As Indians fans, we keep waiting for the boom-bust pendulum to swing one way or the other and stay there. Promise in '04 and '05, disappointment in '06, seemingly arriving as a force in '07 only to regress to non-contention in '08. And eventually it will. Erik Cassano believes that 2009 will be the season that tells us a lot about this latest era of Indians baseball, and how the Shapiro/Wedge duo and era will be looked at in hindsight.

Baseball's 162-game season is supposed to be a truth serum of sorts. It's extremely difficult to play over your head or stay mired in a slump while playing games nearly every day for six months.

Water tends to find its level, for players and teams. The good and bad, successes and failures, are tossed into a giant mixing bowl and whipped together until the resulting mixture offers a fairly realistic view of the player or team in question.

There are exceptions. Injuries can wreak havoc with a player's or team's potential, but then again, if the injury bug bites hard, the win-loss record will likely bear that out. Injuries are part of what makes a team and makes (or breaks) its season.

But if the marathon baseball season is among the best mirrors in sports, the Indians are still trying to figure out what their reflection is saying to them.

Over the past four years, the Indians have seen the many faces of what they can be. Some looks are flattering, some less so. At their best, in the 93-win season of 2005 and the 96-win ALCS season of 2007, they were greater than the sum of their parts. They were a team built on solid pitching in the rotation and bullpen and an offense that lacked power, but still produced runs.

At their worst, in 2006 and '08, they were lugging around a crumbled bullpen, hindered by injuries and, last year, traded away the ace of their pitching staff in anticipation of his departure via free agency. At their very worst, they have

revealed their tendency to go knock-kneed when the pressure is highest, fumbling away a playoff berth in '05 and an American League pennant in '07.

It has been nearly a decade since Larry Dolan purchased the Tribe, nine years since Mark Shapiro took over as GM and entering the seventh year of Eric Wedge's managerial tenure, and the Indians still seem to find themselves in pursuit of the consistency that would brand them a truly elite stalwart of an organization. They've shown flashes of it, but the flame fizzles as quickly as it flickers.

The Indians are the ultimate balance-beam team. With middle of the pack financial resources and a middle of the pack payroll, they can exhibit an ability to swing with the big boys almost as easily as they can resemble an overmatched small market team. They can't outspend their mistakes or out-trade misfortune, so the line between an October to remember and a lost season is as thin as the chalk line between home and first base.

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The Indians' brass is quick to point out that injuries played a big role in the team's lackluster 81-81 season of a year ago. That's true. The unraveling of Jake Westbrook's elbow was a stroke of bad luck that every organization endures sooner or later. The Indians never asked for Fausto Carmona, Victor Martinez and Travis Hafner to all miss large chunks of the season.

But there was also the stubborn refusal on the part of Shapiro and Wedge to admit that closer Joe Borowski's arm was finished, despite the fact that he entered spring training last year throwing a fastball in the low 80s. There was the force-feeding of Martinez and his injured elbow into the lineup for weeks, until it became apparent that he wasn't going to be able to play through it.

Handling those situations differently might not have saved the Tribe's '08 campaign, but it illustrates the thin line between have and have-not. A couple of miscalculations here and there, and the season's slope goes from soapy to oil-slicked.

The point is, injuries played a part in last year's collapse, but to simply chalk the '08 season up to an infirmary case is not telling the whole story. Not when there is a precedent set of dramatic year-to-year momentum shifts with this team. Not when the offense goes into collective slumps that last weeks and weeks. Not when last year's rock-solid bullpen can become this year's bowl of tapioca pudding while still employing many of the same pitchers.

As much as Shapiro and Wedge value their grinders, this team doesn't seem to achieve grinder-type results all the time. Grinders are supposed to be rocks in a choppy sea, models of stability and taking the same approach, day in and day out. Each game is a single game out of 162. That has been the Wedge mantra and mindset since his first day on the job in 2003.

So why the violent shifts in fortune from year to year? Why the tendency toward meltdowns at the most inopportune times? These have been the defining negative traits of the Shapiro and Wedge years, and they seem to be the questions for which there are no easy answers. A lack of clubhouse leadership? A lack of a team swagger, like the Tribe teams of the '90s exhibited? Simply a loss of collective focus and inability to regain it in short order? All might factor into the equation.

On the positive side, Wedge has run a peaceful clubhouse with few exceptions and has instilled a no-excuses mindset with his players. The Indians are a quality team comprised of quality people. But the negative aspects can't be overlooked, because the negative aspects are what have, and might continue, to cost this team a shot at a World Series title.

Now, as the 2009 season dawns, fans are crossing their fingers and hoping that the '09 follows '05 and '07 into the history books as another odd-numbered year of success. The Indians undertook one of the most aggressive offseason improvement plans of any team outside The Bronx, signing
fireballer
Kerry Wood to be their closer, signing Carl
Pavano
to round out the starting rotation, trading for reliever Joe Smith and infielder Mark
DeRosa
. It looks like the Indians are set to show marked improvement over last year's performance.

But sooner or later, this game of hopscotch between odd and even-numbered years will end, and the Shapiro-Wedge era will cement itself as an era of sustained success or an era of failure punctuated by granules of fleeting success.

For their sakes, and for the sake of Indians fans who will enter their 61st year without a World Series title, the Indians' GM and manager had better do everything in their power to ensure that '09 is the start of a run of sustained success, and not just another odd-year spike in performance. Or worse yet, the season that proves that the relative successes of '05 and '07 were random blips on the radar.

By the time October rolls around and the Indians take a collective look in the mirror, they had better like what they see. If they see trophy hardware in the reflection, so much the better.