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Sometimes a coincidence is just a coincidence. Sometimes it's the beginning of a trend. The challenge for Mark Shapiro, Eric Wedge and the rest of the Cleveland Indians is figuring out whether the rather mediocre play of the team to this point, particularly defensively, is just a series of coincidences or the continuation of a disturbing pattern that defined its disappointing 78-win season of a year ago.

When it's early in the season like this, the information from which one is forced to draw conclusions is limited and hasn't had time to settle. But the victors are often those who get out ahead of the curve rather than waiting until the definitive pattern is set. By then, it may be too late.

At this point, the Indians find themselves in frighteningly familiar territory, stuck in neutral and unable to gain any early season traction. Much of this is due to failures in the most fundamental aspects of the game. First, the Indians simply aren't hitting in the clutch. Going into Sunday's game, they were among the worst hitting teams in the American League with runners in scoring position, even with Travis Hafner finding a groove over the last few games. Second, when they do get on base they commit far too many embarrassing base running mistakes. Third, and perhaps most alarming, they continue to play incredibly poor defense.

As Indians fans saw with this team last year, starting pitching and scoring runs alone won't get you to the playoffs. Heck, it won't even guarantee you a winning record. You need a solid bullpen and good, if not great, defense. To this point, though, the bullpen seems relatively settled, the starting pitching average, the hitting poor and the defense abysmal. It's no surprise, again, that they have shown themselves thus far to be merely an average team.

You have to think that the hitting will sort itself out, at least to the point that it's the least of the worries. The early season injury of Victor Martinez destabilized the middle of the lineup and no one really stepped up to fill the breach. Recall that last year, Casey Blake and Martinez got off to great starts at the plate and this allowed the rest of the lineup to the time it needed to settle in. Though that hasn't happened to this point this year, the return of Martinez to the lineup will help tremendously, given his track record. Hafner, as noted, has warmed up as of late after a terrible spring. Grady Sizemore has cooled off since his hot start the first week of the season but he's the real deal and will hit .300, giving those behind him ample opportunities to drive in runs.

There are still some questions to be answered with respect to the offense, however, particularly with respect to players like Jhonny Peralta, Andy Marte and Ryan Garko. Shapiro and Wedge, too, need to figure out what to do with Blake. Playing him every day and watching his repeated failures at the plate to this point is eerily reminiscent of Aaron Boone last year. But again, there is enough pop in this lineup that to this point you have to believe the Indians will score enough runs.

But what of the constant base running errors? Hafner, a seasoned pro, ran himself into outs twice in Friday's game. Others have done similarly, many times. Perhaps this is a string of bad luck but you can't like the trend, particularly when one factors what is still the most glaring shortcoming of this team: defense.

Going into Sunday's game, the Indians were the worst defensive team in the American League. Peralta has been credited with three errors, Marte four and Barfield two. And these

are just the official errors. To anyone watching, there are many more defense lapses that weren't labeled errors by generous scorekeepers but were every bit errors by omission. Barfield's misplay of a pop up in shallow right field on Saturday was the perfect example. Venturing too far out of position to make a catch that was more easily made by right fielder Trot Nixon, Barfield was not able to make the play and Delmon Young was credited with a double. On the one hand, the official scorer likely felt that the difficulty of the attempted catch made it more reasonable to credit the batter with a hit. On the other hand, the failure of Barfield to beg off the play in favor of Nixon, coupled with Nixon's failure to communicate that he was barreling in on the catch, made it an error of omission. But however categorized, it was a case of bad fundamentals as it led to two Devil Rays, both of which were technically earned but neither of which were deserved.

This kind of thing has happened repeatedly this season to the point that Shapiro and Wedge can't simply hope that the situation will correct itself. It's early, but Peralta doesn't seem to have improved in the field. His range factor, which is the number of plays made per games at the position, is still a very mediocre 4.68. His zone rating, which tracks the location of balls hit into his zone and the ability to turn those balls into outs is less than mediocre at .824. Currently, he ranks 15th in the league in that statistic. This has to be alarming given Shapiro's statements earlier that an improved Peralta is integral to the Iindians season.

Marte, someone whom Wedge assured the fans was a major defensive upgrade at third, has been even worse. His range factor is an appalling 2.13 and his zone rating is among the worst of all third basemen at .619. Barfield, another player whom fans were assured was a major upgrade defensively, ranks a paltry 18th among American League second basemen in range factor, though his zone rating is .900, putting him 7th in the league.

Finding meaning in such statistics is a favored past time of most GMs these days, including Shapiro and his band of statistical wonks that support him. But the statistics only tell part of the story. The tougher question that needs to be answered is whether mistakes were made in the assessment of the talent collected for this year's version of the Tribe or whether it portends of something more serious. In particular, fans and Shapiro alike have to wonder why these same things keep happening to Wedge's teams.

Wedge says all the right things during each post-game mortem. He appears visibly upset at the recurring defensive and base running lapses and he continues to promise to get it corrected. But the nature of the baseball season is such that there are few off days. That makes making in-season corrections difficult, at best. Sure, there is always time for additional hitting and batting practice, but unless a team is willing to send a player back to the minors, the learning is mostly on-the-job. Unfortunately for Indians fans, they've been forced to endure more than their share of players learning on-the-job.

But in the end, the question still remains: why do these things continue to happen to Wedge's teams? Does he not place enough emphasis on fundamentals during spring training? Is he so interested in maintaining some sort of mythical team chemistry that he is reluctant to take any sort of action against the offending players? Is he unable to communicate with his players in a way that resonates and produces the intended results? Does he have the right coaching staff? It's likely that there is no single answer to this lingering issue but there most assuredly remains a problem and to this point Wedge has not effectively corrected it. It may not be due to a lack of determination but instead a lack of ability.

When Shapiro named Wedge manager, it was an under-the-radar screen hiring because the Indians were in rebuilding mode. As a result, the fans asked few tough questions and made even less demands of him. But this season is the first time Wedge and Shapiro are no longer tethered by contracts of similar length. Shapiro recently signed on to another five years while leaving Wedge to labor under his old contract that has essentially two years left. This, more than anything else, seems to signal that Wedge is now being evaluated on a different matrix than in the past. Whether or not you are a Wedge fan, this heightened scrutiny is a welcome development.

Baseball is now in the golden age of the general manager. Thanks to people like Billy Beane in Oakland, managers have become, in the minds of many GMs, nothing more than mid-level supervisors. This systematic de-emphasis of their role has caused fans to place an overemphasis on the acquisition of talent, as if merely getting the players is all that matters. But though the job of manager has been devalued over the years, it's still the most vital link between what happens in the front office and what happens on the field.

The offensive lapses of this early season may very well be merely a series of unhappy

coincidences but given the repeated failures each season on the base paths and in the field, it is getting well past the time that this should be written off in the same way. It may be too much to suggest that Wedge is the real problem here but until he finds a way to reach Peralta, Marte and the others whose mistakes are now defining this team it also is not too much to suggest that he's not been part of the solution either. And that, more than anything else, will determine not only his future, but that of this team.