Two years ago, the Indians acquired Andy Marte from the Red Sox. About a year ago, they dealt with the Padres to acquire Josh Barfield. At the time of acquisition, both were top tier prospects that the Indians planned to pen into the lineup card for the next half decade at key infield positions. Both have had their struggles, and in his latest, Tony talks about the impact that a productive Marte and a productive Barfield could have on the 2008 Indians.

Boy, how quickly things can change.

The Indians completed a traded with the Boston Red Sox at the end of January 2006 which brought them what they thought was their third baseman for at least the next half decade. The same thing was thought just ten months later when the Indians completed another trade in November 2006, this time with the San Diego Padres, where they thought they had acquired their second baseman for the next half decade as well.

But, in the two years since Marte was acquired and the 14 months since Barfield took up residence in Cleveland, both players have gone from a bright future with the Indians to having their future with the Indians in doubt. Poor performance and not living up to expectations will do that. Yet, if the Indians learned anything from the Brandon Phillips debacle, you do not give up on young talent until you have exhausted every alternative and given them every opportunity you can give them.

The Indians appear willing to do that this year with Marte, as he has been all but assured a spot on the team as one of the bench players. Since he is out of options, Marte would have to clear waivers at the end of spring training to be sent to the minors.

He most definitely would be claimed, so the Indians will likely give him the first two to three months of the season as a final chance for him to prove himself.

He will start the year on the bench and continue to get a lot of instruction from coaches, and

when he has opportunities to play the Indians want to see him perform well enough where it forces them to give him more playing time.

He will have to earn his at bats and extended playing time this season.

With Casey Blake at third base, the Indians can afford to bring Marte along slowly this year. Als o, with Blake's versatility, it will allow the Indians to keep a non-versatile player like Marte on the bench.

Blake is essentially a starting bench player as he can play any of first base, third base, and the outfield.

He can move to any of several other positions when Marte needs to play, or if Marte starts to demand more playing time.

There is no doubt Marte has the tools and ability to be an above average defensive third baseman with some good pop. The question is if he has the drive to work hard at getting himself out of the funk he has been in since he came to the Indians.

Prior to joining the Indians, he was an elite prospect.

Marte was voted the top defensive third baseman in the league he played in the four seasons before coming to Cleveland.

He also had just put up a very good season as a 21-year old in Triple-A in 2005, when he hit .275 with 20 HR, 74 RBI and an .878 OPS in just 389 at bats.

He was the next big thing at third base.

However, since coming to the Indians he has been a big disappointment in putting up a so-so year in Buffalo in 2006 when he hit .261 with 15 HR, 46 RBI and a .773 OPS in 357 at bats. Wh ile he showed some promise at times when he was called up to Cleveland the second half of that season, he was mostly bad as he hit .226 with 5 HR, 23 RBI and a .708 OPS in 164 at bats.

Marte looked good last year in spring training, and only had a chance to play a handful of games the first month of the season (.193, 1 HR, 8 RBI, .549 OPS in 57 AB) before a hamstring injury derailed him.

He was never the same after that, and the last five months of the season in Buffalo he seemed to go through the motions and hit .267 with 16 HR, 60 RBI and a .766 OPS in 352 at bats.

To complete the trifecta, Marte even had an awful showing this offseason in winter ball hitting .198 with 0 HR, 12 RBI and a .573 OPS in 96 at bats in the Dominican Winter League.

It remains to be seen what kind of attitude Marte brings to camp this year, and how focused he will be. But, it should be reminded he still just turned 24 years old, just like Brandon Phillips

was in his last spring training with the Indians in 2006. And just like Phillips, Marte has endured a few seasons of poor performance where he now looks to be on the outs with the organization as spring training gets set to open.

When all is said and done, the Indians need to exhaust every opportunity to find out if Marte can turn the corner as a major league player, and they need to give him at least two to three months this season to find out before casting him aside. Which is what they thankfully appear willing to do. With Casey Blake all but certain to be gone after this season (he has now become too expensive to keep), the Indians need to find a viable replacement for him in 2009 and beyond and Marte is their best (and only) option at this time. Top prospects Beau Mills and Wes Hodges are still a few years away from helping at the position, although like with any prospect there is no guarantee they will pan out as hoped.

It is to the Indians benefit to have Marte get off to a good start and establish himself early. He is a better defender than Blake, and he still boasts a potent bat that could hit 30 home runs at the major league level.

The problem with Marte, is how often can he make contact and can he develop more discipline at the plate.

