Edgar Renteria and Jacque Jones to Detroit. The White Sox acquired Orlando Cabrera and Scott Linebrink. The Royals got themselves a new manager and a new reliever from Japan. And the Twins appear set to trade Johan Santana to the highest bidder. The winds of change are swirling all around the Indians in the AL Central. And Paulie Cousineau is here to break it all down for us as he takes a look at how the division appears to be shaping up in '08.

As Delmon Young heads to Twinkietown, with the **Johan Race being handicapped**, and the Winter Meetings on the horizon (coupled with not too many smoke signals coming out of the Reservation on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario), perhaps it's time to take a quick look around the AL Central to examine the moves that the teams (other than the Tribe) have made and what questions still exist for them as they ready themselves for the 2008 season.

Moving downward from their 2007 finishes in the Central (Tribe excluded because...well, that's all I ever write about) here goes:

Detroit Tigers

For the team that led the AL Central as late as August 16th, the Tigers jumped into the Hot Stove season with both feet, moving quickly and decisively on the Trade Market and being active in the FA market. They began with a trade for Edgar Renteria, which will allow them to move Carlos Guillen to 1B full-time, jettisoning Sean Casey (and his 4 HR and .746 OPS from 1B) from the lineup. While they gave up a nice pitching prospect in Jair Jurrjens (who, at age 21, posted a 1.14 WHIP over 7 starts in 2007), Renteria adds another piece to the puzzle that Jim Leyland and GM Dave Dombrowski are trying to put together, one that may look vaguely familiar to Tribe fans...you may remember them as the **19**

97 Florida Marlins

.

With Renteria in the fold to join Sheffield and Pudge, could they be targeting Livan Hernandez instead of Player Agent Kenny Rogers (he fired Scott Boras and is representing himself) to fill the rotation?

Are they contacting Robb Nenn to fill the void created when Joel Zumaya hurt himself moving boxes in Southern California?

By the way, before moving on to the rest of the Tigers' moves, did anyone know that former Browns QB Josh Booty was on that 1997 Fish team that broke my heart?

HE has a World Series ring? Ugh...I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit.

Anywho, elsewhere in Motown, the Tigers re-upped with Joe Borows...errr...Todd Jones on a one-year, $7M deal, which lends some sort of semblance to their bullpen. However, without Zumaya, the Motor City Kitties are still prowling for some bullpen arms and are likely to overpay for LaTroy Hawkins and the like to bridge the gap between their starters and Jones.

The Tigers also netted Jacque Jones from the Cubs (for Futility Infielder Omar Infante) to serve as ½ of the LF platoon for the Tigers with Marcus Thames until 20-year-old uber-prospect Cameron Maybin (who underwhelmed in his brief MLB stint in 2007) is ready to take over in LF. As long as you can stomach platoons (and many Tribe fans can't), this isn't a bad looking arrangement as it's mainly to keep Marcus Thames away from RHP (.705 OPS vs. RHP in 2007). Thames was terrific against LHP in 2007 posting a .310 BA / .341 OBP / .586 SLG / .927 OPS line; so as long as Jones improves on Thames' struggles against RHP, the platoon will prove to be advantageous for the Tigers.

Apparently, LF in the AL Central is best occupied by ½ men - first Dason Dellichaels, now Marque Jomes in Detroit. Who knows what amalgamations will appear in KC (Emil Brown / Ross Gload / Joey Gaithright?), Minnesota (Craig Monroe / Jason Kubel?), or Chicago (Jerry Owens / Josh Fields / Pablo Ozuna?)

Admit it, seeing that does make you feel a LITTLE better about Dellichaels, doesn't it?

But back in Detroit, the rest of the offseason will be focused on searching out that bullpen depth that was thinned out when Zumaya injured himself in SoCal with only the dregs of middle relievers (all looking for multi-year deals) on the radar of the Tigers.

As for other concerns going forward (outside of the bullpen depth), there will be a point with this team when age becomes a factor. These Tigers are no kittens (Pudge - 35, Guillen - 32, Polanco - 32, Renteria - 32, Sheffield - 39, Ordonez - 33, Jones - 39) and most are working on long-term deals that could outlive the productiveness of the player. How long the Tigers can stay productive as age and potential injuries mount for them will go a long way in determining how far their talented young pitching (more of which is coming) will carry them for the 2008 season and beyond.

