The Indians bullpen has been nothing short of a disaster this season, and they reached a new low point on Wednesday night against the Rays. Despite this fact, Paulie C says that the answer to fixing the pen is not throwing gobs of money at a Francisco Rodriguez because relief picthers are fickle. And in his latest , Paul does offer up his own thoughts on how to fix the pen and talks a little bit abiut bullpen philosophy in general.

"Will the real Rafael Betancourt please stand up?"

"Oh, there you are Raffy. You know...you could probably move quicker than that when raising your hand."

"Now can you come on over here and sit down next to this MRI machine?"

"And...um...while they're doing that, this nice gentleman in the tweed jacket is going to ask you some questions about yourself and perhaps show you some inkblots while he jots things down in his steno pad."

While this may be an attempt to make light of the horrors that the 2008 bullpen has inflicted upon us this season, it's not exactly a scene that I'm averse to initiating to fix whatever may be wrong with the Indians' most effective reliever from a year ago before he goes past the point of no return.

Throughout the season, we have been forced to ruminate on what exactly has gone wrong in the bullpen
as we try to figure out how this disaster can be avoided in 2009 and beyond. Most of the rhetoric has focused on the need to lock down the back end of the bullpen with a dominant closer, which would allow the remaining pitchers - both young and

old...even you, Betancourt - in the Indians' system to slot themselves into roles for 2009.

All of which brings us to a fascinating article from ESPN's Jim Caple , which our very own
Gary Benz put in such a nice nutshell
as Caple's argument attempts to debunk the notion that the bullpen starts with the back end and can only be effective if an anointed closer pitches every 9th inning of a "save situation". Going further, he says that most closers are failed starters or are merely relievers who ascend to that role by virtue of their success, for whatever period of time that they remain effective. Thus, he says that multiple effective relievers, being maximized in their roles by using them according to situation rather than inning, are the key to an effective bullpen as opposed to beginning with a lock-down closer and letting the rest of the bullpen sort itself out accordingly.

How's that sound as you sit and watch this bullpen and listen to the "experts" on sports talk radio pine for Frankie Rodriguez at "whatever cost necessary" because of what he'll do in the 9th inning?

Throw that log on the burning fire of the idea that the Indians need to solidify the back end of their bullpen with a proven closer and that a failure to do so in the offseason will result in a replication of the nightmare of 2008 next year. Whatever you think of Caple, it's a pretty compelling argument that finding the right mix of relievers for next year is preferential to blowing a good portion of the $20M-$25M that should be available to find help from outside the organization (more next week on how I come to that figure) on one player, who pitches one inning every few days.

The problem, of course, is that if Option A is to have multiple good relievers to slot into the bullpen and Option B is to have a dominant closer with complementary pieces around him, then the Indians look to be light years away from A and stacks of money away from B.

So what are the Indians to do this offseason in regards to the bullpen?

If you believe what came out of Eric Wedge's mouth a few weeks ago , namely that "a lot would have to happen with the people we have down there now for us to not go out and get somebody. Somebody would have to grab

the role, really lock into it and prove that we can count on them. That's a lot to happen in two and a half months," one would have to presume that he feels that the 2009 help is going to come from outside of the organization. Additionally, with the language that Wedge uses, it would seem that multiple years of hammering back TUMS in the 9th inning has Wedge on the opposite end of the spectrum from where Caple is coming from.

Where do we go from here then?

Obviously, Rafael Perez (assuming his arm doesn't fall off this year) and Kobayashi fit into the mix somewhere and Betancourt (assuming Wedge doesn't break his arm to get him off the roster) figure into the mix in some capacity. But if going out and adding pieces is the presumption, what is even out there to augment the current players under control for next year (Perez, Kobayashi, Betancourt, Lewis, Mastny, Mujica, Meloan, Stevens, Zach Jackson, etc.) who may be in the mix for a role coming out of Goodyear?

