Jhonny Peralta has been a lightning rod of discussion for the Indians fans that make our message boards home for their Tribe Talk. Many fans feel Peralta is misplaced at shortstop, where he ie below average defensively and has not adopted the role as the "leader" of the team's defense ... as most shortstops are. Early on, Honny was hitting, and it helped mask this. And now he's not. Brian McPeek opines.

Time was when a major league shortstop was called upon to be a good glove, a weak bat and the captain of the infield.

As late as the 1960's offense was a bonus at the position. Steady, heady infielders like Pee-Wee Reese, Phil Rizzuto, Jonny Logan, Maury Wills, Luis Aparicio and Bert Campaneris were shortstop staples of the 50's and 60's.

The current breed of SS was really born in the 1970's and 1980's. Players like Dave Concepcion, Garry Templeton, Ozzie Smith, Alan Trammel and Robin Yount gave birth to a new era by combining steady, if not spectacular defense, with some impact on the offensive side of the ball. Taking advantage of the new emphasis on offense was Cal Ripken in the 80's. Ripken burst onto the scene in 1982 with 28 HRs and 93 RBI in a rookie of the year season that completely redefined how the position was valued going forward.

Ripken was nowhere near as spectacular or efficient defensively as was a guy like Ozzie Smith. He was, however, a capable SS who gave his Baltimore teams an unmistakable advantage offensively at the position and still made the routine plays. The Orioles suddenly saw that despite his ordinary defense, his offensive contributions lifted them far above other teams who didn't have a middle of the order threat at SS.

And as the Rizzutos begat the Groats and the Groats begat the Concepcions, the Concepcions gave way to the Ripkens. Ripken unleashed a world of power and offensive production on the SS position. Some of the kids watching him average 25 HRs and drive in 100+ runs each season were named Alex Rodriguez, Derek Jeter, Miguel Tejada and Nomar Garciaparra.

That new breed dominated the game in the 90's and beyond. They became the measuring stick to which all shortstops playing today are compared. Even the slick fielders were forced to increase their offensive production, either through utilizing speed or by simply becoming more effective hitters. Omar Vizquel, a defensive wizard, became an increasingly productive offensive player and has positioned himself for a Hall of Fame run because of it.

The problem in all of this for the Indians is that what were once considered enormous numbers for shortstops (20 HR and 80 RBI) are now pedestrian. A team has no significant advantage with a guy who puts up those now mundane numbers and gives you no defense. And mundane offensive numbers and no defense is Jhonny Peralta.

The time is fast approaching when the Indians will have to make a decision with Peralta. Only 25, Peralta has never duplicated his 1995 production when he hit 24 HRs and drove in 78 runs (both career highs). Never "slick" with the glove, Peralta gives the Indians no clear offensive advantage night in and night out against other AL shortstops. Throw in the fact he may already be too big and slow to play the position, he is a poor base-runner and he sometimes appears lost or disinterested during an at-bat or a game, and Peralta is quickly becoming a

liability on a team that can't afford them.

Peralta does not appear to be able to make up for the numerous shortcomings in his game by doing the little things. He is a poor enough bunter that even in situations that scream for him to bunt he's not called upon to so. He was picked off 1st base in the late innings of a recent game with *nobody out and the bases loaded* . He is particularly weak going to his right and he's not exactly Vizquel going to his left either.

With middle of the rotation pitchers Jake Westbrook, Fausto Carmona and Paul Byrd living and dying with the ground ball, the Indians may have to come to the realization that Peralta is not the guy they want fielding those ground balls. So if your SS is weak defensively, is mentally checking out during games and is not a game-changing hitter, what is he doing at the most important position on the field?

The short answer is he's playing himself to the corner of the field. If Asdrubal Cabrera, the SS acquired in last year's trade of Eduardo Perez to the Mariners, acquits himself fairly well over the next 40 games, Peralta is likely headed to 3rd base. He has a strong throwing arm (especially when he's not throwing on the run), he has decent reactions and 3rd base is a position of weakness at the big league level right now. Casey Blake is fine for the time being. But Blake is 8 years older than Peralta and may be best suited for a utility role in the future. And, as SS became a position dominated by power and athleticism, 3rd base has gone the other way. Teams are looking to add some pop on the corners and Peralta may see his power numbers rise at a position where he's not under such defensive scrutiny. If not with the Indians then perhaps for someone else if the Indians decide either Blake or

Andy Marte are better options.

Peralta has become a lightning rod for criticism this season with his under whelming numbers (.213, 3 HR, 9RBI and .622OPS in the last 30 days) and his seeming indifference to his and his team's struggles. Not all of it is fair given his relative youth and the fact any number of players are struggling as much as, if not more than, JP is. But what's clear is that mediocre offensive production coupled with below average defensive ability is a bad blend for anyone looking to play SS at the big league level.