What a weird season. 81-81 for the Indians this year, and it was a tale of two halves. The first half of the year where the team was beset by injuries, underachieved, and fell out of the race quickly. And the second half of the season, where they were one of the best teams in baseball, led by the likes of Cliff Lee, Kelly Shoppach, and Shin Soo-Choo ... three guys none of us expected much from this season. Paulie C checks in with his first installment of his look back at the 2008 season.

Sitting here watching two extremely mediocre teams battle for the right to call themselves AL Central Champions for 2008, I can't help but be bitter. While the Indians ultimately finished 7 games out of this eminently winnable division (and, truthfully, it took a phenomenal 2nd half to get there), to watch the flawed White Sox and the equally flawed Twins attempt to hand it TO EACH OTHER for the last week of the season, then square off to make the playoffs has me looking for the TUMS.

Maybe its sour grapes, but the Indians' team that broke Spring Training this year is a superior team to either of these two teams vying for the AL crown. While there's no use crying over spilled milk, the Indians' rotation boasted two pitchers who could sweep the Cy Young Awards...and one had to battle to be the 5th starter out of Winter Haven.

If pitching wins championships, what went wrong here?

Obviously, we all know about the injuries (Carmona, Westbrook, Victor, Hafner), the slow starts (Sabathia, Carmona, Cabrera, Borowski), the severe regressions (Betancourt, Garko, Gutierrez), the bullpen implosion with the same arms that led the stretch run in 2007, and the disappearance (perhaps forever) of The Mighty Pronk, done in by a "mysterious" shoulder injury. But as the roller-coaster ride of the 2008 season ends, going from the high expectations to the trade of CC to the push in the 2nd half that revealed some surprises on the roster, we enjoyed one of the greatest seasons by an Indians' pitcher, Grady Sizemore's ascent to the elite of MLB, saw young hitters and relievers emerge. All of those things that leave us with the "warm fuzzies" though are countered by being forced to watch the playoffs without the Indians' participation, a result of medical issues, downturns for certain players, and one of the most poorly-timed losing streaks in recent memory.

2008 began as a year full of high hopes, only to see them dashed - so what went right this year and what went wrong...and what does it all mean for the Indians' going forward?

Figuring that a little extra time will be on my hands, I thought I'd take a look back at 2008, the highs and the lows, before looking ahead to 2009. Of course, since I tend to get a little long-winded on this stuff (no....me?), I decided to break it up into three parts to space it out a little and to get you begging for more (OK, maybe not begging). First, I'll examine the high points of the 2008 season, followed by the depths of the season, ending with an analysis looking ahead to close it out, setting up the off-season staring the Indians in the face.

For now, let's hit all the highs that 2008 provided for us:

## Cy Phifer Lee

With the AL Comeback Player of the Year Award already in the bag, I think it's a pretty safe assumption that Clifton should perhaps make some room on the old mantle at home or make plans for an awards room to house the hardware that's going to be coming his way after the 2008 campaign. If there was a better story or a more shocking surprise on the Indians (and maybe in all of MLB) this year, I'd like to hear it. Going from a year when he was demoted to AAA, booed by the fans, fought with the team captain in the dugout, and was completely left off the postseason roster to sliding into the 5th spot in the rotation then transforming into Sandy Koufax for 6 months is a pretty incredible sequence of events over the last

14 or so months for Cliff.

In a year when the Indians traded their reigning Cy Young Award winner and saw what many thought would be the "ace" of the future (Carmona) battle injury and ineffectiveness, Lee provided superb stability at a level unseen in Cleveland since the days of Feller, Lemon, and Garcia. Can he translate his 2008 performance into a stretch of a few comparable years? Hard to say ANYONE could continue the level of dominance that Lee displayed in 2008, but that argument is for another day as it's time to welcome Lee back to the top of the rotation and appreciate his historic season.

## The 30-30 Man

After 2006, when Grady put up his historic line of 53 doubles-11 triples-28 HR-22 SB as a 23-year-old, many were expecting SuperSizemore to take that next step as a player into the elite among the MLB. His 2007 disappointed (if one can truly call an .852 OPS for a 24-year-old playing Gold Glove CF a "disappointment") those who thought that 2006 was just scratching the surface of what promised to be an illustrious career by seeing his extra base hits decline and his K total rise.

