Exactly who are the Cleveland Indians? Are they the team that roared out to a 33-19 start over the first two months of the season? Or the team that has looked very mediocre in posting a 8-11 mark in June? In his latest column, Erik Cassano expresses his fears that the latter is the real Tribe, and that they are just now being exposed for being very average at a number of key spots.

There are two possible truths about this year's Indians:

1) The team that roared to a 33-19 start through the first two months of the season is the real Tribe, and their 8-11 June is a midseason slump.

2) The team that roared to a 33-19 start through the first two months of the season overachieved, and the team that has been 8-11 in June is the real Tribe.

I am concerned that the latter is true, and the Tribe's June record is indicative of a correction that is slowly occurring in the standings. Saturday, we woke up to find the Indians in second place, trailing the Tigers for the first time in a long time.

The baseball season is six months and 162 games long. It's a grind designed to allow water to find its level. Streaks and slumps are supposed to average out over the span of a season, and at the end, the good teams are good, the bad teams are bad and the mediocre teams are mediocre.

In other words, it's very difficult to disguise your team's actual talent level over the course of an entire season. You can do it for two weeks, you can do it for two months, but you probably can't do it for six months.

And, when looking at the Tribe's roster, I see a boatload of mediocrity that tells me, by the end of this season, those 80-to-87 win predictions from the start of the season are probably going to be spot-on.

What the Indians have is a small group of high performers lugging around the rest of the team, which isn't going to work for the long haul. The Indians have been riding the arms of C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona, the bats of Victor Martinez, Grady Sizemore and Jhonny Peralta and the relief work of Rafael Betancourt and Joe Borowski to get to this point. The rest of the roster has been anywhere from inconsistent (Paul Byrd) to underachieving (Travis Hafner) to injury-plagued (Jake Westbrook, David Dellucci) to old (Roberto Hernandez, Trot Nixon) to "He's on the team *why* again?" (Mike Rouse).

But then again, you get what you pay for. And a $61 million payroll that ranks 23rd out of 30 Major League teams according to ESPN.com only buys you so much. It doesn't help when some of the highest-paid players are some of the biggest contributors to the June swoon.

At $7 million, Byrd has the Tribe's second-highest annual salary this year. He has yet to win a game in June (0-2) and the Indians are 0-3 in his June starts.

Hafner, at $4.05 million, is the team's fourth-highest-paid player this year, and he's struggling to keep his batting average around .260.

David Dellucci ($3.75 million, sixth-highest) is on the shelf until at least August with a torn hamstring. Trot Nixon (somewhere between $3 million and $5 million depending on how many performance bonuses he hits) has mustered a .245 average with two homers and 25 RBI in almost 200 at-bats.

Roberto Hernandez was the eighth-highest-paid player on the team at $3.3 million. But the only number that really matters is 42. That's his age, and that's why he didn't pitch well enough to stick around.

Other writers have gone to the caulk analogy, and I find it very appropriate. There are way too many stopgaps, hole-fillers and rolls of the dice on this roster. When Mark Shapiro and Larry Dolan cross their fingers and bet that Nixon, 33 and injury-prone, can make one last stand as an everyday player, when they gamble that a Dellucci-Jason Michaels platoon can work as well as the Ben Brou ssard -Eduardo Perez platoon did a year ago, when they sling a guy like Hernandez against the wall to see if he sticks, that's not a roster built with a plan. That's a roster built on hope.

The same problems that hurt the Indians in 2005 and '06 are creeping up again: When it comes to building a core of promising young players, Indians management is great. The core is family. Long live the core.

But when it comes time to augment that core with capable veterans who can vault this team into true contention, the "constraints of this market," to use a term Shapiro coined, come into play in a big way.

When pumping your payroll into the teens, let alone the top 10, among MLB teams seems like a dream, you aren't going to be able to absorb a lot of bad moves. And you sure as heck aren't going to be able to absorb an underproductive season from a guy like Hafner .

It's no coincidence that the three AL division leaders entering play Saturday are all in the top 10 among MLB payrolls (Boston, second, $143 million; L.A. Angels, fifth, $109 million; Detroit, ninth, $95 million).

A team with a 23rd-ranked payroll is bucking the odds in a big way if it contends all season, let alone makes the playoffs. And that's before the Tribe's stated "Little Engine That Could" goal of winning the World Series enters the conversation.

Once again, the Indians are gambling that their farm system and perceived ability to glean players like Nixon and Hernandez from the scrap heap are going to be able to compensate for the cold, hard cash teams like the Red

Sox
, Angels and Tigers can throw around. It's a fool's bet.

In the end, a 23rd-ranked payroll is going to buy you what 23rd-ranked payroll is supposed to buy you: A roster chock full of inexperienced kids and past-their-prime vets, a roster with the good few leading the mediocre many.

No one is saying it's fair. The Indians do a heck of a lot right as an organization, and they have a management team that understands how to build the foundation for a winner far more than the farm system abusers and neglecters who run teams like the Orioles.

But the state of the final product, the 25 players the Indians put on the field every day, is indicative of the state of the team's finances: Very limited, and very overma tched
by the big-money boys -- which, from where the Tribe stands, is about two-thirds of
MLB
teams.

In a sport without a salary cap, that's not a recipe for success over the course of a season.