In baseball, it's always best not to try and draw too many conclusions from any one game. But a series, particularly a four-game series, is a decent gauge of the state of a team. That being the case, there was much to draw from the Indians recently completed home series against the surging Boston Red Sox. Gary Benz hits on the Red Sox series and the Lofton deal in his latest.

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Because the series featured so little that was positive for the Indians, discussing what went right first seems appropriate, if only to get it out of the way. First, Franklin Gutierrez continues to show he belongs in the major leagues both with his glove and his bat. If that means less playing time for Trot Nixon, all the better. Second, the only other positive to be gleaned were the performances of C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona. Each proved that he can well handle the best the league can throw at him. Sabathia, in his 1-0 loss to Daisuke Matsuzaka, was as much a tough luck loser as Carmona, in his 1-0 victory over Josh Beckett, was a good luck winner. But the bigger picture was that when you throw four of the best pitchers in baseball on the field, the hitting is going to suffer on both sides. And it did. Offense was in scarce supply for two games that ended up being two of the most compelling games of the season anyway.

But when you push back from those two games, the series also showed that if the playoffs started tomorrow, they'd be over quickly. The Indians, as the wild card, would be matched against the Red Sox and the gap between the two seems significantly wider than, say, the one between the Indians and the Kansas

City Royals.

That may have to do, in large part, to one of the biggest disappointments about the series, the performances of pitchers Jake Westbrook and Cliff Lee. It's become apparent to everyone, but particularly their teammates, that when either Westbrook or Lee pitches there is little chance of a victory. On Monday night, Westbrook's first inning meltdown was eerily reminiscent of Lee's performance against Texas a few nights earlier. The conventional wisdom is that if you're going to give up runs, give them up early in order to give the offense a chance. But that wisdom is seriously being challenged in the case of both Westbrook and Lee as they are giving up runs early and often.

Thursday night, Lee was able to get through the first inning unscathed, but it proved to be only a tease. In the second inning, Manny Ramirez sent Lee's first pitch of the inning to dead center field. When it finally landed about 20 minutes later it measured as the third longest home run in Jacobs Field history, which seems dubious because it disappeared behind the trees that sit well behind the center field wall and was probably hard to accurately measure. Put it this way, you're more likely to see Britney Spears singing opera at the Met than to ever see a ball hit further than the one Ramirez hit against Lee.

And that was just the beginning. From that point, Lee couldn't have been more ineffective if he was throwing batting practice, and often it looked like he was, except for the fact that most batting practice pitchers get the ball over the plate more often. If Red Sox hitters weren't actually sending the ball screaming back up the middle, they were standing with the bat on their shoulders watching one ball after another land about a foot short of the plate before casually walking to first. Mercifully, Lee was finally gone after failing to record an out in the fifth.

Which leads to another disappointment about the series, the performance of the Indians bullpen. Tom Mastny's entry into the game Thursday in the seventh inning was the microcosm. Jason Standford was hardly dominating after taking

over for Lee and was spent after giving up singles to Jason Varitek and Coco Crisp in the seventh. Mastny came on and Willy Mo Pena, who was barely hitting .200 at the time (and was actually under .200 when the game started but got "healthy" feasting on Lee in the first few innings) sent the first pitch over the left field wall for a three-run home run. A good many in the crowd, meaning most of those who were not Red Sox fans, began the slow walk to the parking lot thereafter, eschewing the opportunity to sing "Take Me Out to the Ballpark" during a seventh inning stretch that seemed, at that point, still hours away.

There will be a tendency by the apologists among us to see some positive in the fact that the Indians did score nine runs Thursday night. But the fact is the Indians offense scores runs in the same way that Joe Carter used to collect RBI, often when they don't matter.

For example, despite Lee's intent to put the game as far out of reach as possible, the Indians were actually only one swing of the bat from tying the game in the fifth. When Ryan Garko came to bat with the bases loaded and four runs already in, a grand slam would have tied the game at nine. That's a tall order, particularly for a team like this with an uncanny inability to get hits when they'd have the most impact, but it was doable. Unfortunately, Garko flied out to center field and the rally was over.

Ultimately, of course, the Indians did score nine runs, just not when it would have meant something. A Garko slam and the game played from that point forward would have been significantly different. For one, Stanford would never have started the seventh inning. Even if Mastny would have come in at that point, he's much more effective starting an inning than coming in with runners on base. More likely, though, Rafael Bentancourt comes into the game and he would have stood a much better chance of shutting down Boston than anyone else in the bullpen at that point. But if there is anything else positive to be taken from all of this, it's that the good arms in the bullpen should be well rested for the start of the Minnesota series.

What the series revealed is that right now anyway even if the Indians can hold on to their position and make the playoffs, they have significant holes to fill before they can be considered serious threats to win a World Series.

Going into the Minnesota series and unless GM Mark Shapiro moves either Lee or Westbrook, 40% of the rotation is reliable, 40% of it is unreliable, and the remaining 20%, in the form of Paul Byrd, is giving up nearly 4.5 runs per game. The question is what to do about the 40% that is unreliable. Barring a trade, manager Eric Wedge is going to have to consider moving either Lee or Westbrook to the bullpen or to the minors. Friday came the answer as Lee was shipped off to Buffalo to right himself. That seems to be the right move, but putting a sinker ball pitcher like Westbrook, who gets a lot of ground ball outs, might be an interesting choice for the bullpen for just that reason. In other words, having moved Lee, that doesn't necessarily preclude a move with Westbrook.

The truth though, is that though Lee has more victories than Westbrook, he seems further away from returning to form. Frustration seemed to ooze from every pore on Lee Thursday night. He takes to the mound expecting bad things to happen and the prophecy is fulfilled more times than not these days. He may privately grouse about a shaky defense Thursday night that could have helped him out a bit more, the truth is that given the way he's pitching it's no wonder the players behind him are back on their heals. If Lee isn't traded, it would be a mistake for him to return from Buffalo until he has several decent starts under his belt.

Some kind of move is necessary, unfortunately, for Travis Hafner as well. Right now, he's really hurting the team, a few weak hits Friday night notwithstanding. As detailed earlier this week (see article here) Hafner's overall batting average isn't just down, so too is his situational average. He's not hitting with the bases loaded and he's not hitting with runners in scoring position and two outs. In fact, he's not hitting with runners in scoring position, irrespective of the number of outs. His lack of production, given his position in the lineup, is the main reason that the Indians offense appears so anemic. Put it this way, as lost as Josh Barfield

has looked at the plate all season, he's got the same average as Hafner.

For Wedge, he has very limited options regarding Hafner but that shouldn't stop him from making a move anyway. First, he can put Hafner on the shelf for three or four games in a row, perhaps more, and alternate Garko and Victor Martinez as the DH. This would require more playing time for Kelly Shoppach but in the near term it's hard to see how this hurts the Indians either offensively or defensively. Alternatively or possibly in combination with, Wedge can move Hafner lower in the line-up. Switching him with Garko might be a good move near term. Either way, or maybe a third way, Hafner can't keep hitting in the middle of the lineup while he struggles like this.

The trading deadline is looming and it appears as though the Indians are poised for Kenny Lofton's third tour of duty. But that move is hardly an answer to what is currently hurting this team most. Even if a more significant move can be made it won't be the complete answer anyway. Whatever else they do, it's become increasingly clear that Wedge and/or Shapiro need to re-deploy some of the players they currently have in order get different and hopefully better results.