Cliff Lee is struggling mightily and hasn't pitched well on any consistent basis since 2005. Whether they want to admit it or not, the Indians are reaching a decision time with Lee. Rumor has it that Aaron Laffey is headed from Buffalo to Cleveland. Will Lee be demoted, traded, potentially put in the bullpen? Erik Cassano takes a look at The Cliff Lee Situation in his latest.

Cliff Lee is a guy I want to root for.

After sitting through entire Indians seasons that never featured a fulltime left-handed starter, Lee and C.C. Sabathia were a breath of fresh air as the 2000s dawned. Finally, the Indians would be able to neutralize lefty power hitters and force switch hitters over to their normally-weaker right side.

Finally, teams would be penalized for stacking their lineups with lefty pop against the Indians. The days when the Yankees could face Cleveland and bat Paul O'Neill, switch-hitting Bernie Williams and Tino Martinez in order without giving it a second thought were over.

But that fresh air is turning sour. Lee is struggling mightily and hasn't pitched well on any consistent basis since 2005. Whether they want to admit it or not, the Indians are reaching a decision time with Lee.
He was given a multiyear contract extension last year, when he battled his way to a 14-11 record with a 4.40 ERA. The ERA was a little high, but it was the third consecutive year he reached 14 wins, which justified the extension at the time. This year, with Lee sitting at 5-7 with a 5.95 ERA following a brutal first inning in a loss to Texas on Saturday, his track record is starting to look decidedly poor once

you get past wins and losses.

Since becoming a fulltime member of the Indians rotation in 2004, Lee's hits allowed have gone up every year, from 188 in '04 to 194 in '05, and then jumping to 224 last year. This year, he's allowed 96 hits in 15 starts. Assuming 30 starts, that projects his '07 hits allowed to 192. Assuming last year's 33 starts, Lee will easily eclipse 200 hits allowed again this year.
Lee's earned runs allowed are on pace for a dramatic spike this year. He has so far allowed 58 earned runs, putting him on pace to surrender 116 earned runs in 30 starts, way up from last year's total of 98 and his '05 total of 85. Factor in the 108 earned runs he allowed in '04, and that would mean, without a major shift of fortune in the second half of this season, Lee will have surrendered 100 earned runs in two of his first four seasons as a fulltime starter, and come up two runs shy in a third season.

His ERA is the proof: 5.43 in 33 starts in '04, 3.79 in 32 starts in '05, 4.40 in 33 starts in '06 and 5.95 in 15 starts this year.
His 2005 season, when he went 18-5 and ended up on the outskirts of Cy Young Award consideration, appears to be an aberration at this point.

With three and a half seasons as a fulltime starter under his belt, Lee is developing trends that have become the characteristics of his game: He gives up a lot of hits, and consequently a lot of runs. He has trouble staying away from big innings where he gives up hits and runs in bunches. For some reason, this year the big innings seem to happen early. Lee has allowed hitters to bat .390 within his first 15 pitches per start.

Few things deflate a team like getting dropped into a 5-0 hole before the second inning as happened to the Indians on Saturday.

And that's perhaps the most compelling reason for the Indians to examine other options for Lee instead of giving him the ball every fifth day. The Indians have losing streaks of three and four games this year when Lee takes the mound. They had a winning streak of four Lee starts from June 13 to July 1, but instead of using it to propel himself to a second-half comeback, Lee tossed a six-run, six-hit dud in a loss in Toronto right before the all-star break, and the Indians haven't won a Lee start since.

And that's really been the story of Lee's baseball life since the start of last season:

The inability to sustain anything good for long periods. Right now, as much as I don't want to say it, Lee is hurting his team and allowing him to stay in the rotation is probably going to lead to more losses for the Tribe.

Jason Stanford is the long man the bullpen. He might not be a cure-all, but the further Lee ventures into the abyss, the more appealing a Stanford-Lee role swap looks.