Considering the mess the Cleveland Indians' bullpen made again on Wednesday afternoon, this time against the Tampa Bay Rays, it's an easy conclusion to draw that the bullpen is this team's weakest link. But as hard of a premise as it is to accept, it may very well be that the real problem with the Indians' bullpen has far less to do with who is in it than it does how it's utilized. In other words, the Indians, like virtually every team these days, consistently mismanage its bullpen in a way that's probably costing them games.

Considering the mess the Cleveland Indians' bullpen made again on Wednesday afternoon, this time against the Tampa Bay Rays, it's an easy conclusion to draw that the bullpen is this team's weakest link. But as hard of a premise as it is to accept, it may very well be that the real problem with the Indians' bullpen has far less to do with who is in it than it does how it's utilized. In other words, the Indians, like virtually every team these days, consistently mismanage its bullpen in a way that's probably costing them games.

The theory isn't mine nor is it necessarily new, but a recent column by Jim Caple of ESPN.com, put the debate in an entirely different and historic context. His conclusion? The position of "closer" is the most overrated in sports. He may be right.

The basis for Caple's conclusion is a research paper by David Smith of retrosheet.com .

The purpose of Smith's research was to try and determine, among other things, how important it is to get an early lead and whether good teams come from behind more often than poor teams. In doing so, Smith also uncovered some rather amazing evidence from which it is easy to conclude that the emphasis on having a "closer" isn't justified historically and, actually, may be counterproductive.

Reviewing virtually every major league game played since 1944 through 2003 as well as several season prior to 1944 for which information was available, Smith demonstrates that the winning percentage when teams have leads after 1, 4 and 8 innings is virtually unchanged since 1901. Even more to the point, in what are now considered classic save situations, meaning teams having a one, two or three run leads after 8 innings, the winning percentages have likewise been maintained. Thus, a team in 1944, just like a team in 2003, won roughly 85 percent of the games in which it had a one-run lead entering the 9th inning, 94 percent of the games in which it had a two-run lead, and 96 percent of the games in which it had a three-run lead.

In that context, the fact that the Indians bullpen blew a three-run lead on Wednesday is interesting but actually unusual, even considering who is in that bullpen. Over the course of a season, or more likely over the course of several seasons, that kind of loss isn't going to happen very often irrespective of who is in the bullpen. Far more important is whether or not the team has the lead.

That's the first point, really. Considering that Smith reviewed nearly 123,000 games covering over 2.2 million innings and found no statistically significant difference in the winning percentages, the ability of a pitcher, be it a starter or a reliever, to hold a lead early in the game is far more determinative of that team's success than whether or not it has a shut-down closer throwing 101 miles per hour fastballs in the ninth inning with a three-run lead.

Caple, in his column, does a fine job of dissecting the issue even more finely, using the case of Seattle reliever J.J. Putz to make the most salient of points. It's a point that works just as well with virtually any team, including the Indians.

Unquestionably, Putz was Seattle's best pitcher last season. He had 40 saves and a 1.38 ERA. Most of that handiwork came before a serious nosedive that started in late August. As a result of its losing streak, Putz was mostly unused because save situations were few and far between. Had manager John McLaren, who took over for Mike Hargrove, then not managed so much by the book, he might have thrown Putz into a game much earlier to keep it under control or even protect an early lead when his starter was otherwise struggling. Unquestionably Hargrove would have managed similarly, given that managing by the book is his calling card. As a result, the Mariners ended up using inferior pitchers time and again who either gave up leads or couldn't keep a game close, nullifying any need to use Putz late in the game. And time and again, Seattle ended up losing games with its best pitcher glued to the bullpen bench.

Indians' manager Eric Wedge manages similarly. Indeed most managers do. It has everything to do with how bullpens are constructed these days. Relief pitchers carry one of three labels: long relief, short relief and mop up. Within each slot is a subspecialty, particularly for the short relievers. To most managers, there is a major difference between a seventh inning pitcher, an eighth inning pitcher and a closer. Once slotted, managers are reticent to vary.

Oakland As' general manager Billy Beane told Caple that this is as much a result of media-drive expectations as anything else, because it's

certainly not statistically based. As Beane correctly recalled, when the Boston Red Sox announced a few years ago that it would utilize a "closer by committee" concept (much as the Indians have done since they jettisoned Joe Borowski), it was tantamount to an admission that they didn't have a closer. Egads. For sake of more media inquiries, they quickly abandoned the concept, at least publicly.

Entering this season, Indians general manager Mark Shapiro constructed the bullpen based on Rafael Perez pitching the seventh inning, Rafael Betancort pitching the eighth inning and Borowski closing in the ninth. It's the classic formula and one that seemingly worked last season. But in retrospect, its success may have been overstated. The Indians had good starting pitching, decent middle relief pitching coupled with enough offense to take leads into the late innings. This isn't to diminish the contributions of Betancort, Perez and Borowski. Holding a lead is important. But getting it is far more important.

What this all really gets back to for the Indians this season is not what happened against the Tampa Bay on Wednesday, but what happened when Shapiro decided that the team had plenty of offense going into this season.

Entering Wednesday's game, the Indians were 49-63. Of those 49 wins, 46 occurred because they entered the ninth inning with the lead, 44 of them occurred because they had the lead in the eighth inning. Statistically, the Indians are 46-2 this season when entering the ninth inning with the lead and 44-4 when entering the eighth inning with a lead. In each case, and with a bullpen that most would paint a disaster, the Indians are matching historical averages anyway. In fact, irrespective of the inning, if the Indians enter it with the lead, they are

winning more games than not, especially late, consistent with historical averages.

The problem, which should be obvious, is that they simply aren't generating enough offense to get the lead very often. They most certainly aren't carrying very many leads into the late innings of games. And a team that can't score enough runs to get a lead isn't going to come from behind very often either.

On that score, the Indians' rather woeful offense is turning every other team's bullpen into virtually unhittable machines. Fifty-one times the Indians have entered the ninth inning trailing and they've won only once. That means opposing teams, irrespective of who their closers might be, are shutting down the Indians 98 percent of the time in those situations, which is relatively far above historical averages. That same pattern holds from the seventh inning on. In fact, the Indians have won only seven times when trailing entering either the seventh, eighth or ninth innings.

If there is any good news in this, it's that the Indians bullpen isn't nearly as awful as it seems even as it's mismanaged. At the same time, it reinforces how poorly the offense has otherwise performed. Ultimately, it provides an important lesson that a statistical wonk like Shapiro should already know but if he does, he hasn't put it into practice: real success isn't going to follow until he quits sacrificing the offense for the sake of the bullpen.