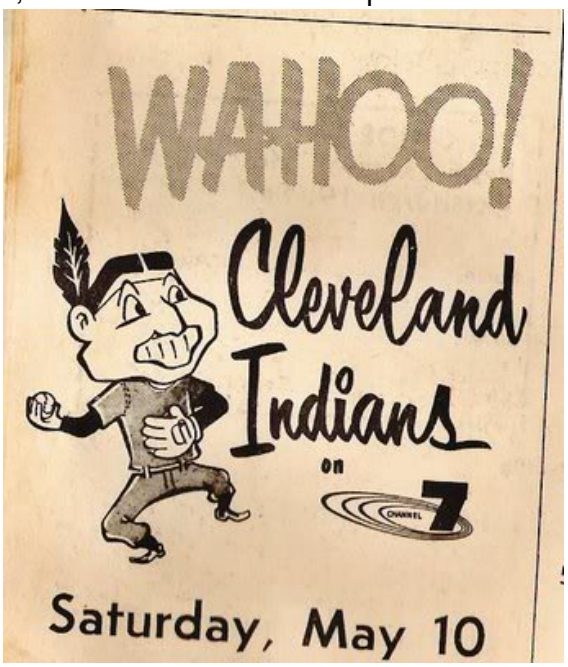
With another lost weekend under their belt, you can almost feel the last ounce of optimism dripping from the entire Cleveland Indians organization. In a season of dispiriting losses, these were just a few more, but tough to take given the fact that the Royals had dropped 12 straight coming into the series. In Gary's latest, he draws a parallel between the 2008 Indians and their predecessors from 40 years ago, the 1968 team. Both squads had fantastic starting rotations, but could do nothing else well.



With another lost weekend under their belt, you can almost feel the last ounce of optimism dripping from the entire Cleveland Indians organization. In a season of dispiriting losses, these were just a few more. But given that the Royals were on a bit of a tear themselves, 12 straight losses and counting, possibly the only positive from the Indians' trip into Kansas City was that this team might finally have reached rock bottom. If not, then hide the children.

The Indians may not be the most disappointing team in the major leagues this year, but they are on a fast track to the top two. Laying waste to exceptional starting pitching with impunity, the team that was one game from the World Series last year right now can't beat Kansas City. Baseball fortunes can certainly turn quickly and teams can get hot, but seriously does anyone see that in the near term for this team, particularly as presently constituted?

The most frustrating aspect about Version 2008 of the Indians is the unrealized promise of its starting pitching. Done in mostly by a lack of offense this year's Indians ought to be clothed in the vintage uniforms of their 1960s predecessors. In fact, if you want to throw darts and pick a year, the summer of 2008 is taking on the look and feel of the summer of 1968, meaning all pitch and no hit.

Baseball is far different today than in 1968. Most notably, pitching dominated in a

way it hasn't since. The mound was higher, there were fewer teams. There was no designated hitter. Ball clubs had to be built to withstand a 10-team race. Before the march to expansion and ultimately three divisions in each league, baseball in 1968 has the American League and the National League. No wild cards, no ALDS, no ALCS.

In 1968, the Indians had one of the better pitching staffs in the league, most of which was a holdover from the previous year. Alvin Dark was in his first full season as the Indians' manager, which was not surprising given that the team was coming off what can only be characterized as a miserable season the year before. Despite a pitching rotation that in 1967 featured Sam McDowell, Luis Tiant, Steve Hargan and Sonny Siebert, the Indians finished eighth in the American League at 75-87. The team ERA was 3.25, a figure that would be leading the major leagues right now but was only fifth best in the league then. The far bigger problem is that the Indians couldn't score runs. That didn't change much in 1968.