Minnesota Twins

Up in the Twin Cities, the offseason started with a disappointment (albeit an expected one) as CF Torii Hunter packed up his Gold Gloves and headed west to the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim playing in Orange County in the Republic of California. While the wisdom of the length of the deal that Hunter received from the Angels can be questioned (generally players who make their living with their legs aren't too productive on the south side of 35 and Hunter will be 33 next July); it is inarguable that Hunter is no longer a fixture in CF at the

HomerDome and will no longer contribute his 25 HR, 100 RBI production to the Twins' lineup. For the offensively-challenged Twins (with Hunter in the lineup) - that's a big deal.

A few weeks prior to Hunter's announcement, the Twins decided to prepare themselves for Hunter's imminent departure by acquiring...wait for it...Craig Monroe - the same Monroe cut by the Tigers down the stretch last year! I know, I know - Monroe was not seen as a Hunter replacement, he was simply seen as an upgrade over Jason Kubel and Jason Tyner in LF. But his acquisition speaks to the lack of quality hitters in Minnesota. Hunter's departure only made it worse for the Twins.

So the Twins found themselves in a troubling spot, with Hunter gone and Johan Santana and Joe Nathan seemingly destined to follow him out of town with nothing in return after 2008. Of course, by now most of us know that the Twins went into full-blown activity mode - declaring Santana "on the block" and dealing from their depth at starting pitching to fill a void in their lineup by trading (among others) highly regarded pitching prospect Matt Garza to the Rays for (among others) highly regarded hitting prospect Delmon Young.

On the surface it looks to be a trade that benefits both teams as the Rays fill out a spot in their rotation at a reasonable salary while the Twins augment their pop-gun offense with a tremendously talented (although not very disciplined) 21-year-old Young who figures immediately to help out LH Mauer and Morneau and RH Cuddyer in the middle of the Twins' lineup. Young will attempt to take the place of Hunter in the lineup, though not necessarily in CF, depending upon what happens with Johan Santana.

Ahh, Johan...

Depending on the day and the source, Santana has been rumored to be

heading to the Bronx, Queens, Beantown, Chavez Ravine (let's hope the Twins do the AL a favor by sending him to the Dodgers), and Anaheim. The names being connected to Santana in a deal are pretty lustrous (Phil Hughes, Ian Kennedy, Melky Cabrera, Robinson Cano, Jon Lester, Clay Bucholz, Matt Kemp, Chad Billingsley, Jose Reyes, Jered Weaver, Brandon Wood are just a few...the main name in the "meh" category is Coco Crisp), so if a deal gets done it would definitely constitute a "blockbuster". One interesting to watch is whether the team that acquires Santana (if one does) insists on having a contract extension done with Santana prior to consummating the exchange. Regardless, the face of the Twins could change overnight with their haul for Santana filling in holes on their roster...but creating a pretty big one at the top of their rotation.

The question in Minnesota is if Santana is dealt - is Nathan far behind?

And are the Twins in full rebuild mode, stockpiling high-ceiling prospects while keeping the payroll flexible with an eye to their new stadium opening with a now-mature team of budding superstars to fill it? While those quandaries do affect the 2008 team (can we all agree that a team with Johan is different than one without him at the top of the rotation), they are all basically long-term questions.

In the short-term, if Santana is traded, the Twins better hope that 2006 wunderkind Francisco Liriano is fully healthy because if he's not, their starting pitching now has Boof Bonser and Scott Baker fighting it out for Opening Day (depending, of course, on the return for Johan). On the offensive side, the overall lineup remains weak (Mauer, Morneau, Cuddyer, Young, and Yuck), and doesn't figure to be too much better than the 2007 version (Young replaces Hunter), which outscored only the White Sox and Royals in the AL.

The Santana Sweepstakes will be fun to watch to see what (if any) haul

Santana will bring to the Twin Cities; but, after that excitement subsides, it could be a long summer in Minnesota as the rebuilding project may be starting and the waiting for the young talent acquired for Santana (and perhaps Nathan) to gel with the pieces in place already in Minnesota.

Chicago White Sox

Like the Tigers and the Twins, the Pale Hose have been extremely active in the offseason, addressing a number of glaring holes on the roster, while some remain unresolved. The South Siders started the offseason by extending SS Jose Uribe's contract, then trading for SS Orlando Cabrera, which will essentially move Uribe to 2B. To obtain the Gold Glove-winning Cabrera, the White Sox parted with Jon Garland, who is set to earn $12M in 2008, his contract year. Cabrera immediately and immensely upgrades Chicago's infield defense and adds a quality bat who won't K as much as the other White Sox hitters (5 of their 9 regulars had more than 100 K in 2007) to the lineup.

