The major league trading deadline is July 31 and most of the non-game stories you're likely to read these days will focus on some variation of the same theme: what will the contenders do, what will the also-rans do? In his latest, Gary Benz says that Indians fans have become so infatuated with the trade deadline and potential deals .... that they ignore the internal improvements the team needs to make to topple the Tigers for the Central crown.

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Over the last several years, fans have become so conditioned to the trading deadline that the days leading up to it are some of the most anticipated of the season, no matter which side of the equation you're on. Teams who thought they would be in better shape but aren't (the Indians last season, Chicago this season) look to dump payroll. A team can lose just as easily with less expensive players than with those currently taking up space and getting the same results, so why not save a little salary in the waning months of the season?

Teams that find themselves contending, on the other hand, are in search of that elusive missing piece—the one or two players that might deliver them to the promised land. Though this is often more myth than reality, enough trade deadline deals have been cut and been relatively successful to cause teams and their fans to look outside for additional help.

To this point, the consensus seems to be that the Indians need to look externally. The middle relief has been shaky and an additional bat or two is always helpful, so the conventional wisdom has gone. Given the shaky nature of the middle relief, the consensus is well taken, particularly as Cliff Lee and Jake Westbrook continue to struggle. But whether the Indians need an additional bat or two is a much more difficult question, far more difficult than whether additional pitching would be useful.

Friday night, the Indians squeaked by the Texas Rangers, 3-2. You could explore any number of storylines about that game, not the least of which was how the defense nearly blew the game by giving the Rangers extended opportunities in the bottom of the ninth to win that game. But surprisingly the one storyline that won't get much thought, given that the Indians are second only to the Detroit Tigers in runs scored this year, is the fact that the Indians only scored three runs Friday night.

But the truth is that's the storyline that most fans should be following because it unlocks the key to the question of whether or not offensive help is needed for the remainder of the season.

Despite the number of runs scored, anyone closely following the Indians, particularly the last six weeks or so, has had to have the lingering, if unstated, feeling at various points that the offense hasn't been that good. Admittedly, that's a difficult conclusion to draw given both the record and the runs scored. But the Indians still trail the Tigers in the standing, the Seattle Mariners are coming on strong in the wild card race and the hottest rumor regarding trading deadline help has a creaky Kenny Lofton coming to Cleveland for that final push.

Lofton might be a good addition if the tradeoff is sending Trot Nixon and his bad back packing. But if the sole issue is whether Lofton or anyone else for that matter is needed for the final push, the answer is probably not. The answer, actually, lies in simply getting more production out of the players currently in the

lineup.

That conversation starts with, but is hardly confined to, Travis Hafner. Though he has been starting to pick it up as of late, Hafner seems to have spent most of the season trying to prove that he can hit singles to the left side of the field. Maybe that will ultimately cause teams to stop using the “Hafner shift” nearly as often, but Hafner’s a natural dead-pull hitter and that has proven to be pretty successful to this point in his career. Even if it is just a matter of being out of sync, unless Hafner significantly picks up the pace, he will come up well short of the promise of last season. He has 16 doubles to date. Last year he hit 32. Though he hit is 16th home run against the Rangers on Friday, he looks to fall well short of the 42 he hit last year. With 64 RBI to this point, Hafner looks to fall well short of last year’s total of 116.

Though Victor Martinez is the better overall hitter and probably always will be, Hafner is the face of the Indians offense. And as he has struggled, it has made the Indians offense look inconsistent, if not ineffective. For example, with the bases loaded, Hafner is hitting only .182 this season. This is nearly 200 points under his career average in that category. With runners in scoring position, he is hitting .198, which is almost 100 points under his career average. With runners in scoring position and two outs, his average dips even further to .186, again well below his career average of .239 in that category. If Hafner can improve in those areas for the rest of this season and get close to his career averages, that is likely to provide much more of a spark than an aging Lofton could provide.

And while Hafner to this point is a big part of the problem, the issue is larger, demonstrating that while a team has to score runs to win games, that statistic is hardly the best way to measure a team’s offensive effectiveness.

For example, while the Indians may be second in the league in runs scored, they also are second in the league in runners left on base. In fact, they have left 77 more on base than the Tigers, which isn't surprising since the Tigers team batting average is .287 compared to the Tribe's .275 average. Thus, while the Tigers are barely ahead of the Indians in total runs scored, they clearly are getting more out of their scoring opportunities than the Tribe.

But where the real difference starts showing up is the simple act of putting the ball in play. If you have the sense that the Indians strike out a lot, it's because they do. Only Tampa Bay and Texas have struck out more than the Tribe. The Tigers, on the other hand, have struck out 126 times less. While an out may be an out, some outs are much more effective than others. You can't advance a runner unless you at least put the ball in play, something the Tigers do much more effectively than the Indians.

Digging deeper one can see why that lingering feeling about the offense is well justified. Not only is Hafner, for example, struggling with the bases loaded, so too is the rest of the team. Overall the Indians have had 104 at bats this season with the bases loaded and have just 24 hits for a .230 average. By contrast, the Tigers have only loaded the bases 86 times, but they have 37 hits, 13 more than the Indians overall, and an average of .430. Broken down further, as of Friday, the Indians have had five players who have come up with the bases loaded at least 10 times: Garko, Blake, Peralta, Barfield and Hafner. Hafner's .182 average is the lowest of the five. The best is Garko, at .250. Blake and Peralta are at .200 and Barfield is at .188. The Tigers, on the other hand, have had three players come to bat with the bases loaded at least 10 times and every one of them is hitting over .400 in that situation.

If that doesn't tell enough of the story, consider the averages with runners in scoring position. The Indians have had 879 at bats with runners in scoring position. They have 230 hits for an average of .261. That's a full 14 points under the overall team average. The Tigers have had 883 at bats with runners in scoring position. They have 289 hits for a .327 average, which is full 40 points higher than the overall team average. The same trend holds true with runners in scoring position and two outs. The Indians have 421 at bats, 107 hits and a .254 average, 21 points under their overall average. The Tigers have 399 at bats, 123 hits for a .308 average, 27 points higher than their overall average.

Considering how much more effective the Tigers have been in their at bats than the Indians, it's amazing that the Indians are just one game behind the Tigers in the standings. This is even more amazing when the pitching stats are thrown in. Though the Indians pitchers have been solid overall all season, the Tigers have been even better. Tiger pitchers have a better ERA, and opponents are hitting worse against them and have scored less runs than they have against the Indians. The Tigers even have more saves than the Indians.

There are still about 65 games left in the season, enough time for trends to turn. But simply pitching better, even in middle relief, isn't likely going to be the key to overtaking the Tigers and winning the division. The key is offense. And while fans may want the Indians to make a move just to prove that they are in it to win it, with nine days remaining until the trading deadline, the answer really lies not externally but internally, unless the Indians decide to trade for the Tigers offense. The truth, while much more mundane, is that the Indians don't necessarily need to make a move to get better. They have enough horses. They just have to get much better production out of them, particularly in clutch situations.