In December of 2001, Mark Shapiro traded Robbie Alomar to the Mets and officially set in motion a rebuild of the franchise. Shapiro famously stated that the Indians would be contenders in 2005, with sustained contention beyond 2005 being the goal. We're now four seasons into the Shapiro post-rebuild plan, and while things haven't gone precisely to script, Paulie C's latest column gives our readers some interesting analysis of the team's performance during that period of time.

In December of 2001, the trade of Roberto Alomar to the Mets signaled that the rebuilding process was officially underway in Cleveland as the team that had gone to the playoffs 7 out of the previous 8 MLB seasons from 1995 to 2001 had evolved into a bloated, unproductive roster full of overpaid veterans and middling prospects. GM Mark Shapiro, at the press conference announcing the trade, famously pronounced that the Indians' rebuilding plan would not be in earnest and the team would contend in 2005, with sustained contention beyond 2005 being the goal. While Shapiro likely had many days and nights between that December afternoon and 2005 in which he probably wanted those words (and more notably that defined timeframe) back, the Indians somehow found themselves in contention in 2005, making Shapiro look like a soothsayer...if a lucky one.

Now, a full four seasons later, a body of work has been put forth substantial enough that the idea that the Indians would begin a stretch of steady contention can be examined. Obviously, the season to season roller coaster is well known - the playoff push of 2005 that fell just short to the unfulfilled expectations of 2006, from the "oh-so-close" 2007 to the unmitigated disaster of last year - but looking at it in a broader sense, how have the Indians performed as a whole using that 2005 "year of contention" as a starting point? To truly judge that in the proper context (and removing the emotional ups and downs of each season), how does their performance over the last four years compare to the rest of MLB?

Using cumulative records from 2005 to 2008, here is how MLB teams rank in terms of winning percentage with the applicable playoff appearances and World Series championships shown:

MLB Records - 2005 to 2008

LAA - 378-270 (.583) - 3 Playoff Appearances
NYY - 375-273 (.579) - 3 Playoff Appearances
BOS - 372-276 (.574) - 3 Playoff Appearances, 1 World Series Championship
NYM - 357-291 (.551) - 1 Playoff Appearance
PHI - 354-294 (.546) - 2 Playoff Appearances, 1 World Series Championship
CHW - 350-299 (.539) - 2 Playoff Appearances, 1 World Series Championship
CLE - 348-300 (.537) - 1 Playoff Appearance
STL - 347-300 (.536) - 2 Playoff Appearances, 1 World Series Championship
MIN - 346-303 (.533) - 1 Playoff Appearance
TOR - 336-312 (.518)
OAK - 332-315 (.513) - 1 Playoff Appearance
HOU - 330-317 (.510) - 1 Playoff Appearance
MIL - 329-319 (.508) - 1 Playoff Appearance
DET - 328-320 (.506) - 1 Playoff Appearance
CHC - 327-320 (.505) - 2 Playoff Appearances
LAD - 325-323 (.502) - 2 Playoff Appearances
ARI - 325-323 (.502) - 1 Playoff Appearance
ATL - 325-323 (.502) - 1 Playoff Appearance
SDG - 322-327 (.496) - 2 Playoff Appearances
FLA - 316-331 (.488)
TEX - 313-335 (.483)
COL - 307-342 (.474) - 1 Playoff Appearance
CIN - 299-349 (.461)
SEA - 296-352 (.457)
SFG - 294-353 (.454)
TAM - 291-357 (.449) - 1 Playoff Appearance
WAS - 284-363 (.439)
BAL - 281-366 (.434)
PIT - 269-379 (.415)
KCR - 262-386 (.404)

Looking past the alarming parity on display (20 of the 30 MLB teams have been to the playoffs in the last four years), I hope you're seeing the line in bold - the

348-300 record that puts the Tribe 5th out of the 14 AL teams in terms of cumulative record from 2005 to 2008 and 7th out of all 30 MLB teams. Not too bad, considering the teams that appear on the list above and below them, include nearly all of the heavy hitters in terms of dollars spent. The inclusion among the "big boys" then becomes an interesting subplot to this when you consider how much money, in terms of payroll, was spent by each of the top ten teams on this list from 2005 to 2008.

Using **USA Today's Salary Database** , here are the total payroll numbers for those top ten teams (of which the Tribe is 7th) with the average annual payroll:

Team Payroll - 2005 to 2008

LAA - $429,664,988 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $107,416,247)
NYY- $801,690,518 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $200,422,630)
BOS - $520,021,198 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $130,005,300)
NYM - $451,415,823 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $112,853,956)
PHI - $371,493,426 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $92,873,357)
CHW - $407,789,832 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $101,947,458)
CLE - $238,177,333 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $59,544,333)
MIN - $247,954,272 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $61,988,568)
STL - $370,909,476 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $92,727,369)
TOR - $297,371,200 Total Payroll (Average Payroll - $74,342,800)

Seeing the ten most successful teams over the last four years in that context, how about the fact that only the Twins and the Blue Jays even come close to the Indians in terms of getting the most bang for their buck?