I'm glad you asked as I've been sitting on this list for a while pertaining to available relievers, with players having an option on their contract for 2009 marked with a *). The order by which they appear has to do with their ERA+ for 2008, which measures their effectiveness (while admittedly not being the MOST accurate measure of effectiveness available...
this is
..., ERA+ is easy to wrap your head around) for the current year, using the number 100 as league average (so that's what the number after the names means):
RHRP

Dan Wheeler - 192
Francisco Rodriguez - 176
Salomon Torres* - 156
Kerry Wood - 152
Juan Cruz -150
David Weathers - 133
Brandon Lyon - 119
Keith Foulke - 104
Kyle Farnsworth - 101
Al Reyes - 97
Trevor Hoffman - 90

Tom Gordon* - 87
Mike Timlin - 87
Bob Howry - 85
Todd Jones - 85
Guillermo Mota - 85
LaTroy Hawkins - 77
Luis Ayala - 74
Eric Gagne - 69
Jason Isringhausen - 68
Matt Wise - 64
Jorge Sosa - 58
Chris Reitsma - 57
Juan Rincon - 53
Brendan Donnelly - NA

LHRP

Scott Downs - 319
Joe Beimel - 224
Brian Shouse - 172
Hideki Okajima* - 167
Brian Fuentes - 162
Will Ohman - 156
Dennys Reyes - 152
Eddie Guardado - 140
Darren Oliver - 129
Jeremy Affeldt - 120
Damaso Marte* - 101
John Parrish - 100
Steve Kline - 94
Alan Embree* - 81
Mike Stanton* - 79
Scott Eyre - 63

Quite a list, eh?

Some other pitchers that are currently starting but have experience in the bullpen (Braden Looper, Ryan Dempster, etc.) could be included, but your eyes probably glazed over halfway through that list anyway.

Seeing those names now (c'mon down...Dan Wheeler and Scott Downs?), what prudence is there to going out and adding arms to the bullpen, given the volatility from year to year for the performance of a relief pitcher (cough...Betancourt)? Is there a sure thing in there? Knowing that past success does not guarantee future performance, this is like throwing darts to see what pitchers are going to be solid in 2009, regardless of what they've accomplished in the past.

Where do effective relievers come from as every team in MLB faces the same challenge of constructing a bullpen from year to year?

Just looking around the AL Central - the Royals, Twins, and White Sox boast three of the best closers in MLB...and guess where they came from?

Joakim Soria

Rule 5 selection from Padres with 12 total IP in A-ball prior to selection
2008 - 1.57 ERA, 0.76 WHIP, 54 K, 11 BB in 51 2/3 IP

Joe Nathan

Traded from SF Giants as a 28-year-old reliever in the AJ Pierzynski trade
2008 - 1.17 ERA, 0.92 WHIP, 50 K, 11 BB in 46 1/3 IP

Bobby Jenks

Selected off of waivers from Anaheim Angels
2008 - 2.06 ERA, 1.07 WHIP, 22 K, 10 BB in 39 1/3 IP

Does identifying where these players came from mean that closers truly "fall from trees", a quote often attributed to former Tribe GM John Hart?

Not quite, but a certain bit of luck and timeliness in acquiring a pitcher on his way up to effectiveness, as opposed to getting a guy on his way down, seems to play as large of a role as anything like statistics or scouting.

And there's the rub on all of this...it's possible that a guy like Brendan Donnelly comes up and pitches great for the Indians this year, working his way into the discussion for 2009 (assuming he's re-signed), then fall apart at the beginning of 2009, bringing the whole discussion back to Square 1. Whether or not the pieces

(or at least some of the pieces) are already in-house to cobble together an effective bullpen remains to be seen and the unfortunate nature of relievers doesn't mean that a strong finish to 2008 should necessarily guarantee a spot for next year.

To be honest, I don't care who emerges for 2009, nor am I going to pretend to have a crystal ball that tells me that Jeff Stevens or Joe Beimel is going to make this whole discussion inconsequential. The last few young relievers that I had that warm and fuzzy feeling about (Fernando Cabrera and Jensen Lewis) broke my heart and stomped all over it, so I'm not going to hold out hope that Jon Meloan is going to ride in on a white horse to save the bullpen nor will I cast my lot with Perez (as much as I want to) for fear of throwing my jinx on his spindly shoulders.

The bottom line is that the bullpen has killed the Indians this year and a failure to remedy that portion of the club, however that balm is formulated, means that if the same happens in 2009 that somebody's going to be on trial for another potential bloodbath.