In a season once filled with so much hope, there's been a myriad of things that have contributed to the Indians poor start and subsequent deal of C.C. Sabathia to Milwaukee for prospects. Most notably the bullpen, injuries to key players, the effects of organizational inactivity in the off-season, and the regression of certain non-injured offensive players. With the All-Star game upon us, Paulie "The Masochist" Cousineau decided to tackle the reasons one at a time, and start with the bullpen.

In the indefatigable search for what has gone wrong with this Indians' season, once so full of hope, a few immediate reasons have as much carry as a Josh Hamilton bomb into the New York night - most notably the bullpen, injuries to key players, the effects of organizational inactivity in the off-season, and the regression of certain non-injured offensive players. With the All-Star Break upon us, I thought it would be a good idea to start this series by examining a portion of the team that has so obviously contributed to the dreadfulness of the 2008 season - YOUR 2008 Hellpen.

Before getting too deep into this, let's take a quick walk down memory lane and look at the members of the 2007 Indians' postseason Bullpen...you remember, the one that contributed to the ALDS defeat of the Bronx Bombers and nearly beat the eventual Champions in the Fall Classic:

Joe Borowski
Rafael Betancourt
Rafael Perez

Jensen Lewis
Tom Mastny
Aaron Laffey
Aaron Fultz

Some familiar names, no?

Inconceivably, the players that locked down the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th innings of the 2007 season, allowing the Tribe to run away with the AL Central and make a strong push in the playoffs, are essentially the same culprits that completely blew up (to a man) in the 2008 season, throwing gas on the smoldering flames of the Indians' season, greasing the team's descent from the top of the division to the cellar, seemingly armed only with kerosene-soaked meatballs.

If these are the same players, how did such a severe drop across the board occur so completely? I know that bullpens are volatile entities, full of players who are relievers for a reason (whether their career as a starter stalled or their mastery of pitches ended with two), but to see what happened in 2007 compared to what we've been subjected to boggles the mind. And maybe that's where we should start with this thing, to compare the stats from last year's bullpen that allowed the team to close out the AL Central in style to this year's incarnation, which is ingloriously looking UP at the KC Royals in mid-July.

The rankings in parentheses are where the bullpens of each year ranked among the 14 AL teams:

ERA

2007 - 3.73 (4th of 14)
2008 - 5.13 (14th of 14)

WHIP

2007 - 1.33 (5th of 14)
2008 - 1.51 (13th of 14)

Batting Average Against

2007 - .254 (7th of 14)

2008 - .277 (14th of 14)

OPS Against

2007 - .707 (4th of 14)
2008 - .796 (14th of 14)

K/BB

2007 - 2.51 (1st of 14)
2008 - 1.91 (9th of 14)

Losses

2007 - 17 (4th least of 14)
2008 - 19 (2nd most of 14)

Saves

2007 - 49 (most of 14)
2008 - 15 (least of 14)

Save Percentage

2007 - 78% - 49 of 63 (2nd of 14)
2008 - 52% - 15 of 29 (14th of 14)

Going from the top half (or in the case of K/BB and saves, from the top) in 2007 to near or at the absolute bottom of the AL in EVERY relevant category a year later doesn't qualify as getting knocked down a few notches or seeing a slight regression.
No, no...it is something far more horrible and drastic.

Looking at those numbers give credence to the feeling that watching the 2008 bullpen devolve into the bloody mess that they find themselves in has been reminiscent of watching a horrifying downhill ski crash as a momentary loss of balance quickly becomes a hurtling mass of limbs akimbo and uncontrollable momentum - and not going in the right direction. The rapid, and irreversible, descent of the bullpen down the side of the mountain started with a few hiccups

as the season began that turned into some head-over-heel cartwheels as the relievers blew lead after lead, gaining steam and carnage as the season wore on. As the season began to circle the drain, the names became different, but the same terrifying results were "achieved" as the season careened out of control, before (hopefully) crashing into the orange net of the 0-8 AL Central road trip.

Who could have seen this coming, given the perceived depth and excellence that carried the 2007 bullpen? How did the thought that the relief corps would be a strength of the team as Opening Day dawned devolve to the point that it became a fair assessment to say that the 2008 bullpen may have essentially sabotaged the 2008 season?

Certainly, the feeling that Brodzoski (The Close) was due for a precipitous fall from (relative) grace was pretty widely held among the Friends of the Feather, but the players who spent 2007 setting him up figured to step up into his shoes to rescue the progression of the bullpen. It seemed that there were plenty of talented arms ready to step up to choose from. Among Senor Slo-Mo and The Scarecrow, and with the impressive showing by Jen Lewis down the stretch in 2007, the arms seemed to be there to make up for the surefire drop-off for JoeBo. The Indians, perhaps sensing that The Big Borowski would not last the season, augmented what looked like a strength of their team in the bullpen with their only FA signing of any merit by inking Japanese closer Masa Kobayashi to make up for any drop-off that might occur to one part of the bullpen or, at least, eat some innings until some of the main contributors could right the ship.

