If you listen to the local sports talk radio shows, or read the Cleveland media outlets such as this one ... fans are skeptical about the Indians off-season moves this year. Yet, most of the national media types have hailed the Tribe for what they feel has been a very productive and prudent off-season. It's made for some great debates, and Tony hits on that and the '07 Indians in his latest.

After a very promising season in 2005, the Indians had a hiccup in 2006 mostly due to an under-achieving team and poor decisions in the front office. This off-season, the Indians front office appears to be back to making smarter decisions, and the team is in line to rebound and pick up where the 2005 team left off.

Cleveland fans may not be aware of it, but the Indians are poised for a revival in 2007.

Oh how things always look so promising when a new year looms. ‘Tis the season and all that.

But, I’m not alone in this view. Nationally, the Indians already appear to be the sexy pick by a lot of baseball people to be a strong playoff contender or even win the division next year. People like “Baseball America’s” Jim Callis, “The Hardball Times” David Gassko, and ESPN’s Rob Neyer have already publicly stated they feel the Indians probably are the favorite to win the division next year, while others like ESPN’s Peter Gammons and Buster Olney all have stated the team is in for a big rebound this season, with Gammons even mentioning this team has the potential to win 100 games.

But how can that be? Are all these guys taking in the holiday festivities too much and simply just three sheets to the wind? Who spiked the eggnog? I mean, if you sampled the local radio airwaves, numerous Indians message board forums, or talk at the watercooler, the opinion of this team is much different. In fact, many probably feel this team may barely hold off the Royals for 4th place in the division.

So, what are Indians fans missing here?

From a national media perspective, this is a very good team. But, from a fan perspective, it seems the fans view this team as average with a cheap owner. Maybe we know more than those in the national media who don’t follow the team everyday. For example, that Eric Wedge is not a very good manager. Or, maybe the national media knows something we don’t know. For example, this team was a serious under-achiever last year and they have the numbers and scouting reports to prove it.

Part of the reason fans under-value this team may stem from a serious disconnect between the fans and owner Larry Dolan. It is no secret that Dolan ticked a lot of fans off back in 2002 when they tore the team apart and dove into “The Plan.” And with that, he created an image (he is cheap and a liar) that many fans simply refuse to get over. This town does not forgive. Ever. And, we are known to hold grudges for a long, long time. Larry Dolan made his bed, and once you make it that way in this town, it sticks forever.

Also, the frustration level of the fanbase is at an all-time high. The 2007 season will be the 5th full season since “The Plan” went into effect, and fans are growing impatient and expect results with this team getting to the playoffs and ultimately winning a World Series. There is also the whole “Dolan is cheap” mantra that has carried on for almost five years. To top it off, you also have a Browns franchise going completely nowhere and a Cavaliers team not playing to expectations. Frustration levels are at an all-time high, and it compounds with every season that does not end in a championship for any of the three major sports teams in this city.

Basically, it has come to the point where until a team proves themselves, the fans just aren’t going accept any optimistic viewpoint with their teams. We as fans are tired of spin and what next year brings, and we want results now. It should be noted, though, that with that type of thinking a lot of objectivity in evaluating their teams also is thrown out the window.

Case in point: The Indians.

For whatever reason, fans don’t want to acknowledge that the Indians return pretty much every key component of their offense in 2007, which ranked #2 in runs scored, #4 in batting average and #4 in OPS in all of baseball. Or, that the offense has consistently been pretty much in the top five in hitting, runs scored and OPS for the last three years now.

Nevermind that even with this good offense, the Indians arguably made it better when they acquired Josh Barfield in a trade and signed David Dellucci to fill a big void in the outfield versus right-handed pitching. With Barfield out of San Diego’s offensive graveyard known as Petco Park, and Delluci platooning in LF against righties (.264 avg and .875 OPS from 2004-2006), and players like Sizemore and Hafner only scratching the surface of their offensive potential, this offense should continue to improve. Yet, fans feel we need to trade for a premium bat like Manny Ramirez.

Also, while the starting rotation is largely considered the team’s strength by fans, it still doesn’t get the credit it deserves. In 2006, Indians starters were 7th in baseball (2nd in the AL) with a 4.31 ERA, and that was with Jason Johnson in the rotation for almost half a season. It goes without saying that the Indians starting five is one of the best in baseball, and they have four starters who have performed at a consistent level for three or more years.

CC Sabathia established himself last year as a staff-ace, and is nearing free agency so he will be pushed to put up good numbers not only from a team standpoint, but financially as well. Jake Westbrook also has established himself as a good #2-3 starter, and is in a contract year. With Sabathia and Westbrook both in or close to contract years, we are going to get top effort

out of them in 2007. Cliff Lee and Paul Byrd are good middle of the rotation starters, and consistently give quality starts.

Outside of the unpredictability of injuries, the only unknown with this staff is Jeremy Sowers. Sowers was a highly touted prospect last year, so what he did last year in half of a season should not be a real surprise. Still, the league will make adjustments to him, and he will need to show the ability to adjust back. While his strikeout-rate was low and he had a penchant for giving up home runs last year, Sowers is incredibly intelligent and has shown the ability to adapt in the past, so this will be a big plus for him in his sophomore season. The Indians also have starting depth in the minors in Fausto Carmona and Adam Miller about ready to fill in if needed.

