want him to be."

If Wedge is at his wit's end with Peralta, It means the Indians' front office is as well. So unless Peralta suddenly turns on the juice these last 10 games of the season, it is highly likely that Peralta will either not be a member of the Indians by next spring, or will be playing a different

position at the very least.

A lot of preseason prognosticators fingered Peralta for a slide this year after an impressive full-season debut, but I don't think anyone thought he would fall this hard. His spacy play at shortstop looks like it might even be infecting Andy Marte, a third baseman with Gold Glove potential who has also shown an aversion to exerting himself at times.

So how did it get this bad for Peralta? We can only hypothesize about what's going on in his head, but it's probably a combination of several factors:

### **1. He bought his own hype**

After hitting .292 a year ago and setting an Indians franchise record for home runs by a shortstop with 24, Peralta appeared to be a rising star. Sure, he didn't have the range of Omar, but he was competent in the field after a shaky start and his offense made everyone believe he was going to follow in the lineage of Derek Jeter, Miguel Tejada and other shortstops who developed into heart of the order hitters.

Peralta swallowed the accolades hook, line and sinker, and much like the departed Brandon Phillips, started believing he was better than he actually was. Maybe he started thinking he had this baseball thing down pat, which is a sure recipe for humble pie for a young player.

### **2. He signed a fat contract extension**

It's amazing how different players react with stark contrast to newfound financial security. Grady Sizemore signed a six-year contract extension and took it as a vote of confidence from the Indians organization. It seems to have made him try even harder to be a great player. Peralta signed a five-year contract extension and is acting like a person who hit the lottery and never has to worry about money again. The drive to prove himself seems to have evaporated.

### **3. He is no longer viewed as Omar's replacement**

Peralta had a huge mountain to scale at the start of last season. He was the guy who had to prove he was worthy to tread the same infield soil where Omar Vizquel worked his magic. Every time a ball was hit to him, Peralta knew he would be incessantly compared to his predecessor. Every error, every late throw, every miscalculation would be met with eye rolls, scoffs and "Omar would have made that play." Peralta knew it, and it kept him on his toes last year.

This season, we are in the year 2 A.O. (After Omar), and Peralta, based on his performance a year ago, was allowed to stand on his own merits without the relentless comparisons to Vizquel. It caused him to relax, maybe too much.

Peralta seems to be one of those players who needs constant prodding to realize his potential. Wedge -- hardly a master motivator -- is having a hard time doing that. It is possible that Peralta might need to play for a different manager who can find a way to light a fire under him again.

But I'm not about to lay the bulk of the blame at the feet of Eric Wedge for not motivating Peralta. In the end, the player is the one who has to take the field and find a way to make the plays and get the hits. This season, Peralta isn't doing that.