It's reasonably accepted in baseball circles that good pitching tends to beat good hitting. It's why general managers build teams from the pitching mound out. But following the Cleveland Indians this season, particularly in the last seven days, what we've learned is that it's equally true that bad pitching also beats bad hitting. Gary makes the case that after manager Eric Wedge's comments on Sunday that hitting coach Derek Shelton may be on the hot seat.

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Around the fringes, people keep talking about the Indians' offensive woes like it is the economy. Management, in the form of manager Eric Wedge and general manager Mark Shapiro, is reluctant to admit the recession that's evident to everyone else, but it is now willing to at least concede that there has been some sort of slowdown. Well, recognition that a problem exists is always helpful, but Shapiro isn't going to be able to paper over it by mailing out refund checks to the hapless that paid good money to watch bad baseball this past week and then skip town.

In a historical context, the Indians haven't suddenly rediscovered the 1970s. But if you want to use history as a teacher, then just know that the last time the Indians went through a stretch like this they fired the hitting coach. Which raises the question, is current hitting coach Derek Shelton in trouble?

Following Sunday's shut out to the terminally futile Kansas City Royals, Wedge said that everything was open for evaluation. Most of the ensuing discussion focused on the players, the lineups and darn near everything else but Shelton. If the team is really going to do something more than the usual gestures like changing the lineup and calling up a player or two, then Shelton is fair game. And if Shelton is fair game, then he has reason to be worried, for about 62 million more reasons than you think.

It was just under three years ago when Shelton replaced Eddie Murray under nearly identical circumstances, at least on the surface. It was early June and the Indians were hitting .243 as a team, a figure which is actually one point better than the Indians current team batting average. When Wedge fired Murray, he said "it's not just about right now, it's just about what we feel is best for our ballclub today, the future and long term. From an offensive standpoint, I feel we can do better. But it's not just about Eddie Murray. I just felt that we needed to make a change and I felt this was best for our ballclub."

That move by Wedge was still one of the best managerial moves he's made. Being freed from the shadowy grip of the moody Murray, Indians hitters across the board responded. By season's end, the team's average was .271, nearly 30 points higher. They were also fourth in the league in runs scored and third in on-base percentage. It was an onslaught that continued throughout 2006 as well. But as 2007 wore on and now nearly a quarter of the 2008 season in the books, the drop in production has been dramatic.

Clearly Indians hitters were more welcoming to Shelton, at least at the onset. But at this point, it's almost as if you could simply substitute Sheton's name in Wedge's quote about Murray and make it fit equally as well. That doesn't mean that Shelton is entirely to blame for the current woes, but it's undeniable that the team has been in a hitting tailspin for most of the last 200 games.

The real onus for the offensive struggles appears to be focused far more intently on Travis Hafner, but that doesn't take the heat off of Shelton. If anything, it

increases it. Enough has already been said about Hafner's struggles to fill the library in his hometown of Jamestown, North Dakota, which may not be saying much actually. And ignoring the roadside psychology of those who are prone to diagnose a problem they couldn't be more ill-equipped to evaluate, the larger truth is that the correlation between Hafner's so-called slump and the Indians overall offense is nearly perfect.

Certainly, Hafner's personal lack of production accounts for a big part of the team's dip. But it's not just the lack of hitting. The real problem is the stench that Hafner's struggles create on the rest of the lineup. There are such things as team slumps, but when the one guy more than any other in the lineup that's paid to hit no longer can, all it's done is increase the pressure on every one else. Other than catcher Victor Martinez, who is a hitting savant like Manny Ramierez but without similar power, you can literally see every other player in the lineup trying to do too much, time and time again..

If Ryan Garko, for example, swings any harder, his large intestine is going to pop out of its casing. Casey Blake seems to walk to the plate feeling like he has to defy his career stats and hit .350 and 40 home runs when the Indians would be far better off if he'd just get to those career averages. Asdrubal Cabrera just seems lost. Jhonny Peralta appears bored.

This is where guys like Shelton are really supposed to earn their keep. Wedge continues to bemoan not just the lack of hitting but the inability of his hitters to put themselves into good hitters counts. He's been critical, too, of the lack of adjustments that his players are making from at bat to at bat and from game to game. The simple question is whose fault is that? Not to carry the analogy too far, but Shelton is somewhat akin to a football team's offensive coordinator. If a team supposedly has the right players-and Indians management has made it clear that it believes it has the right players-then blaming the players only gets you so far. Time to turn to the one calling the plays.

But if you're Shelton, where do you start given that there's only 24 hours in a day?

You could attack the symptoms, like Garko, Blake, and the dynamic duo of Jason Michaels and David Dellucci. You can try and straighten out Cabrera before he loses confidence. You can even given Peralta an extra can of Mountain Dew with his pre-game meal. But first and foremost, if Shelton is astute at all, his energy will be expended in figuring out if Hafner is salvageable. Right now the Indians have about $62 million committed to Hafner through 2013 and if he continues to hit like Bob Uecker then his deal will be a bigger albatross around the Indians neck than Barry Zito's contract will be with the San Francisco Giants. If Hafner isn't going to make it, the impact on the team and ownership won't stop reverberating for the next decade.

Given the size of that investment, the Indians will dump Shelton long before they change course on Hafner, even as he's become baseball's equivalent of golf's David Duval, a major winner who now can't break 80. If Shelton doesn't understand this calculus and find a way to right the biggest ship of all soon, then his inevitable firing in early June will actually be well deserved. The only problem, though, is unlike in 2005, an immediate resurgence doesn't appear nearly as likely.