Then came this year, when Sizemore - batting at the top of a lineup that boasted him and...well, a bunch of guys that were disappointing or still emerging for most of the year - became the leader of the Indians, both on the field and off of it. He finished the year with 33 HR and 38 SB (even with a late-season swoon) and ended the year **second in the AL in VORP** , behind only A-Rod. His importance to the lineup cannot be underestimated as the Indians played 2008 essentially without Victor and Hafner and STILL scored over 800 runs (actually, 805 - good for 6th in the AL) with Grady paving the way, sitting atop the lineup of a team that boasted **only 4 players with VORP's over 12 for the second half of the year** , when the Indians thrived. To put that 12 number in perspective, **the magnificence that is the season put together by Edgar Renteria** resulted in his VORP finishing with 12.2. Ultimately, Grady put the offense on his shoulders and carried them while establishing himself as among the top 3 to 5 hitters in the American League.

Did I mention that he turned just 26 at the beginning of August and is under club control through the 2012 season?

Yeah, that's a bright spot that figures to burn for a while on the North Coast.

## Mr. Show Pack and The BLC

When 2008 began, Shoppach and the good S.S. Choo were thought to be on the outside of the Indians' plans going forward, blocked by entrenched stars (Victor), young players who performed well in 2007 (Gutz), or "similar" players being paid more money (The Looch). It was thought that Shoppach would simply provide depth at C and see a few more starts behind the dish with Victor playing up the line more frequently to reduce the burden on him physically. With Choo, coming off of TJ surgery and out of options, the hope was that they could at least find him a spot to keep him on the roster, perhaps taking AB from Dellucci from time to time so the team could better evaluate whether he was a strict platoon OF or if he merited more of a look as an everyday OF. For both, AB looked to be scarce and a good read on either seemed unlikely when the year started.

Of course, Victor then Hafner hit the shelf and these two essentially replaced them in the lineup. Maybe not in their spots in the lineup (certainly not at the beginning), but their AB went ostensibly to Shoppach as C and Choo as an OF (as Dellucci was relegated to DH duty and Gutierrez's struggles continued). What the two of them did, as a response to getting regular playing time, serves as the great revelations of the 2008 season. Since the All-Star game (because it's an easy to pick date, if arbitrary), **Choo posted the 3rd best OPS in the AL and Shoppach posted the 8th best**. These two players, thought to be complementary players (and maybe even afterthoughts) performed better than A-Rod and Miguel Cabrera over the course of 200 some plate appearances. Both established themselves as viable MLB players with the upside of All-Star potential, two pleasant surprises on a team full of disappointments.

## Stomping Out the 9th

There weren't many bright spots in the black hole that was the Indians' 2008 bullpen that seemed to suck any light out of anything threatening to shine this year. But Jenny Lew (after some velocity issues sent him back to Buffalo) solidified the back end of the bullpen when he ascended to the role of closer. Maybe his "ascension" was more of a result of simply no other arms being options - but whatever the case, **from the time that Lewis took the reins as the closer, he performed at a level that was pretty close to the elite of**

**MLB** . Saving 13 games while striking out 22 and walking only 6 in his 21 2/3 innings since his first save opportunity, Lewis stabilized the madness that had prevailed throughout the 2008 season in the bullpen. His "give-me-the-ball" attitude has come across on the mound and **quotes like this** about saving a game for college teammate Jeremy Sowers haven't exactly hurt the idea that the mentality is there:

*"We haven't picked Jeremy up all year," Lewis said, referring to the bullpen's deficiencies. "I went out there with the idea that he was going to lose this game over my dead body. This is like going back to our college days, when Jeremy would start and I would finish. I told him after the anthem that 'this is your day, and I'm going to finish it."*

'"Over my dead body"? Yeah, I like the attitude...the results didn't hurt either.

**Guess Who's Back?**

One of the great surprises of the 2007 season, and probably an impetus for the Indians making their run into the playoffs was the preternatural play of Asdrubal Cabrera after he was called up to the parent club to take the place of Josh Barfield. Given his bat control and glove, most figured that while he may not be able to replicate his breakthrough performance, that he would do enough to work his way through the difficulty and find a groove in MLB, all while providing stellar defense. Well...the defense was there, but the groove proved elusive. He couldn't hit, waving at pitches out of the strike zone, while looking helpless at the plate with the line to prove it:

**First 52 games**

.184 BA / .282 OBP / .247 SLG / .529 OPS with 1 HR and 14 RBI over 158 AB

He was unceremoniously sent to Buffalo as the Indians' season at that point was slip-sliding away, losing his job to Josh Barfield who had been similarly unimpressive at AAA. After a month-plus in Buffalo, Cabrera returned to the parent club (aided by Barfield's finger injury and the fact that the season HAD, in fact, slipped away) with a vengeance. He displayed the bat control and the

occasional power that his 2007 season had promised:

**Last 62 games**

.320 BA / .398 OBP / .464 SLG / .862 OPS with 5 HR and 33 RBI over 194 AB

The trajectory of his career path (he STILL doesn't turn 23 until mid-November) survived a blip and an adjustment period to put himself firmly back into the Indians' plans, regardless of position.

