The Indians go into the 2006 season as legitimate contenders for a playoff berth, but that doesn't mean there are not any questions surrounding the team. While the team is very deep with starting pitching and relievers, and there are a few concerns with the position players, the outfield might be the biggest question mark this season.

To many fans, the bullpen is the biggest question mark this season. Due to the year-to-year volatility of bullpens, this general feeling among fans does have its merits. Of course, the Indians bullpen is loaded with talented pitchers: Fernando Cabrera, Matt Miller, Guillermo Mota, Rafael Betancourt, Scott Sauerbeck, and Bob Wickman. Also, a lot more talent is about ready to play now in a bullpen role: Jason Davis, Jason Stanford, Andrew Brown, Kaz Tadano, Jeremy Guthrie, and even Danny Graves and Steve Karsay. In other words, the Indians have a good group of relievers and do have options in the bullpen even if there are a few failures or injuries.

You can't say the same thing about the outfield. The starting trio of Jason Michaels, Grady Sizemore, and Casey Blake begs more questions than it provides answers.

Of the bunch, Sizemore is the only player who performed well in full-time duty last year. But, while Sizemore looks to be a star in the making, he still is a 23 year old player entering his sophomore season. And, of course, the dreaded "Sophomore Jinx" could rear its ugly head. Anyone remember Joe Charboneau? Super Joe was the 1980 rookie of the year, hitting .289 with 23 HRs, 87 RBIs and an .846 OPS that season. Those numbers are practically identical to Sizemore's first full season in 2005, in which he hit .289 with 22 HRs, 81 RBIs and an .832 OPS.

After his great rookie campaign, Charboneau's career was prematurely cut short

due to a back injury he suffered in Spring Training in 1981. After such a great rookie year, he appeared in only 70 more games in his major league career hitting .211 with 6 HRs and 27 RBIs. Yes, the feeling around baseball is that Sizemore is a star in the making, but he has not yet established that track record in the major leagues where you can feel confident in what you'll get from him.

What happens if Grady Sizemore struggles or gets hurt? Who is ready to step in and replace him? Todd Hollandsworth? Franklin Gutierrez? No and no. Sizemore may not be able to drink a beer with a straw through his nose or open beer bottles with his eye socket like Charboneau used to do, but one thing is certain: if Sizemore goes down due to injury or struggles, the Indians are in trouble.

But, of the three outfielders, Sizemore is the least of our worries.

In the offseason, the Indians sacrificed some stability in the outfield by trading the popular Coco Crisp to try and fill other needs in the organization, and filled the vacancy in left field by trading for Phillies 4th outfielder Jason Michaels. This was a bold and risky trade for Shapiro, especially in light of how thin the outfield corps for the Indians already is. For the past four seasons, Michaels has been a backup outfielder for the Phillies, although to Michaels defense it would be hard for anyone to crack the starting lineup in an outfield that had Bobby Abreu, Pat Burrell, and super prospect Marlon Byrd and veteran Kenny Lofton.

Michaels ability to get on-base could offset the loss of Crisp, but the main question that remains is how will he handle a transition to being a full-time player? What if he struggles and shows he really is just a 4th outfielder? What is the contingency plan if he does fail? Like with Sizemore, if Michaels struggles or fails the Indians have absolutely no in-house solution to fill a starting outfield role early this season, if not until 2007.

Then there is Casey Blake.

You know, back in 2003 when Blake made the team it was a good story. Nice guy who was a career minor leaguer finally latches onto a team and performs well. Good for him. But, feel

good stories have a way of turning sour at some point, and right now Blake is an annoyance. He's like a dead branch on a tree, serving no purpose and just a bother to the rest of the tree that is trying to grow. Shapiro needs to take a chainsaw to that branch, put it through a wood chipper and burn it so we can be rid of Blake for good.

Too bad Shapiro doesn't see it this way.

Evidently, Shapiro believed in Blake so much after his very good 2004 season that he rewarded Blake with a 2 year $5.4M contract with a team option in 2007 at $3.75M. One only has to wonder if Shapiro is now looking into the camera like Tom the cat in those old Tom & Jerry cartoons and imagining himself looking like a "sucker." After his repugnant 2005 season, one has to wonder if 2004 was nothing more than a scam. Like a con-artist doing just enough to dupe you into believing in him, only for his true colors to show later. Apparently, with Blake STILL in RF, the con is still being worked by Blake.

Next to Aaron Boone, Blake might have been the most common Indians player fans played Pin the Tail on the Donkey with last year. For someone routinely hitting in the 8th and 9th spot in the order, his numbers on the surface were not that bad compared to what most teams throw out there in the bottom of their order. 23 HRs were nice, and his .746 OPS made him look like Babe Ruth next to Aaron Boone and his pitiful .667 OPS. But, what made Blake Public Bum #1in Cleveland, even over fellow Killer B's Boone and Broussard, was how he irritated the piss out of Indians fans night in and night out by failing awfully in key

situations. Saying he was awful may be too nice, as the word does not do justice in explaining how bad he was.

Blake's situational batting averages in 2005: .171 with Runner's In Scoring Position (RISP), .085 with RISP and two outs, .182 with a man on 3rd and less than two outs, .143 with the bases loaded, .192 with runners on any base, .141 with runners on any base and two out, and .174 close and late. Basically, as soon as someone got on base, Blake became an even worse hitter than the famed Mario and Minnie Mendoza. Pa-the-tic.

But hey, Blake DID hit a robust .278 with no one on base, including 18 or his 23 HRs. Oh, and he thrived leading off innings with a .322 batting average. I guess if baseball was a game played with only one out and one player, he'd be All-Star caliber, maybe even a first ballot Hall of Famer.

All kidding aside, Shapiro did nothing, nadda, zilch, nil to fix the problem in RF for this season. To give him some credit, Shapiro did a good job at fixing the two other dead spots in the lineup at 3B and 1B. Eduardo Perez was brought in to platoon with Broussard at 1B, and these two should be a quality lefty/righty platoon. Plus, beyond this season the Indians have several in-house 1B options at their disposal such as Ryan Garko, Michael Aubrey, Ryan Mulhern and Stephen Head. Also, Andy Marte was

acquired in the Crisp trade to fill a huge hole at 3B and eventually (thankfully) supplant Aaron Boone as the starter.

But, it all comes back to Blake and Shapiro's unexplainable decision to not find a suitable replacement for him this season. Shapiro probably made the right choice in not looking to free agency to find Blake's replacement, but while he was prudent in avoiding free agency, one has to wonder why a trade was not sought. Maybe Shapiro feels Blake can't be THAT bad in 2006, or maybe he wants to evaluate him in Spring Training or the first month or two of the season before making a deal for someone like Kevin Mench, Craig Wilson, Ryan Shealy, or Corey Hart. Who knows.

A famous psychologist in the 1940's by the name of Abraham Maslow once came up with a theory called the "Hierarchy of Needs." His theory contends that that as we meet "basic needs" we seek to satisfy successively "higher needs" that occupy a set hierarchy. Clearly in this case, the Indians basic need is a starting RFer who can help them achieve a higher need (um, like the playoffs). Shapiro was the American League Executive of the Year in 2005, so you would think someone with such an award bestowed upon them would recognize such a need.

The success of this season will come down to pitching, defense and timely hitting. But, the outfield and what Shapiro does to address the issue in RF will go a long way at helping this team succeed or fail this season. The outfield is the big question mark for the Indians going into 2006, and why wouldn't it be when you have the still unproven kid in CF, the career 4th outfielder in LF, and Casey Mendoza in RF.