Indians writer Tony Lastoria comes strong with an enlightening piece on what the Indians biggest problem has been this season, and why Mark Shapiro is in denial about it. Don't forget to check out Tony's columns reviewing the happenings in the Indians minor league system on Thursdays and Sundays.

"If our starting pitchers get us through the seventh inning consistently, I guarantee you our bullpen will improve. I guarantee you. To say our bullpen is the biggest problem is the wrong perception. Write that down . . . the wrong perception."

The quote above came from Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro late last week in the Cleveland Plain Dealer. In addition, the Cleveland Plain Dealer also provided these team stats for the Indians for 2006 through 30 games, and provided the 2005 season numbers through 30 games for comparison:

	Record	Team Batting	Runs Scored	Team ERA	Bullpen ERA
2005	12-18	.232	111	4.35	2.77
2006	16-14	.311	198	5.45	5.53

With 30 games in the books, at this juncture, it is a pretty significant sample size to start making some judgments on the performance of individual players, and the overall team as a whole. For fans who have

watched this team over the course of the first 30 games, it shouldn't be easy to summarize the team play as follows: outstanding offense, consistently bad pitching, horrific relief pitching, inept managing, and lousy fundamentals.

While some of the base-running gaffes are inexcusable, and manager Eric Wedge lacks once creative bone in his body or a smidge of tactical ability…..the biggest problem to date has been the pitching.

If you haven't had a chance to witness the nightmare that is the Indians pitching through 30 games, all you need to do is look at the team ERA of 5.45 through 30 games. After being ranked #3 in all of baseball (#1 in the AL) in 2005 in Team ERA, through 30 games this year they were 28th out of 30 teams in Team ERA.

The starters and relievers both have had a hand in that poor performance to date. Yet, if you read Shapiro's quote, he seems to imply that the main problem is our starting pitching because they are not pitching into the 7th inning. And, if this happened, the bullpen would be fine.

Let me ask this…..how many teams have their starting staff consistently pitch into the 7th inning, let alone in April and May? To even suggest this is absurd, and Shapiro is dancing around the real problem at hand: middle relief pitching.

You'd think that based on Shapiro's comments, that in 2005 the Indians starters through 30 games were consistently pitching into the 7th inning, which is why the bullpen ERA was 2.77 last year versus 5.53 this year.

Wrong.

Here is the breakdown for first 30 starts in 2005 and 2006:

	<4 IP	<5 IP	<6IP	>=6IP	>=7 IP
2005	5	7	14	16	10
2006	4	5	14	16	6

In both 2005 and 2006, in 2005 and 2006 the starter pitched at least 6 innings, and in both 2005 and 2006 the starter did not pitch at least 6 innings 14 times out of 30 starts.

Here is the total IP for starters through 30 games each year:

2005: 170.2
2006: 167.1

Our starters have only pitched 3.1 less innings as a whole as compared to last year, which means we dipped into middle relief almost as much last year through 30. At this point, the 2006 starting staff is on par with the 2005 staff as far as pitching late into ballgames goes. Yes, the 2005 staff had pitched four more times into the 7th inning; however, the 2006 staff also pitched 3 more times into the 5th inning.

Starters ERA through 30 games (starts in parentheses):

2005:
Jason Davis (1): 1-0, 6.00 ERA
CC Sabathia (4): 2-1, 2.63 ERA
Jake Westbrook (7): 1-6, 6.69 ERA
Kevin Millwood (6): 0-3, 4.10 ERA
Cliff Lee (6): 3-1, 4.46 ERA
Scott Elarton (6): 0-2, 7.47 ERA
TOTAL: 7-13, 5.22 ERA

2006:
Fausto Carmona (3): 1-2, 7.94 ERA
CC Sabathia (2): 1-0, 4.91 ERA

Cliff Lee (6): 2-2, 3.31 ERA
Jake Westbrook (7): 3-2, 5.23 ERA
Paul Byrd (6): 4-2, 7.11 ERA
Jason Johnson (6): 2-2, 5.08 ERA
TOTAL: 13-10, 5.38 ERA

Clearly, Shapiro is being a tad arrogant here in avoiding the major issue at hand (middle relief pitching). Sure, just about every team's middle relief pitching is suspect….but my point of contention is this: our bullpen ERA through 30 games last year was 2.77, and this year is 5.53. The middle relievers didn't have a problem being effective and getting outs last year. Why the problem this year?

Yes, the starters this year have not pitched well, but the data suggest that the starters are also off to the same rough start as in 2005. For that reason, at this point I am not that concerned with the starters (yet).

Bottom line, Shapiro is being a bit disingenuous here. From 2005 to 2006, the starters have been the one constant, while the offense and relief pitching have both swung to opposite ends of the spectrum. Yet, Shapiro would lead you to believe there is a wrong perception that the bullpen is the big problem. Since the bullpen was under pretty much the same circumstances in 2005 as the bullpen is now, the only conclusion here is that Shapiro is doing a Gregory Hines tap dance around the issue at hand….and that this is just not a very good bullpen.

And, I'm not exactly going out on a limb with that statement. Prior to the season, I'll admit, I felt differently….but some of the changes to the middle relief corps to date just have not faired well for Shapiro. And, the problem to this point has not been the late innings with the loss of Bob Howry. The problem really has been the ability to get through the 5th, 6th and 7th innings so we can get to our setup man and closer.

I'd like to believe this bullpen is just performing at a level below their

talent, and that they'll snap out of it. However, while there is some talent in this bullpen with the likes of Fernando Cabrera, the bullpen is a mess. And this accounts for the injuries to Rafael Betancourt and Matt Miller, as those two were not performing well either (albeit a small sample size). When you have past their prime guys like Danny Graves, or inexperienced relief pitchers like Jeremy Guthrie, Jason Davis, Brian Slocum, et al….you are asking for trouble.

We all know the volatility of bullpens from year to year can be drastic, and this is why given the current performance of the bullpen compared to last year this should be cause for serious concern. Right now, we need quality bullpen guys below the 8th/9th inning guys. If the Indians are not confident for this year in what they currently have, or what they have stocked away in the minors to help this year....then it is time to go out and make a deal to get help. Let's start using some of that capital (prospects) to fill our need for bullpen help at the major league level.

Yes, it is a bit early for any deals, but come June, middle relief should be a primary focus for Shapiro.

That is, um, unless he still feels our biggest problem is starting pitching.