**Jhonny 4-Spot**

After a phenomenal 2005 season and a dismal 2006 season, Jhonny Peralta's 2007 season and start to the 2008 season seemed to put Jhonny basically into the category of "he is what he is". A nice 20 HR, 75 RBI player whose OPS sits between .750 and .800 from the SS position. In fact, in late June with about 68 games under his belt, Peralta looked to be in line for those numbers, though his OPS hovered around the .700 mark. If anything, it looked like Peralta had regressed a bit, reverting closer to Jhonny v.2006 than resembling even v.2007.

Then, The Atomic Wedgie put his SS in the 4 hole probably because he had no other options and hoped it would maybe jump-start Peralta's season. Jump start is a subtle way to put it:

**First 68 games (not hitting 4th)**

.238 BA / .285 OBP / .423 SLG / .708 OPS with 11 HR and 30 RBI over 265 AB

**Last 86 games (hitting 4th)**

.306 BA / .365 OBP / .512 SLG / .877 OPS with 12 HR and 59 RBI over 340 AB

Are those the numbers of a true #4 hitter? No, but on a team that SHOULD have Victor and some amalgamation of Travis Hafner and Pronk on the team, Peralta's numbers sit very nicely in the #5 or #6 hole. The old "he is what he is" phrase still applies...but he "is" a fixture in the lineup, regardless of position (what, is there an echo in here?).

## 2nd Half Offensive

Due to all of the names listed above, the Indians were able to settle at **the top of MLB in runs scored after the All-Star Break**. The contributions of Sizemore, Choo, Shoppach, Cabrera, and Peralta augmented Cliff Lee a solidified bullpen (thanks to Jenny Lew) helped the Tribe go 40-28 after the Break.

But really, most of the credit goes to the offense for winning as many games as they did. Why does the offense get most of the credit in the 2nd half of the season?

Consider the starters not named Cliff Lee in those 68 games:

Jeremy Sowers - 5.05 ERA, 1.25 WHIP over 13 starts
Fausto Carmona - 7.61 ERA, 1.66 WHIP over 12 starts
Zach Jackson - 5.60 ERA, 1.43 WHIP over 9 starts
Anthony Reyes - 1.83 ERA, 1.25 WHIP over 6 starts
Paul Byrd - 1.24 ERA, 1.10 WHIP over 4 starts
Scott Lewis - 2.63 ERA, 1.08 WHIP over 4 starts
Bryan Bullington - 7.45 ERA, 1.55 WHIP over 2 starts
Aaron Laffey - 12.91 ERA, 3.26 WHIP over 2 starts

That's 55 starts by pitchers who aren't going to win the Cy Young Award, who collectively posted a 5.11 ERA and a 1.40 WHIP. Now, it should be noted that the Indians posted a post-All-Star game record of 30-27 in games started by these non-Cliff Lee pitchers (yes, Cliff was 10-1 after the break)...but still, over .500 with THAT cast of characters starting games?

The Indians' offense in the 2nd half of the season may not have been the prettiest to watch and didn't have the "likely" pieces and parts doing most of the damage, but the results are hard to argue with. Of course, a potent 2nd half doesn't mean that the Indians' offense is fine or that it doesn't need tweaking (see Cleveland Indians, circa 2007), but it offers hope that didn't exist at the beginning of July that some pieces are here and that the end of 2008 showed a glimmer of hope for the club's offensive future.

With 2008 firmly in the rearview (thank God), it's almost finally time to look ahead to 2009...as if that hasn't been the focus since the beginning of July. Next up

though, I'll take a look at what went wrong this year (as if this hasn't been beaten like a dead horse), then finish with the questions facing the Indians this off-season, including examining holes to fill, decisions to make, and what can reasonably be expected to position the 2009 Indians in the mix for the 2009 AL Central Crown.