This exercise, though, isn't meant to be an in-depth look at payroll disparity or to laud the Indians' management for getting good returns overall on a limited payroll or to intimate that had the Indians spent more money that "World Series Championship" would appear in the list at the beginning. No, it's merely an attempt to judge how successful the Indians have been since the seeds that they sowed in the rebuild that started in the winter of 2001 started to bear fruit in 2005.

When that rebuild began, the Indians stressed that the team would be built on starting pitching and how "waves of arms" would crest every year from

the minors to combat the attrition and departures that plague pitching staffs from year to year. The idea went past the premise that the team would sit on the pillars of a strong pitching staff, as it would be augmented by a steady, if unspectacular offense (getting away from the "All-Star at every position" strategy of the late 1990's), finished off with a bullpen cobbled together with a mix of veterans and youngsters that wouldn't cost the team too much, in terms of money or committed years.

Lo and behold, in those four years, the Indians have relied on starting pitching to be the bedrock of the team, boasting consecutive Cy Young Award winners and always sitting (at the very worst) in or near the top third of MLB in terms of ERA for starting pitchers from year to year:

Indians' ERA by Starters - 2005 to 2008

2008 - 4.16 ERA (6th in AL, 11th in MLB)
2007 - 4.19 ERA (1st in AL, 2nd in MLB)
2006 - 4.31 ERA (3rd in AL, 7th in MLB)
2005 - 3.96 ERA (5th in AL, 10th in MLB)

That starting pitching also was consistently supported by a steady offense that has finished among the top 8 in MLB, which essentially puts them always in the top quartile in the league as they posted a remarkably consistent number of runs from year to year:

Indians' Runs Scored - 2005 to 2008

2008 - 805 (6th in AL, 7th in MLB)
2007 - 811 (6th in AL, 8th in MLB)
2006 - 870 (2nd in AL, 2nd in MLB)
2005 - 790 (4th in AL, 7th in MLB)

Two goals, two realized goals, right?

Here's where we get to the portion of program where "steady contention" becomes impossible, despite the best-laid plans. Despite the success of the rotation and the offense, the team's success or failure has been dictated by the performance of their bullpen:

Indians' ERA by Relievers - 2005 to 2008

2008 - 5.13 ERA (13th in AL, 29th in MLB)
2007 - 3.75 ERA (4th in AL, 6th in MLB)
2006 - 4.73 ERA (11th in AL, 25th in MLB)
2005 - 2.80 ERA (1st in AL, 1st in MLB)

See the two years they had a good bullpen and the two years they didn't?

Perhaps this is oversimplifying things to simply break the team down into three parts and say that everything's fine with the rotation and the offense and lay blame 2006 and 2008 on the bullpen, but the idea that the Indians were to be built on a strong rotation and a steady offense have held suit for all four years since that magical date of 2005. The X factor that seemed to have determined the season for the Indians seems to have been the bullpen at an admittedly cursory glance.

The lesson there, I think, is how the Indians approached this upcoming 2009 season as Shapiro made a clean break from the credo of John Hart (the GM at whose knee Shapiro plied his trade) that "relievers and closers grow on trees" as Shapiro aggressively pursued Kerry Wood and netted Joe Smith from the Mets in a trade. He continued to throw arms into camp to see if one might stick or to provide some AAA depth when (not if) things go awry at some point in the 2009 bullpen.

But the construction of the 2009 team differs in another way from the versions from 2005 to 2008 as, for the first time in five years, the starting pitching (previously and without exception designed to be the bedrock of the team's success) holds the most question marks...even more than the notoriously volatile bullpen. Perhaps the Indians' brass feels that the sheer number of possibilities, if not certainties, in the rotation will shake itself out as the season progresses. But that's a sharp departure from years past, when the rotation was Priority #1, #2, #3, #4, and #5 with the idea that the rest of the team would take the lead from the player at the center of the diamond for five to seven innings.

Whether the 2009 season will represent another step in the road to steady contention is anyone's guess as the construction of the team differs from the models that have compiled the 7th best cumulative record in MLB since the 2005 launch date. However, assuming that the augmented bullpen figures to be a

steadying factor and not a disruptive one and that the rotation (in whatever combination of arms) continues to remain a given, the Indians should continue their winning ways, with more success and contention on the horizon.