When the Indians began their rebuilding phase in earnest in late June of 2002, trading Bartolo Colon to the Montreal Expos for a slew of prospects, Indians' GM Mark Shapiro set a rebuilding process into place that we all knew as "The Plan". The Plan called for developing young starting pitching to be the bedrock which the whole idea of consistent contention is built upon. Yet, the Indians have done a frighteningly poor job doing that over the last seven years. Paulie C talks about it in his latest column.

When the Indians began their rebuilding phase in earnest in late June of 2002, trading Bartolo Colon to the Montreal Expos for a slew of prospects, Indians' GM Mark Shapiro talked up the idea of hitting the fast-forward button on the rebuilding process, attempting to shorten the usual length of rebuilding by moving their most valuable asset for close-to-MLB-ready players and by following up that move with an adherence to a philosophy of how a team should be built to compete year after year in the Cleveland market.

This "PLAN" became the subject of much speculation and much discussion , but the way that the team set itself up left no doubt that one of the fundamental pillars (if not the main driving force) of "The PLAN" was that the best way that a small market team to compete on a consistent basis was to rely on a strong starting rotation, capable of winning games or keeping the team in games. The logic behind the premise was simple enough, in that a strong starting staff could easily hide the warts in a bullpen by pitching late into games and minimizing the damage that an inconsistent bullpen could do on a season as well as keeping a team with an average or solid offense in games, simply by

contributing six or seven innings of baseball to make any run or runs scored by the offense all that more important.

Given the payroll restrictions that the Indians foresaw, the philosophy of stressing the importance of a solid rotation above all else seemed not only solid, but also achievable in that pieces were already in place to build around with CC Sabathia. Of course, this is not exactly rocket science that good starting pitching wins baseball games, but the manner in which the Indians' Front Office put all of their emphasis on creating a deep and talented pitching staff showed a commitment to that area of the team that was stronger than other areas.

As some of the talent began to develop with this basic tenet in place, the likes of CC Sabathia, Jake Westbrook, and Cliff Lee emerged as stalwarts in the rotation, complemented by what constituted "big-money" Free Agent acquisitions (for the Indians, at least) in Kevin Millwood and Paul Byrd while the Indians waited for their young starters to start to emerge from the farm system...those "waves of arms", if you will, designed to be a constant flow to the parent club to provide the Indians with quality and depth for their rotation.

After a tease of a season in 2005 (with Millwood) and a clunker in 2006, the Indians' "PLAN" looked to be right on course in 2007, when everything went so right. The starting rotation boasted two homegrown "aces" in Sabathia and Carmona, innings-eaters in Westbrook and Byrd, and compensated for CP Lee falling off the cliff by simply plugging in the revelation of the second half of 2006, Jeremy Sowers , and another young arm in Aaron Laffey to pick up the slack, with fireballing Atom Miller supposedly waiting in the wings in AAA.

Remember that?

Remember how right that all looked, how the Indians seemed poised to simply plug in parts to that rotation, even with the knowledge that CC was likely to leave and Byrd was simply pitching out his contract?

Sitting here now, a mere two years later, waiting for Zach Jackson to start a game in late-May, is it fair to ask what happened?
Where are the waves of arms?

Where is the depth?

Where is the quality?

Just two years after that 2007 rotation, the Indians' 2009 rotation is ready to use the 9th starter of the season in The Zach Attack on Wednesday...all of this before the end of May.

Want some comparative numbers to throw that up against in terms of the years that the starting pitching was designed to be the strength of the team?

2008 - 12 starters used in the season

2007 - 8 starters used in the season

2006 - 9 starters used in the season

2005 - 6 starters used in the season

Does the number of starters tell the whole story as to how a season is going for a starting rotation? Absolutely not, but isn't it pretty fair to assume that the fewer starters that pitch in a season means that those starters are contributing more quality and more length than a team with a number of starters toeing the rubber?

Why is it that, rather suddenly, the Indians find themselves dipping THIS deep into their starting depth? Is it simply injuries, or does ineffectiveness and lack of quality depth options play a role?

