You'll see some new names start to appear on the front page here in February, as I have been very lucky to add a handful of new talent to the stable of writers here at The Cleveland Fan. And this morning, I am really excited to run the debut piece from Jerry Roche, a great writer that was one of our winners on the TCF New Columnist Contest, which attracted 35 entrants. Jerry's first piece talks about a prayer. A prayer for Pronk. We need 'ya Travis! And to all our readers ... take a second to welcome Jerry to the site!

Cleveland Indians Manager Eric Wedge was seen last month furtively slipping into Annie Savoy's Church of Baseball near Durham, N.C. As Wedgie knelt in front of a statue of Kenesaw Mountain Landis, one of my best buddies recorded his prayer from a rear pew.

On the tape, Wedgie's monotone voice is unmistakable:

"Dear great and gracious gods of baseball, hear your faithful servant. In the name of all that is fair and just and righteous, please deliver to the woeful city of Cleveland a hale and hearty designated hitter. Please give Travis Hafner - you might know him as ‘Pronk' - the strength and the hand-eye coordination that once made him one of the most feared hitters in all of baseball.

"Because if that sum-bitch hits .197 with only five homers again this year, we're really gonna be up shit creek. Amen."

Need I state the obvious? The Indians, lacking the super-sized payrolls of their East and West

coast competitors, need Pronk to produce this summer. Not the Pronk of 2008, but the Pronk of 2006 (.308 BA, 42 HR, 117 RBI) - before he went and got married and got his wrist broken by a pitch.

During the years 2004-2006, Hafner's combined line looked like this: .308 BA, .419 OBP, .612 SLG, 1.031 OPS. (To coin Tom Hamilton, "Wow! ... How about that?!")

Pronk, 31, has four years and $49 million remaining on his contract. Last year, he went on the disabled list on May 30th with weakness in his right shoulder, and he returned in September a mere shadow of his former self. In October, he had the shoulder ‘scoped, and earlier this month he picked up a bat for the first time.

What is intriguing about this whole sequence of events is that it doesn't sound like anybody knows for sure what went so radically wrong. He had it ... then he lost it.

Has he lost it for good? Is he over the hill? Will he return to form?

The shoulder is officially given as the cause of Hafner's 2008 woes. That could, in fact, be true. Or maybe the broken wrist never completely healed. Or it could be a fallout from Major League Baseball's crackdown on steroid use (even though the thought of Hafner taking 'roids would be so far out of character as to dismiss its possibility). Or maybe it's something as simple as his bride, the former Amy Beekman, just being plain old bad luck. (Goodness knows, it wouldn't be the first time a woman ever brought her man down.)

Whatever the case, there's nary a living, breathing Indians fan who hasn't got his fingers crossed for Pronk's healthy return to those thrilling days of yesteryear. (And there are probably another couple hundred thousand fantasy baseball fans who have warily placed a bob or two on him.)

The fact that Hafner himself isn't worried does not ease our own collective concern.

"I don't see any reason why I can't be productive," he told the Associated Press earlier this month. "I think I can have better years than I've had in the past." (Given his history, good luck with that.)

And Wedge sounds fairly certain that the baseball gods will reward him for his faith - though a recent statement to reporters contained a caveat, if you read between the lines.

"I'm extremely confident he's going to be fine," Wedge said. "I'm probably more confident than he is. I expect him to be an average major league championship middle-of-the-order bat."

Uh-oh. That's not exactly a ringing endorsement. Emphasize the word "average," and you have every reason to pout. Emphasize the word "championship," and you have every reason to cheer. But keep the phrase completely intact, and Wedgie sounds at least a little bit hopeful.

With the team poised to head to Goodyear, Ariz., for spring training in two weeks, it's already no

secret that the Indians will need more offense. Always dependable C.C. Sabathia is now toiling for the hated Yankees; nobody is expecting ace Cliff Lee to have another Cy Young year; Fausto Carmona is an enigma; and Carl Pavano is just a bargain-basement addition until he proves otherwise. As a matter of fact, to say that the starting rotation is a little shaky might be an understatement.

But having a 2006 or 2005 or 2004 version of The Pronkster in the four hole between a supposedly healthy Victor Martinez (career .298 BA, .832 OPS) and Jhonny Peralta (.276, .804 last year) sure would be sweet.

So let's all get down on our knees, clasp our hands together, and pray:

"Dear great and gracious gods of baseball, hear your faithful servants. In the name of all that is fair and just and righteous, please deliver to the woeful city of Cleveland a hale and hearty designated hitter. Please give Travis Hafner - you might know him as ‘Pronk' - the strength and the hand-eye coordination that once made him one of the most feared hitters in all of baseball.

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