An 8-12 start to a season with high expectations has Indians fans on edge as the team gets ready to finish up the latter portion of their April schedule. There are popular targets for that fan angst. Jason Michaels, David Dellucci, and Casey Blake to name a few. Brian McPeek says that blame for the Indians cold start is misplaced, and that fans should be looking at the team's "Big Three" when looking for the real reason the team is struggling.

It's difficult to turn on a television, a radio or a computer without being exposed to the residue of the Indians disappointing start to the 2008 season. There are plenty of theories to explain the slow start and most of them revolve around the Casey Blake/Andy Marte third base debate or the Ben Francisco/Jason Michaels-David Dellucci left field situation.

Enough has been said and argued on those points to turn even the steadiest stomach. Let's just agree that there are valid arguments to be made on both sides of those coins.

But when we step back from personal opinions and observations we may see that our anger and disappointment has been misplaced. All things being equal, we can probably all agree that even with decent years from any or all of those players the bigger issue is that without the main cogs in the Tribe machine the contributions from the fringe players would likely not make a difference in a playoff run.

No, I think we are putting the cart before the horse here. Form follows function.

And right now it's the Indians core group of players who, by and large, are malfunctioning.

The Indians "Big Three" has, for a couple of years, been Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez and Grady Sizemore. As they go, so go the Indians.

Hafner has been a study in inconsistency over the past 12 months. You can chalk 2007 up to a bad year or something more sinister if you like, but the bottom line is Hafner's production has dropped during that time period. There are times when he looks utterly lost at the plate and there are some nights where you swear he's ready to return the 2006 form that saw him as one of the game's biggest power threats and as productive a hitter as you could find in the American League.

A return to that 2006 form is crucial for the Indians success in 2008. With the way this Tribe team has been put together Hafner can't be just decent. He has to go beyond just being a productive hitter. The Indians and Hafner have to get Travis back to within shouting distance of the player he was in 2006.

In 2007 Martinez became one of the best two-way catchers in the game. His defense and throwing improved to the point where he was an asset defensively and his offense was superb. Martinez led the 2007 version of the Tribe in batting average (.301), HRs (25) and RBI (114). Victor also clearly became the on-field and clubhouse leader for the Indians in 2007.

Flash ahead to 2008 and you see that Martinez, while still productive and still putting together consistently strong at-bats, is perhaps the only clean-up hitter in the major leagues without a HR. Martinez is still hitting .345 but only 3 of his hits (in 55 at bats) have gone for extra bases and he has the same number of RBI as Asdrubal Cabrera and one fewer than Franklin Gutierrez.

But the straw that stirs the drink offensively is Grady Sizemore. And Sizemore,

with a few exceptions, has thus far come up nearly bone dry in regard to creating scoring chances for the Indians offense. This comes after a 2007 season that, while still productive, was disappointing when taken into context with his 2006 season and the expectations that come from being everyone's All-American.

Sizemore is currently hitting a pedestrian .256 out of the lead off spot. That's unacceptable because Sizemore has the speed and ability to bunt for hits, the power to create his own scoring chances and the talent to change the complexion of a ballgame every time he steps in the box. Instead Grady has struck out in more than 25% of his at bats (20 strikeouts, 78 at bats entering Tuesday night) while the rest of the lineup takes most of the abuse.

Sizemore affects far more than his own leadoff spot in the lineup. Grady on 1st base is a threat to run (5/5 SBs in 2008) and with that threat comes more fastballs for the number two hitter in the lineup and so on down the lineup. Sizemore being on base also means more options for a manager in regard to manipulating the game. Moving runners with a bunt, hit and run, etc., are not viable options when Sizemore is walking back to the dugout after waving at strike three.

The trickle down effect is substantial also in that with Sizemore eliminated from play pitchers can be more selective with the heart of the order.

Grady's OBP is 100+ points higher than his batting average. He is getting on base with some frequency. But his impact has been, well, less impactful than it needs to be. It also turns the pressure up substantially on the rest of the lineup. The struggles of Gutierrez and Cabrera as well the struggles of the rest of the lineup are magnified by

the failure of Sizemore to ignite the Indians office. It's odd to see the focus of the fans' attention turned toward players like Blake, Dellucci, Peralta, et al when we knew and know what we were likely to get and are likely to get from them. It's not surprising to see the young hitters like Gutierrez or Cabrera struggle in the two hole when Grady is scuffling in the leadoff spot ahead of them. They're seeing a steady diet of breaking balls without Grady running interference and young hitters do tend to struggle with major league breaking balls.

There's no question it's still early in the year. Three months from now this futile stretch may be nothing than more than a bad memory on the way to a pennant. Grady still plays hard every night, still makes a difference with his glove and is still more likely than not to live up to the expectations. But an honest Indian fan will tell you more is needed from Sizemore. If we're going to asses blame to Dellucci and Blake, et al. early in the season why is anyone else immune from scrutiny and criticism? If those players are failing to live up to moderate expectations shouldn't we hold everyone else accountable for living up to theirs?

Sizemore, Hafner and Martinez are like make-up that covers up some of the blemishes we all know exist on the face of this Indians team. When we're looking to assess blame and discuss the intricacies of where things are going wrong let's start at the top of the Indians order and work our way down from there.