On the surface, things did seem much better when compared to 1967. The 1968 Indians finished third in the American League with a 86-75 record. By 1960s Indians standards, that's a pretty good record. In fact, it was only the second time since 1959 that the team finished above .500. Unfortunately, the Indians will still a far, far cry from first place, finishing 16.5 games behind Detroit and Denny McLain, who led the league with a 31-6 record and 1.66 ERA. Though McLain had one of the great pitching seasons of all time in 1968, the Indians were still a disappointment. They could have made a much better run at the Tigers if they simply could have hit.

On the mound and despite McLain, the Indians had the best pitching staff, finishing first in ERA with an amazing 2.66. They yielded the third fewest home runs and had the most strike outs. Four of the five starters had at least 12 wins. Luis Tiant had an amazing nine shutouts and 19 complete games.

Offensively, though, was a different story. The Indians were eighth in runs scored, averaging just over three runs a game, nearly a full run per game behind Detroit. They had little power, finishing ninth in home runs, and their on-base percentage was only sixth. Lee Maye hit .281and catcher Joe Azcue hit .280. Unfortunately, Jose Cardenal was next best, but at .257 was 24 points behind Maye. Hurting the Indians even more were the disappointing seasons of both Tony Horton and Max Alvis. Horton had hit .281 in 106 games in 1967 but dipped

to .249 in 1968. Alvis' drop was similar, hitting .256 in 1967 but dropping to .223 in 1968.

Go up and down the 1968 lineup and you will find a team that, offensively, begins to resemble the 2008 Indians, and not just because one of the leading hitters was again a catcher and one of the biggest disappointments was a first baseman (or former first baseman in the case of Travis Hafner). More to the point, despite its relative success to its previous seasons the 1968 team underperformed. Starting to sound familiar?

Fast forward 40 years and you see a pitching rich team that still can't hit. Consequently, it's crashing to the ground as if it were dropped by Ted Stepien from the top of the Terminal Tower. The players keep saying they are looking for a spark, well into denial that they lack the basic chemistry to sustain any sort of fire in the first place.

If you were building a team, starting pitching is where you'd start and the Indians have it in spades. The fact that Paul Byrd, the team's fifth starter, pitched like a fifth starter on Sunday is so far down on the list of concerns with this team as to be almost meaningless. If Byrd ultimately fails, there are plenty of others to take his place in the rotation. There is every chance, by the way, that any of those others would be an upgrade over Byrd anyway. Still, as we learned in 1968, pitching may be most things but it's not everything.

Though the bullpen has been closer to awful than good, mostly, though, and without much further comment, the problem with this team has been the hitting. A lack of power, diminishing skills and misguided hope are to blame.

The question facing Indians general manager Mark Shapiro is really the same one facing White Sox general manager Ken Williams. How do you improve a team's offense in June? White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen went on one of his trademark expletive-filled tirades on Sunday, this one aimed at Williams and the lack of improvement in the team's offense. Williams responded the same way as Shapiro, by channeling Kevin Bacon: "remain calm. All is well." That's probably going over as well with Guillen and Chicago fans as it has with Indians manager Eric Wedge and Cleveland fans.

It's hard to tell whether Williams and Shapiro really are in a state of denial as they watch their best offseason intentions lay waste to expectations. But the reality is

that the economic structure of baseball these days makes meaningful trades in June nearly impossible. Teams on the bottom run economically are never looking to take on salary or part with cheap young talent. Teams in the top tier always think they can compete and, while not as reluctant to take on veteran salaries, usually aren't willing to part with major league talent in return. With a trading deadline almost two months away, there is no pressure on any team, really, to act any differently.

The crushing reality is that organic improvement is the only real option at this point. For Chicago, that means their trio of underperformers, Jim Thome, Jermaine Dye, and Paul Konerko, have to start hitting. For Cleveland, with Hafner shelved indefinitely, that means that their remaining trio, Victor Martinez, Grady Sizemore, and Jhonny Peralta must do likewise. And if organic improvement doesn't come to fruition, then head to the thrift store and buy a Nehru jacket, some love beads and alava lamp, it's 1968 all over again.