There are any number of ways one can choose to look at the Indians collapse over the last several days. In Gary Benz's latest, he says that the difference in the ALCS came down to leadership. Boston had it, Cleveland did not. And that the inability of two of the Indians key leaders, C.C. Sabathia and Travis Hafner, to put the rest of this young team on their backs and close out the series when it had the chance is not only a stark reality to be faced but a situation to be addressed.

There are any number of ways one can choose to look at the Indians collapse over the last several days. There are the individual plays, of course, that will be talked about and that list already has started: Kenny Lofton being called out at second when replays show he was safe; Joel Skinner's puzzling decision to hold Lofton at third when he seemingly could have easily scored; Casey Blake grounding into the double play, etc.And generally individual games tend to turn on individual plays. That's just the way it is.

But if the point in understanding what happened is to arrive at some greater truth that can be utilized down the road, then the real reason the Indians are cleaning out their lockers on Monday and Boston is preparing to play Colorado on Wednesday comes down to leadership. Boston had it, Cleveland did not. The inability of two of the Indians key leaders, C.C. Sabathia and Travis Hafner, to put the rest of this young team on their backs and close out the series when it had the chance is not only a stark reality to be faced but a situation to be addressed.

Sabathia may win the Cy Young award based on his performance this season, but you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who watched the Cleveland/Boston series who'd say that Sabathia is a better pitcher than Josh Beckett, particularly when it counted most. While Beckett seemed intimidated by nothing much, Sabathia acted almost overwhelmed by the enormity of the playoffs, starting with the Yankees series. He wasn't completely ineffective, just mostly, but what he did do was demonstrate that at this point he's not the fully realized superstar Cleveland fans would like to believe he is.

What was particularly frustrating in this regard is how he seemed to abandon what had brought him to this stage in the first place. He repeatedly nibbled rather than challenged, and in the process unwittingly set a tone for the other pitchers to follow. Outside of one glorious half-inning in game two when Tom Mastny set down David Ortiz, Manny Ramirez and Mike Lowell in the 10th inning, Sabathia and, by proxy, the rest of the Indians pitchers, basically had no answer to the middle of the Red Sox lineup.

It would be hard to overstate how poorly Indians pitchers approached the middle of the Red Sox lineup. There is no question that David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez are terrific hitters, but time and again Indians pitchers, led by Sabathia, treated the two, as well as Kevin Youkilis and eventually Mike Lowell, with such caution that they were pitching from behind even before they threw a pitch.

Ortiz, went 0-5 on Sunday and still batted .292 for the series. Youkilis batted .500 for the series while Ramirez batted .409. Lowell batted .333. But those raw numbers hardly tell the story. What matters most is that they were an intimidating presence in the lineup and time and again Indians pitchers simply pitched scared or expended so much energy trying to be so fine in their approach they didn't even notice that the inning and the game was getting away from them in the meantime.

Consider, for example, game one. The third inning effectively spelled the end for Sabathia and the Indians. Julio Lugo led off with a double and was sacrificed to third by Pedroia. Up came Youkilis. Instead of Sabathia challenging him, he nibbled and begged and ultimately walked him on four straight pitches. Shaken, Sabathia then hit Ortiz to load the bases. After getting ahead of Ramirez 0-2, Sabathia couldn't finish, instead throwing four straight balls to walk in a run. Lowell then him a double and a game that had been 1-1 was now 4-1.

In game five, Youkilis hit a home run off of Sabathia in the first inning. Ramirez then doubled and Lowell singled. The only thing that kept that inning from being bigger was that Ramirez got thrown out at the plate trying to score. In the third inning, after Youkilis hit into a double-play, Sabathia then walked Ortiz and Ramirez singled and the Indians were now behind 2-1. In the seventh, when Sabathia should have been sitting in the dugout, something for which he can't be blamed, he gave up a lead-off double to Pedroia and a triple to Youkilis before being replaced by Rafeal Bentancourt. Youkilis eventually scored that inning on a sacrifice but the two runs were charged to Sabathia and the Indians were now behind 4-1 and that game, too, was now effectively over.