Surely, with all of those arms that had experienced enough success in 2007, the 2008 bullpen could at least come close to the success of the prior year...maybe not with the same exact arms in the same exact roles, but the pieces were there, right?

Unfortunately, we all know the answer to that question after 94 games.

The bullpen has fallen flat on its collective face, unable to close out games (with Borowski only tallying 4 of the 14 Blown Saves) or keep the Indians in close games to allow late-inning victories (the team is 18-48 when tied at some point from the 6th inning on) or provide any kind of support to a beleaguered starting rotation.

What happened here?

We all know about Brodzoski (The Close)'s fall from grace, so I'm not about to kick a man when he's down (particularly considering that his lousy 2008 wasn't exactly unexpected), so let's focus on the players that were thought to be relievers that would step up to be the main cogs for this year's bullpen, comparing their 2007 to their 2008:

Betancourt

2007 - 1.48 ERA, 0.76 WHIP, 8.88 K/BB ratio, .183 BAA, .485 OPS Against
2008 - 6.00 ERA, 1.48 WHIP, 3.00 K/BB ratio, .289 BAA, .835 OPS Against

Perez

2007 - 1.78 ERA, 0.92 WHIP, 4.13 K/BB ratio, .187 BAA, .530 OPS Against
2008 - 3.16 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 2.69 K/BB ratio, .253 BAA, .683 OPS Against

Lewis

2007 - 2.15 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, 3.40 K/BB ratio, .234 BAA, .611 OPS Against
2008 - 4.73 ERA, 1.64 WHIP, 1.47 K/BB ratio, .281 BAA, .830 OPS Against

Those aren't regressions - they are swan dives off the cliffs of Acapulco from the three most promising pitchers as 2007 closed out, the players who held the 6th, 7th, and 8th innings in check for opponents for the Indians last year. Every player the Indians counted on "taking that next step" in their development saw serious drop-offs in their efficacy (even Perez who, despite "succeeding" more than the other two, has posted two months with an ERA under 1.50 and two months with an ERA over 4.00), for whatever reason, which left the bullpen without anybody who could get batters out consistently...at least anybody we were seeing toe the rubber.

And that, to me, is where this thing should have been headed off at the pass before it got too out of hand for the team. The players who were main cogs in the Indians' bullpen in 2007 showed awfully early that they weren't going to replicate their success this year. Borowski and Lewis had no velocity and Betancourt had given up his 4th HR by May 4th after giving up 4 all of last year. But trotted out they were (if they weren't "DL'd" or eventually demoted), in similar

situation after similar situation, to fail miserably and to find themselves deeper and deeper in the abyss of ineptitude.

Perhaps no better alternatives existed, but the patterns went unchanged for months...and so did the results. Not to harp on Betancourt (though he is, essentially, the poster child for the stark difference between 2007 and 2008), as he has no control over when he pitches and in what situations, but of Betancourt's 42 appearances, exactly 4 have come before the 7th inning. I'm all for letting a guy "work it out" on his own, but not to the detriment of the team, for goodness sakes. Certainly, quality arms (or at least arms that were effective in 2008) have been in short supply, but continuing to run an obviously struggling pitcher out there (insert your favorite 2008 Borowski moment here) is so counterproductive that it borders on insanity. Knowing that bullpen management and finding the right progression of relievers is one thing that a manager can control (though he can do little once they take the ball), the notion that Betancourt and Borowski continued to pitch the 8th and 9th innings into the month of July when neither pitcher's ERA had been below 5.00 since April 25th shows a stubbornness and an inflexibility in bullpen management that certainly didn't help the bullpen pull itself out of the doldrums. By the time the Indians gave some other arms (Elarton, Mastny, Mujica, etc.) chances at regular work in meaningful games, the season was already lost.

So now we're left to cobble together the bullpen for the rest of the season trying to find out if Jen Lewis can recapture the magic of the last half of 2007, which Rafael Betancourt is the real one, and if any of these young arms (Mujica and, further down, Jeffrey Stevens and a potentially healthy Tony Sipp) can help out the 2009 bullpen that looks more devoid of a legitimate closing option (and an obvious one at that) than it has since the days of Steve Karsay.

And if any of those things come to pass, what guarantee is there that the success in the second half of 2008 of any reliever will result in success in 2009? Go ask Fernando Cabrera (the one with the post-All-Star break ERA of 1.35 in 2005, averaging nearly a K an inning only to follow it up with a pre-All-Star break ERA of 6.46 the very next year) how momentum of one season carries over to the next for a reliever.

The bullpen is, and always will be, a crapshoot from year to year where a player can go from dominant to dormant in the matter of a single season. While that is true, to watch the Indians' relievers, almost as a group, go from the dizzying

heights of 2007 to the lowly depths of 2008 has been nothing short of remarkable...and by "remarkable", I mean worthy of a remark.

That remark, however, is not something I normally let pass through my lips.