The trade of Garland is one that wasn't unexpected as GM Kenny Williams is known for moving around his pitchers that he deems more valuable as trading chips (Freddy Garcia, Brandon McCarthy), but it does put some pressure on the young pitchers in Chicago to step up in Garland's absence. It will be interesting to see how Gavin Floyd (5.27 ERA, 1.49 WHIP in 2007) and John Danks (5.50 ERA, 1.54 WHIP in 2007) react to being handed rotation spots and if they can attain a level of consistency at the MLB level.

Outside of upgrading the SS position, the White Sox had a huge hole in their bullpen in front of Fat Bobby Jenks as no Chicago reliever outside of Jenks (with more than 30 IP) had an ERA under 4.79 and 3 of the 6 with more than 30 IP had ERA over 6.00! To remedy the problem, the White Sox took a page out of the 2006-2007 Baltimore Orioles' offseason playbook and overpaid for a middling middle reliever in Scott Linebrink. Don't get me wrong, Linebrink is a nice addition to the Chicago bullpen, but a 4-year, $19M deal for a 31-year-old RH reliever a full two years away from his most successful season (in pitcher heaven Petco Park, no less) borders on lunacy. Two years from now (or maybe as soon as this year), Linebrink's presence in the bullpen and contract will be an albatross around the team's neck as they realize their lack of foresight when inking Linebrink.

The other glaring hole at The Cell that Kenny Williams will attempt to remedy is the lack of a legitimate CF and LF as they lost out on Torii Hunter and Aaron Rowand seems unlikely to return to Chicago. I suppose that Andruw Jones and everyone's favorite 4th OF masquerading as a legitimate CF, Coco Crisp, are out there; but right now, Jerry Owens and Pablo Ozuna figure in pretty squarely into their outfield picture. Take into consideration that Joe Crede may be dealt (moving Josh Fields to 2B and out of the LF picture) and the situation becomes more muddled.

Of course, the White Sox could be working on the deal to land "The Big Fish", Miguel Cabrera, out of Florida; but holes remain in the lineup to go with the youth in the rotation

and the still-paper-thin bullpen. Consider that the troika of Konerko (32), Dye (34), and Thome (37) are now a year older and one has to wonder if the White Sox are fooling themselves into believing that they're closer than they really are and would be better served to develop their own players (or trade for some MLB-ready prospects) instead of grasping for that brass ring again with a decidedly inferior team.

Kansas City Royals

With a new manager (Trey Hillman) a new Japanese reliever (Yashuhiko Yabuta), and a promise from ownership to be "in" on some FA deals (they were allegedly $20M short on the Torii Hunter sweepstakes), the Royals find themselves waiting for a young nucleus of talent to mature...again. The difference this time is that it seems that KC may actually have some quality young players to build around. Between Alex Gordon, Billy Butler, David DeJesus, and Mark Teahan, the Royals at least have a core group of players that have the possibility of developing into something resembling a lineup.

Pitching-wise, Gil Meche (though overpaid) looks to be a main cog for the rotation, as does Brian Bannister. Starting prospects Leo Nunez and former overall #1 pick Luke Hochevar could augment the talent in place to give the Royals some pitching depth.

Additionally, with Joakim Soria in the bullpen and talented arms like Jimmy Gobble and Zack Grienke to fill out the staff while finding their niche, the Royals are rich in talented arms - something not many teams can boast.

With all of the positives and the hope that springs eternal in KC, the Royals still have lots of holes in the lineup, from LF to SS to 1B, coupled with the overall inexperience of the whole pitching staff. Overall, some young talent is there, but they remain a good distance away from the Indians and Tigers at the top of the division. The stubbornness of the White Sox Front Office and the decisions of the Twins' Front Office this offseason could put the Royals more firmly in the mix of the AL Central in 2008, but they remain an emerging and still-maturing group of players.

2008 Outlook

While it's embarrassingly early to even consider how 2008 is looking to shape up in the AL Central, every team has its own flaws, concerns, and hopes. No team is perfect, but some are certainly further along in the process of building a sustained contender. The teams looking up at the Tribe at the end of 2007 have all improved (or made attempts to improve) their clubs for 2008 and while the Indians will still probably look to

upgrade their team (regardless of the public comments from the Front Office), it is important to follow the activity of our AL Central brethren as the easiest path to the playoffs remains simply raising the AL Central banner and not having to worry about the Wild Card.