The Indians are off to a 4-2 start, but Paul Cousineau is still apprehensive about the 2007 Indians. Why? The bullpen, and manager Eric Wedge's handling of said bullpen, appears to be just as shaky as last season. Paul takes a closer look at the use (read: misuse) of the Tribe pen through six games in his latest.

The Tribe took two of three from the Halos at “home” in Milwaukee, and are headed back to the Jake (with snow expected tonight in the Cleveland area) to take on the White Sox for the weekend “Home Opener”. Despite the fact that they took an early season series from the favorite in the AL West in a neutral site, the Angels' series didn't leave a great taste in my mouth. The offense had an extended period of time off (thanks for the win today Grady and Pronk) and showed the same inconsistency that plagued them last year, the bullpen looked shaky and made certain wins much less certain, and the infield defense looked no better than the sieve that it was last year.

The biggest concern, however, remains the bullpen.

Regardless of the arms in the bullpen, the handling of those arms is chief among those concerns. The Atomic Wedgie has shown his colors again in his stubbornness and favoritism regarding the use of his bullpen. Just like the Chicago series, in the two games that the Indians had a lead, Wedge pitched Betancourt, Hernandez, Fultz, and Borowski. In the Wednesday loss, Cabrera and Davis finally made their debut and Mastny came in to bail JD out of a jam (more on The Taxidermist later).

Apparently, the bullpen consists of an A-Team (for when the team has a lead) and a B-Team (for when innings need to be eaten). Realizing it's only been 6 games, these classifications for the relievers seem to be pretty set in stone, as it looks unlikely we'll be seeing any change in those teams. To wit, Hernandez has done nothing but fail and still gets trotted out in close games; while Mastny has been effective in his appearances, yet seems permanently relegated to mop-up duty. Wedge has always shown a propensity for riding his favorite horses (remember the end of the 2005 season when Cabrera, Betancourt, Howry, and Wickman were the only guys trotting in from the bullpen?), but to stick with ineffective relievers (Hernandez), while better options may exist (Cabrera looked GREAT and, again, Mastny has been nothing but effective this year). If these patterns continue, Wedge is going to sabotage the season pretty quickly and throw some gas on the “Wedgie can't manage his way out of a paper bag”

talk.

Now, Wedge can only play the hand that's dealt him, but to even throw some of these guys out in lieu of having a shot at the game is terrifying to watch. Take Jason Dangerously, who made an inauspicious debut last night, showing off a new funky delivery and whiffing the first 2 batters only to completely fall apart once a runner hit 1B. Davis then proved completely incapable of getting a batter out, grooving straight fastballs, and eventually having to be bailed out by Mastny (who just throws strikes and gets batters out), burning an arm out of the bullpen in the process.

I know it's only 2/3 of an inning, but it's the same thing with Davis - inconsistency, inability to prevent runners already on base from scoring, and complete frustration. At a certain point with Davis, all of the talk about “electric stuff” and his potential to become Joe Nathan has to turn into the reality that he's simply an ineffective reliever taking a roster spot away from a potentially useful arm in the bullpen. Allowing him to “knock the rust off” or try to harness his stuff while the Indians are in a position to contend, at any point in the season, is simple irresponsibility.

Wedge's current favorite ineffective reliever, Hernandez, left today's game with an unspecified “right leg injury”, giving hope to the thought that another reliever can take his spot in Wedgie's bullpen rotation. Maybe Hernandez will hit the DL and can go on a rehab assignment to figure out what's wrong with him. Or…maybe he's 42 and the tank's simply empty.

Watching the Angels lock-down bullpen (Pronk's moonshot against Scot Shields notwithstanding) shows the importance of developing your own relievers to occupy the 8th and 9th innings. Watching the Tribe batter flail away at Francisco Rodriguez makes one dream of a Eddie Mujica or a Tom Mastny or a Fernando Cabrera developing into a top-notch closer to make the Indians forget about their bullpen difficulties. Once those homegrown pitchers are in the fold, they can be supplemented with pitchers like Justin Speier (or, if you will, Just Inspire) to finish off the bullpen that's the envy of all of MLB.

Unfortunately, until one of these young arms develops (or is put into situations where they're allowed to developed), the Indians will be forced to sign players like Hernandez or never-ending projects like JD to fill the time and bullpen spot in the interim. Of course, if Wedge doesn't put talented arms like Mastny and Cabrera into games that are actually within reach, we may be forced to watch the newest retreads for the foreseeable future.