The Indians can't afford another player hacking away in the lineup, as they have enough of these players as it is.

This brings us to Barfield.

With the Indians needing to give Marte one last shot this year at third base, a proposed move of Jhonny Peralta from shortstop to third base has been put on hold. While Peralta will be the starting shortstop in 2008, if the Marte experiment at third base is a disaster this year, we could finally see this move take place starting in 2009.

By moving Peralta to third base it would allow

Asdrubal Cabrera to move to his more natural position at shortstop and create a spot for

Barfield at second base. The Indians defense up the middle would be strengthened considerably, and Peralta would be adequate at third base where the switch could allow him to concentrate much more on his offense and allow him to get bigger.

The Indians can afford to be patient with Barfield this year. He has options left, so they can send him to Buffalo all year if they wish to have him work on finding the stroke that had him so highly coveted just over a year ago.

In his five year minor league career, Barfield hit .300 with 61 HR, 404 RBI, and a .796 OPS in 611 games.

He was considered an up-and-coming dynamic offensive second baseman who had excellent bat speed and could eventually hit 20-25 HR in the big leagues.

But, Barfield's power for whatever reason evaporated last season (.324 SLG), which was over a 100 points less than he had the previous year in San Diego as an untested rookie and hitting in the offensive graveyard that is Petco Park.

Also, the Indians rarely saw him hit to his strengths, which driving the ball the other way to right-center and also using the whole field.

Barfield will most likely start the season in Buffalo to try and re-discover his lost hitting stroke. T aking a step back may actually benefit him as it gives him some time to reassess himself and make the adjustments necessary to get back to Cleveland as soon as possible.

It remains to be seen, though, whether or not Barfield accepts the demotion.

Thankfully, Barfield has excellent makeup, and while he will not be happy with a demotion to Buffalo to start the year, as a young player he knows he has to rekindle his game and do what it takes to get back to the majors or he risks a freefall of a once promising career.

It could be another Brandon Phillips situation (minus the attitude) where Barfield has the label of a former #1 prospect, but he has to go back to the minors and sort of start over. Phillips swallowed his pride when he was sent back to the minors for all of 2004, and responded with a very good year by hitting over .300, being an All Star, and showing a renewed attitude.

Hopefully the same happens for Barfield, and more importantly hopefully the Indians learned from their miscue in the way they handled Phillips after that 2004 season.

Some fans are already deadest on kicking Barfield to the curb and trading him, which to me is insane. It would be a mistake to trade Barfield or let Marte go at this point, especially considering that there is absolutely nothing in the upper levels of the Indians system in the middle infield or third base remotely ready for extended time with the Indians in 2009. Cabrera is still unproven, and second base options in free agency are very overpriced, so the smart play is to stick with Barfield and see if he can bounce back.

While Barfield had a disappointing year last season (.243, 3 HR, 50 RBI, .594 OPS), it should be noted he was adjusting to a new league and team. The Indians need to hedge their bets and avoid another Brand Phillips mistake, and at least give Barfield a look this whole season in Buffalo and Cleveland to see if his power returns and his offensive upside shows again.

In any case, if Barfield can step back and catch his breath this year and find what was lost, it will go a long way at helping what looks like a big hole in the Indians infield in 2009. As mentioned, with Blake pricing himself out of Cleveland, third base is a huge question mark in 2009 and beyond. If Marte cannot hold down the position and the Indians are forced to move Peralta there, Barfield will be called upon to fill the second base void left with Cabrera moving to shortstop.

Having Barfield (or Marte) bounce back this year will go a long way at helping the Indians in their plans for the 2009 offseason.

The Indians have a great window of opportunity the next three years , and in addition to the Sabathia Conundrum, the situation at third base and second base is something the Indians need to iron out in the next year.

Both Marte and Barfield have the distinction of being former mega-prospects who were ranked #1 in their respective systems at one time, but have seen their star power fade in the last few years.

If both or even one of these players can perform up to expectations, it undoubtedly would help remove a question mark or two about the team's future and also give the Indians a big advantage as they are both young, cheap and under the teams control for several more years.

As the Indians go into the 2008 season, Peralta, Blake and Cabrera will be the starters at shortstop, third base and second base. But, with the hopeful return to form of Marte and Barfield, that could change some this season. More importantly, a return to excellence for Marte and Barfield bodes well for the Indians in 2009 and beyond and would allow them to focus their efforts in other places to improve the team (left field) or maintaining it (resigning Sabathia).

That is why the turnaround of these once promising prospects could be a big key to the Indians future.