Indians fans also lament the team speed and defense. While these were problems in 2006, the Indians have improved both of these aspects, especially the defense. This team is by no means anywhere close to rivaling the 1985 St. Louis Cardinals as far as team speed goes, but the team speed is a lot better than what it was for the first half of last season. Josh Barfield and Shin-Soo Choo will be regulars in the lineup, and should be a big help in adding more stolen base opportunities, but most importantly allow this team the ability to put pressure on the defense by going 1st to 3rd or 2nd to home. I mean, think about it. Barfield and Choo essentially are replacing Belliard and Broussard/Perez in the lineup, and that is a pretty nice increase in speed and athleticism on the basepaths and in the field.

The Indians defensive woes were well documented in 2006, and deservedly so as they were terrible. The outfield defense was fine, but the infield defense was a big reason why the Indians gave up the 4th highest batting average in baseball to opponents (.285). The Indians have made big strides at improving their infield defense, and actually started laying the groundwork for this improvement around mid-season last year.

Martinez is still a question mark behind the plate, and will always be an average thrower at best. But, if he can get back to a defensive level close to his 2005 performance (which is what he supposedly played at the 2nd half of 2006), he will be acceptable. Andy Marte is a huge defensive upgrade over Aaron Boone at 3B, and Barfield will be an upgrade over the 2006 Ronnie Belliard (Belliard was one of the worst defensive 2B in 2006). Also, if Peralta can at least find a way to split the difference between his 2005 and 2006 performances, he'll be an improvement.

So, the offense, rotation, team speed, and defense all look good or improved. Damn, we look like world beaters, right?

Not so fast. Besides health, the biggest key to the success of the 2007 Indians comes down to two things: 1.) The bullpen and 2.) Eric Wedge. No matter how you look at these two issues, whether in a positive spin or negative one, they still are huge question marks for this team in 2007. The bullpen's performance and Wedge somehow becoming a more effective in-game manager are vital to this team's success next year.

When it comes to bullpens, if someone could come up with a method to consistently predict bullpen performance, that person would be a very rich person. This might be one of the biggest obstacles for sabrmaticians to tackle quantitatively, and probably an impossibility. Although, whatever Terry Ryan is doing to pump out bullpen arm after bullpen arm in Minnesota should be studied, documented and then copyrighted.

The Indians are loaded with talent in the pen, but the problem is getting these players to funnel this talent into results. Guys like Fernando Cabrera, Jason Davis, Eddie Mujica, Rafael Perez, Tony Sipp, etc all have tons of talent to help this bullpen in 2007 and beyond, but the problem to date has been the Indians ability to development them as relievers and maintain consistency (Cabrera and Davis) or give them opportunities (Sipp, Perez, Mujica, Mastny,etc). In addition to the young talent, the bullpen does have a good mix of veterans. Rafeal Betancourt is the bully's most consistent reliever, and when used properly, is one of the better middle relievers in the game. And Matt Miller, when healthy, has been effective.

But, our biggest issue in the bullpen last year was getting to the closer the first half of the season, and then closing games the second half of the season. We also had no reliable left-handed relief for late inning matchups. This leads into the free agent additions of Roberto Hernandez, Aaron Fultz and Joe Borowski to the bullpen. All three will go a long way at correcting the late inning relief issues this team had last year, if not to just make this at worst an average bullpen as in this case going from awful to average would still be outstanding improvement.

The question still remains, however, who will close? It looks like Borowski, but the Indians are still in search of another backend bullpen arm and are rumored to be on the verge of signing Keith Foulke in the next few days. If the Indians are able to find one more good arm for the backend of the bullpen, preferably at closer, this bullpen will be drastically improved from last year. At least on paper, since the volatility of bullpens won't let you know how effective it is until the season gets going.

With the talent this team has on offense and in the rotation, as well as the improved defense, team speed, and bullpen, this team should be a cinch to win at least 90 games. Easily. But, that would be the case if Jim Leyland, Bobby Cox, or Tony LaRussa were the manager of this team. Of which they are not.

Yes, for all the improvements this team has made this offseason, the one improvement they did not make was to the guy who is the biggest influence on this team’s success. The manager. Sure, Peralta can bounce back or slump, the bullpen can flourish or cave, but to me, the single person that can affect this team the most might be Eric Wedge. Some will debate how much a manager truly affects the win-loss column, but if you have been aboard the Wedge Express the past few seasons, you fully understand how his lack of in-game managing skills, creativity, etc were big reasons for this team’s flop the last week of 2005 and for most of 2006. Thankfully, unlike previous seasons, the Indians do not appear to be as patient to ride things out with Wedge if he gets this team off to another slow start.

So what does all this mean?

This is a good team, but both sides of the fanbase, whether positive or negative, and the national media are both right and wrong. It just depends what areas of the team you choose to weigh more heavily. This team is a lot better than the some of the pessimistic fans give it credit for, and several improvements have been made even if they are not of the “name” variety. But, by the same token, the national media also for whatever reason continues to gloss over and avoid one of the true problems with this team and why it failed in 2005 and 2006: the manager.

Whether you are a pessimist or optimist, or an “Apologist” or an “Anti-Dolan” fan, your viewpoint is skewed. And with that, neither side will admit to being wrong, which is why these debates go on infinitely in the off-season.

‘Tis the season, yes.