If there wasn't a straight line from Sabathia's performance in either game to ineffectiveness of Carmona, particularly on Saturday night, the line wasn't very circuitous either. In the first inning Saturday, Dustin Pedroia was down in the count 1-2 and then singled. Carmona, like Sabathia, sensed the pressure and tightened up, immediately getting behind to Youkilis, who eventually gets an infield single on a 2-2 pitch. Ortiz comes up and all Carmona did was immediately go 3-0 on him, eventually walking him after getting the count to full. The bases were now full. Carmona then got ahead of Ramirez quickly and ultimately

struck him out then induced Lowell to fly out. On the cusp of getting out of what was looking to be a disaster, Carmona seemed completely spent by what had already taken place. As a result he let down and eventually J.D. Drew drilled a 3-1 pitch over the wall in center field. That game was effectively over, too.

It's not like these situations were limited to the games Cleveland lost. In fact, the middle of the lineup for the Red Sox was active throughout the series and caused Indians pitchers fits time and again. It's just that in the games Cleveland won, the other Red Sox hitters had trouble capitalizing on all the attention that was being paid to Youkilis, Ortiz, Ramirez and Lowell.

But as intimidated as Sabathia and the rest of the Indians pitchers seemed to be by the Red Sox lineup, the Indians could still have prevailed if Hafner had been able to step up when Sabathia could not. Instead, Hafner effectively killed off whatever remaining hope remained after Sabathia's flameout.

On Saturday night, despite Drew's grand slam, the Indians were still just one swing away from tying the game in the third inning. Trot Nixon and Casey Blake had both singled. Grady Sizemore lined out and Asbrubal Cabrera flied out. Up came Hafner with the opportunity to do something special.

It may be unrealistic to ever expect a home run, but somehow great players find a way to seize the moment. Hafner, like Sabathia, showed he's not yet in that category. When great was needed, he quickly went

down in the count 1-2, a place he seemingly found himself in throughout the series. Hafner then grounded out to first to kill the inning and sap whatever chance the Indians had of getting back into the game.

If that seems like too harsh of an assessment, then consider the following. In Hafner's first at bat in game one, he hit a solo home run. It was as good as it would get for him the entire series. He struck out in the fourth inning and flew out in the sixth inning (with Cabrera on base and one run already in). In game two, Hafner flew out in the first inning with Sizemore on second. In game three, Hafner went hitless. Although the Indians won the game, it bears mentioning that in the fifth inning with two out and one on, Hafner grounded out when a single would have scored two.

In the crucial game five, with Josh Beckett on the mound, Hafner had a chance to break open the game early. Sizemore led off with a bloop double and Cabrera singled. Hafner then grounded into a rally-killing double play, which was all the more deflating when Victor Martinez singled. Instead of a three or four run inning and a chance to send the Red Sox a message that they wouldn't be intimidated by Beckett, the Indians only got one. Finally, in the eighth inning of game seven, after both Sizemore and Cabrera singled, Hafner struck out on three straight pitches.

You can't fault manager Eric Wedge for sticking with Hafner, but the Boston series was the mini-version of Hafner's entire season. Thus, his failure to step up in the postseason was not necessarily a big surprise.

But even if his failures weren't a surprise doesn't mean that they weren't critical to the team's overall failures, just as were Sabathia's. This is a young Indians team that needed its leaders to step up when things seemed darkest. It's hard to gauge, but the failures of these two could linger well into next season. Look what's happened to Alex Rodriguez. Even if the Indians make the playoffs next year, the story line will focus on Sabathia and Hafner and their 2007 failures. Can they handle that additional pressure? It's a question that will be asked until adequately answered on the field.

As the Indians enter the off-season, getting these answers correct will help determine the future of this franchise as much as anything else. In the case of Hafner, GM Mark Shapiro can only hope considering how much money already has been committed. With Sabathia and potential free agency looming after next season, Shapiro must go even a step further. If Shapiro convinces the Dolans to invest the kind of money into Sabathia that his regular season stats will dictate, then it will be as a result of a huge leap of faith that Sabathia will become what the Red Sox have in Beckett. The Indians can't afford to get this wrong.