When Indians GM Mark Shapiro was ticking off the prospects for the upcoming season, he told everyone with a microphone or a notepad that Jhonny Peralta's ability to hit like he did in 2005 and not 2006 was one of the keys. Peralta has responded to the challenge. But some of the guys Shapiro assumed would produce are not. Gary Benz disects the Indians offensive woes in his latest piece.

When Indians GM Mark Shapiro was ticking off the prospects for the upcoming season, he told everyone with a microphone or a notepad that Jhonny Peralta's ability to hit like he did in 2005 and not 2006 was one of the keys. When Shapiro made that statement, it was with the unstated assumption that Victor Martinez and Travis Hafner would continue to hit as they had in the past. Martinez has fulfilled his end of the bargain. And indeed, when Hafner got off to a fast start in April, it really never occurred to anyone that come August, it would be Hafner's bat and not Peralta's that is likely to make or break the season.

But that is exactly where the Indians find themselves on August 10, entering an important home series with the hard-charging Yankees. Peralta has responded to the challenge laid down by Shapiro, hitting .280 with 19 home runs and 59 RBI heading into the Yankees series. Hafner, unfortunately, hasn't lived up to the assumptions made based on the expectations created over the last three years.

You can slice Hafner's statistics in whatever detail you'd like and it's still a struggle to find even a sliver of positive news at this point beyond the fact that he is drawing a fair number of walks. He's hitting a robust .254 to this point, which

places him just ahead of Josh Barfield and just behind Trot Nixon. And while his 70 RBI are second on the team, he should have 100 RBI by now if he was hitting even close to what his statistical norms have been. He is hitting under .200 with runners in scoring position, at trend that is growing worse with each game, which tells you all you need to know about why the Indians are finding it increasingly more difficult to score runs. Hafner leads the team in number of plate appearances with runners in scoring position (146) but has just 21 hits to show for it for a batting average of .194. Using just last season as a comparator, Hafner batted .304 with runners in scoring position.

While the working assumption is that Hafner is merely mired in a slump, the better question is whether or not that working assumption is correct. Perhaps pitchers have caught up with Hafner or maybe, like Austin Powers, he just has temporarily lost his mojo.

When you look at Hafner's relatively brief career, the last time he hit (or didn't hit) like this was his first year with Cleveland in 2003. Hafner played in 91 games and batted only .254, exactly his average today. And while his on-base percentage then of .327 is well below his ever-sinking on-base percentage this year (.380), the comparisons between those two seasons are eerily similar. Although Hafner batted mostly in the sixth, seventh and eighth spots in the lineup in 2003, he had the same inability to hit with runners in scoring position then, hitting only .230. His ability to hit with runners in scoring position and two outs, a measure of his ability to hit in the clutch, was abysmal at .094. This year it is a mere .188. But what is most telling about 2003 is that it begins to show the emergence of what kind of hitter Hafner was going to be.

Looking at the statistical splits of that year two trends were emerging that are back this year. In 2003, he hit .233 against ground ball pitchers, defined as pitchers who statistically, over a three year period, get consistently more ground outs than fly outs, by a ratio of less than .83 fly outs to ground outs. He also hit only .200 against so-called power pitchers, defined as pitchers who either strike out or walk a batter more than 28% of the time, as opposed to a finesse pitcher who either strike out or walk batters less than 24% of the time. An average pitcher falls in between. Looking at 2007, Hafner is struggling against groundball pitchers vs. fly

out pitchers (.250 average vs. .294 average) and is really struggling against power pitchers vs. finesse pitchers, .192 vs. .292.

Compare those to what most consider to be his breakout season of 2006. Last year, Hafner pretty much hit whatever was thrown at him. He hit .291 against ground ball pitchers and .318 against fly out pitchers. He still struggled a bit against power pitchers with a .257 average but more than made up for it against finesse pitchers by hitting .348. But the truth is that what Hafner did in 2006 was really similar to the previous two seasons as well. For those three years he was a remarkably consistent hitter, with the only trend being that he doesn't hit power pitchers all that well. (He's a career .290 hitter overall but a career .240 hitter against power pitchers) This leads to the inevitable question of whether or not Hafner is simply facing more groundball and/or power pitchers this year (or in 2003) than he did in 2006. Unfortunately, the answer is no. The percentages in each of those years, not surprisingly, is about the same. In fact, those percentages are about the same every year. In simple terms, this season is a replay of 2003 only played out over even more at-bats.

But despite what might appear to be less of a slump and more like cold-hard reality, there are plenty of reasons to believe that this really may be a case of mojo temporarily misplaced. The hitter Cleveland fans often compare Hafner to is Jim Thome, mostly because of their physical presence. But the comparison is more apt than most fans might imagine and Thome's career is instructive in placing Hafner's current struggles in context.

While most fans remember Thome as someone who seemed to hit for a high average and incredible power, he actually only hit over .300 for the Indians three times in his 11-year career, which includes his first three seasons when his playing time was limited. In actuality, he's a career .281 hitter, decent, but not as high as most fans would guess if asked. Thome's equivalent to Hafner's 2003 year was 1994 when he was an emerging hitter and ended the season with a .268 average. Just like Hafner in 2003 Thome in 1994 was developing certain trends that have carried through in subsequent years. For example, in 1994, Thome, like Hafner, struggled more against both fly out pitchers and power pitchers, just as he does today and throughout his career. And, just like Hafner, during Thome's best

years, for example 1995, it didn't matter what pitcher he faced. He hit well against whatever was thrown at him and from whoever threw it.

But what fans might find the most comfort in is that despite his overall success, Thome's career wasn't just a straight line upward. He has had similar ups and downs. For example, in 2000, Thome hit only .269 and it was the first time in five years that his on-base percentage was below .400, though by just a fraction. Although Thome did finish with 37 home runs and 106 RBI, figures that appear to be well be out of reach for Hafner at this point, his average with runners in scoring position and less than two outs as well as with two outs, like Hafner this year, were well below his career averages. Thus, had he not been struggling, Thome should have had closer to 120 RBI.

While it may be of less comfort in the near term, it is also nice to note that whatever Thome's struggles were in 2000 they didn't continue into the next two seasons. Like 1995, iThome hit pretty much everything thrown his way during those two seasons. On the strength of his career in Cleveland in general and those two seasons in particular, Thome was able to hit the lottery with Philadelphia and he's been most persona non grata in Cleveland ever since.

It seemed that barring injury, Indians manager Eric Wedge wasn't going to sit Hafner down for a prolonged period of time, despite his struggles. Maybe that speaks to Wedge's hard-headedness as a manager or maybe it was just wishful thinking. But with Hafner now nursing a sore knee owing to an awkward slide into second against the White Sox on Wednesday, Wedge may not have much of a choice. It worked out well enough on Thursday night against the Sox and it would be hard to imagine that things could get any worse with the offense with Hafner out of the lineup for a few more days.

While Hafner is looking more like Gorman Thomas these days than Thome, the truth is that even with his struggles, Hafner is following the sometimes circuitous route to superstardom that many others before him have faced. It may be best for the Indians to sit him down now and play him less often for the remainder of the

season, but only because it looks like this is a season-long slump and not just a few bad weeks. Overall, though, it really doesn't appear near the time for Shapiro or the fans to change their working assumptions about Hafner for future years. If Thome's career is any indication, and it should be, Hafner will re-emerge, if not now soon anyway.