One thing frustrates Erik Cassano about the Indians above all else. It's not Eric Wedge. It's not the tight purse strings of Larry Dolan. It's not Jhonny Peralta or Jason Michaels or Casey Blake. It's the bullpen. More specifically, their junkyard philosophy on building a bullpen. In his latest, Papa cass vents on how the Dolan/Shapiro era Indians have approached the construction of arguably the most important part of any contending baseball team.

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Friday's sudden retirement of Keith Foulke laid out perfectly the risk involved in how the Dolan-era Indians approach the construction of arguably the most important part of any contending baseball team, and how it flies in the face of the organizational philosophy on building the rest of the team.

When it comes to building an offense and a starting rotation, the Indians' brass is pretty meticulous. They protect their prospects like prized jewels, almost to a fault, opting to give roster spots to has-been Juan Gonzalez and never-will-be Jason Johnson over budding stars Grady Sizemore and Jeremy Sowers the past two years.

This year, it will be Ryan Garko in dry dock as Blake takes over most of the first base duties.

But when it comes to grooming and protecting their bullpen corps, the Indians are far less cautious, and it has really hurt them in two of the past three seasons.

Former Indians GM John Hart had a favorite saying: "Closers grow on trees." He meant that late-inning relief pitchers tend to find their roles by accident, either out of organizational necessity or because they failed as starters.

Hart had a basic point. Jose Mesa was a failed starter who became a dominant closer in 1995 and '96, and has made a career of it since. He'll retire among the all-time saves leaders.

Paul Shuey was an example of the antithesis. A live-armed stud prospect with a filthy splitter, knee-buckling curve and mid-90s fastball who was groomed to be a late-inning fireman, but could never stomach the role enough to become dominant.

In short, building a bullpen is the biggest crap shoot this side of baseball's amateur draft. There is no real right way to do it, and what failed one time could be a rousing success the next time.

But there are ways to enhance your chances of success, and the Indians aren't doing it.

Why would a team jeopardize all the hard work they put into developing hitters and starting pitchers by placing the outcomes of most games in the hands of a clearance-rack bullpen built on the makeshift foundation of injury project players signed to one-year deals?

It was only a matter of time before some rag-armed reliever suddenly hung 'em up after finding that, in the words of Joe DiMaggio, "I said 'Move,' and my body said, 'Who, me?'"

If it wasn't Foulke retiring, it would have been Foulke tearing his elbow to pieces, or Joe Boro wski
needing shoulder surgery, or 42-year-old Roberto Hernandez saying, "That
Foulke
guy was right. I'm getting too old for this. I'm done, too."

This is the backbone of you 2007 Indians bullpen, now minus one.

The pressing question from this corner is, if the Indians are so adamant about building an offense and rotation from homegrown pieces, why aren't they as adamant about building a bullpen the same way?

Perhaps GM Mark Shapiro has taken Hart's pet saying a little too much to heart. Yes, any way you build a bullpen is going to be a roll of the dice. But if Shapiro and his staff would invest some time and money in grooming some of those power pitchers in the minors to be late-inning relievers, he might find that the organization can construct a bullpen backbone consisting of a closer and a few setup men that will be intact for three-to-five years. Then Shapiro can fill in around the edges with the one-year bargain signings he annually grabs.

There is nothing wrong with signing a Hernandez or Borowski to fortify a bullpen that already has its central figures in place. But when you start needing over-40 and recently-injured pitchers to absorb the brunt of winning games, that is troubling.

The Indians are loaded with power arms that could make a career out of late-inning relief, or at least get their start there. Fausto Carmona, despite his late-inning misadventures of a year ago, has closer stuff, and might make a fine late-inning reliever if the Indians would properly groom him instead of throwing him to the wolves like they did. Same goes for Jason Davis, who has bounced back and forth between starting and relieving for five years.

On the horizon is lefty Tony Sipp, who many Tribe observers seem to think could be this team's closer one day. If the team properly cultivates his talent, which the Indians don't have a history of doing for relievers.

Danys Baez is perhaps the poster child for the Indians' indecision regarding pitchers. He was both an effective starter and reliever, but the Indians' decision-makers couldn't make up their minds. It took signing with the Devil Rays for Baez to finally find a definite future as a reliever.

This year-to-year parade of Bob Wickmans and Keith Foulkes is growing tiresome. It's time for the Indians to find a longer-term solution for the back of their bullpen. Since that almost certainly isn't going to come from a trade or free agency, it must come from within.

If the Dolan-Shapiro Indians pride themselves on their well-financed farm system, it's time for them to put their money where their mouths are when it comes to the bullpen. If they don't, they risk ruining all the other work they've done to make the other areas of the team competitive.