If nothing else, you have to give Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro credit for one thing, he certainly knows his team. Going into the season, Shapiro told anyone who would listen that as shortstop Jhonny Peralta goes, so goes the team. Nearly one-quarter into the season, Shapiro couldn't possibly be more dead-on.

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It hardly seems a coincidence that Sunday, Peralta hit his 10th home run of the season and the Indians won their 10th series of the season. In each case, both Peralta and the Indians are months ahead of where they were last season. Peralta didn't hit his 10th home run until the 88th game last year while the Indians didn't win their 10th season until mid-August. Can it really be that simple?

Perhaps it is that simple, but if you scratch below the surface, the resurgence of Peralta may be the most visible sign of the turnaround but it is hardly the only reason or even the most critical.

Start with Paul Byrd. Last season, his first with the Tribe, Byrd was the sort of fringe free agent whose signing hardly raised an eyebrow among the fans. Perhaps it was due to circumstances beyond his control. Remember, the Indians had diverted most everyone's attention by pursuing higher visibility free agents to anchor the back of the bullpen while alienating the reliable but scary closer, Bob Wickman, leaving him to hang in the balance. In the meantime, the Indians couldn't quite find enough room in the budget for Bob Howry, a key set-up man, showed virtually no interest in re-signing Kevin Millwood after he stabilized the starting rotation the year before, and let Scott Elarton, an iffy fourth or fifth starter,

at best, to leave for the pastures of Kansas City. This allowed Byrd to fly a bit under the radar.

But not completely. Tribe fans were told that Byrd was the kind of player, like Millwood, whose steady presence, if lesser pedigree, would too bring stability to a young starting staff. In particular, Byrd was a control pitcher who kept his teams in the game by consistently throwing strikes. But things didn't quite work out that way for either Byrd or the team. Byrd was up and down from opening day on. Had he not been the recipient of great offensive support, his record would have been far worse than the mediocre 10-9 it was. Byrd was hit hard and often, particularly early in the season. His vaunted control simply wasn't there.

But as the season wore on, Byrd slowly got better, just not decidedly so. His ERA, which started off in the 10+ range ended at 4.88. Still even with this improvement this was second highest ERA in his career, the highest he had in his last 10 years, and by almost a full run! Peralta, as an everyday player, may have been a more visible target of fan wrath last season but Byrd was no less ineffective.

This year, Byrd has completely turned it around and is the pitcher Shapiro originally envisioned. After Sunday's win, in which Byrd went eight innings, he is now 4-1. His ERA is 3.55 and he has pitched at least six innings in every start. His control has been phenomenal. He has walked only three batters all season and two of those came in his first official start against Chicago on April 14, a game the Indians won 4-0. In his two no-decisions, he's given up only three earned runs. Peralta, as an everyday player, may be a more visible reason for the resurgence of the Indians this year, but Byrd has been no less effective.

Next is Casey Blake. At times this season, Blake has reminded fans of Aaron Boone last year, which isn't a good thing. Early in the season, Blake simply wasn't hitting. On April 10, following the fourth game of the year, his average was .312. Eleven days later, he was hitting .188. By May 2nd, his average had climbed to .202. But since then, he's been on a virtual tear (for him). Following yesterday's game he's hitting .255, which is essentially equal to his career total of .260.

Though Blake will never be much of an offensive force for the club, what is interesting is that he is hitting .282 batting in the second slot in the order this year. He's also hitting .267 since being reinserted as the regular third baseman. In the

field, Blake's defense at third base has been terrific, particularly for a defensively-challenged team. Marte, in 13 games, had committed 4 errors. Blake has appeared at third base in more than twice as many games—32--this year and only has four errors. His fielding average is .945, a significant improvement over Marte's .857. These statistics are the reason the Indians waited until the last possible minute to bring Marte back from his rehabilitation assignment. Simply, Blake, for all his shortcomings, has stabilized the lineup thus far in a way that Marte, whose upside far exceeds Blake, couldn't.

Next up is Fausto Carmona. His pitching thus far has been the biggest, most pleasant surprise for Indians fans in years, particularly after the way he imploded in such a spectacular fashion last year when he was used in the closer role following the trade of Wickman. This truly is where luck comes in and is why, for all the statistics Shapiro and his staff may want to crunch, success is so difficult to predict. If not for the early season injury to Cliff Lee, followed closely by the eerily similar injury to Jake Westbrook, Carmona would be toiling at Triple A. But since losing his first start on April 13, in which he didn't make it out of the fifth inning of a game against the White Sox, Carmona has given up only eight earned runs in six starts, culminating in last week's brilliant shutout of the Twins. When Westbrook returns, the guess is that Jeremy Sowers, who has been ineffective all season, will find his way back to Buffalo while Carmona finds himself pitching in the All Star game.

And if Carmona doesn't find his way to the All Star game, C.C. Sabathia certainly will. He's already 6-1 and has pitched at least six innings in every start. His ERA is 3.65. Though he has two no-decisions, the Indians ultimately prevailed in both of those games, meaning that the Tribe has won eight of the nine games he's pitched. By almost any pitching measure, Sabathia is among the elite in the league this year. When it's Sabathia's turn in the rotation, opposing teams go into the game knowing that they are at a disadvantage. In fact, the only thing Sabathia has yet to solve is how to pitch in Oakland, which isn't much of a problem given the unbalanced major league schedule, unless the Indians face Oakland in the playoffs. But most importantly, this season, more so than in any other, Sabathia has stepped up his performance and established a presence on the mound that the Indians simply haven't had in years.

Finally, there is the bullpen which, along with defense, was last season's Achilles' heel. Last year, the Indians scored almost 90 more runs than they surrendered. Using the Pythagorean Won/Loss statistic as developed by Bill James and

published on Baseball-Reference.com, that should have yielded a recorded of 89-73. As we know, the Tribe instead finished at 78-84 and it wasn't because of the starting pitching, either. But this season the bullpen has made a remarkable turnaround, although the exploits of Fernando Cabrera of late are a source of some concern. Closer Joe Borowski has performed as good as Shapiro hoped and better than most fans have expected. He has 13 saves in 15 opportunities, even if his few meltdowns have been particularly ugly.

But the closer role wasn't really the problem when it mattered last year as much as it was middle relief. Recall that early in the season the Wickman simply didn't see many save opportunities. And when he left, well, the season was effectively over anyway and whatever save opportunities came the Indians way were an adventure, to say the least. But one of the more telling statistics about the relief pitching last year is that its earned run average was .4 more than the starting pitching, which isn't where you want your relief pitching to be. This year, the bullpen's ERA is now .4 of a run less, which is nearly a run per game difference over the course of a season. That may not seem like much until you consider two things. First, the Indians starting pitching is even better than last year and second, last season the Indians were 18-26 in one-run games while this season they are 8-4.

The remarkable thing about baseball though is that for all the sum of its parts that it really is, sometimes it really is as simple as one player. Maybe Jhonny Peralta is the bellweather for this franchise for this season as Shapiro suggests. Maybe. But the suspicion is that Shapiro knows better, which is why so much time was spent in the off season reconstructing the bullpen. But however Shapiro wants to sell it, the truth is that for Indians fans, they can take at least take decent comfort in knowing that should Peralta regress to the indifferent player on display last season, the Indians, with even better starting pitching and greatly improved middle relief, are much better positioned than last year to withstand such occurrence.