Certainly the case can be made for injury and injury causing some of that ineffectiveness as the quality of pitchers is going to drop the deeper a team has to go into their rotational depth, but wasn't the idea that the Indians would plan for that with these "waves of arms"?

For a team that prides itself on having contingency plans for their contingency plans, is it fair to simply blame injuries or has it devolved more into a talent issue or a talent evaluation issue?

To me, at a certain point, this becomes a talent issue as the Indians simply haven't developed these arms that have contributed at a Big League level with any sort of consistency since "The PLAN" became the credo of the organization. As the calendar is about to flip to June in 2009, the Colon trade

occurred nearly seven years ago...care to take a guess how many pitchers broke camp with the Indians this year from Goodyear that were drafted or were international signings and were developed by the Indians since that trade in 2002?

Two....

Two pitchers that started the season on the 25-man roster this year were drafted or signed as amateurs by the Indians and developed by the organization since that day in late June of 2002.

Scott Lewis and Jensen Lewis...that's it.

If you want to throw some of the players who have come up since Opening Day to contribute who fall under that same criteria (drafted or signed as amateurs since the Colon deal and developed by the Indians), add Aaron Laffey, Jeremy Sowers and Tony Sipp.

How are those "waves of arms" looking now?

It's true that Carmona and Perez were both signed as amateurs by the Indians and worked their way through the organization, but both were inked by the Tribe prior to that night in June of 2002. That's probably picking hairs, so sure...throw them in there too.

This is the "waves of arms" that's going to feed the parent club to overcome the losses in Free Agency?

Obviously some of the best-laid plans have gone amiss, but have the failures of Sowers been THAT damaging or the injuries to Westbrook and Atom Miller been THAT difficult to overcome that the Indians are about to enter June and have no appealing option to start a game this week?

But it's not just that the alternatives to fill holes don't seem to be there - the pitchers that HAVE logged innings this year have been underwhelming at best. Consider what the Indians' rotation (and this includes those names that have emerged to augment the parent club) have put forth this season:

2009 Rotation after Monday's game

5.79 ERA, 1.60 WHIP, 1.51 K/BB, 5.47 innings per game

Oof...right?

Want a real sucker punch?

2009 Rotation without CP Lee after Monday's game

6.81 ERA, 1.69 WHIP, 1.22 K/BB, 5.10 innings per game

That's 46 games into the season after Monday's game, nearly 1/3 of the way into the season, so we're not exactly looking at a small sample size anymore and suddenly the Indians are looking to put together a run back into the AL Central with Lee, Pavano, and a number of question marks that get bigger with each passing game, particularly without the services of the pitcher who was probably the most valuable to them this season this side of the reigning Cy Young winner in Aaron Laffey.

Sure, Carl Pavano has been a nice revelation after his first start and a nice "find", but why was it even necessary to go out and sign a player like Pavano if the whole idea behind "The PLAN" was to develop layers of arms, supposedly accounting for attrition, so the Indians' rotation would always have steady stream of arms?

Why was it necessary to continue to pitch an obviously injured and ineffective Anthony Reyes if the Indians were designed to fill the back-end of the rotation from within?

Essentially, the "wave" that was supposed to be breaking into Cleveland at this time resembled more of a gentle lapping at the coast and the Indians, obviously lacking confidence in their home-grown players, saw that this "break" in the waves was coming and the only way to counteract this development was to sign or acquire players like Pavano and Reyes, some four years removed from their first foray into the bargain bin with Kevin Millwood and Jason Johnson.

Is this "break" in arms or apparent flaw in "The PLAN" simply a result of the arms not being around to emerge as viable MLB starters?

Maybe, and while the Indians stocked their position player depth via trade, acquiring Cabrera, Choo, Shoppach, Valbuena, LaPorta, Brantley, Santana, and others to make up for their organization holes around the diamond, the sense that these "waves of arms" still existed as viable options resulted in the Indians essentially attempting to ride out this downturn in talent that arrived in MLB as starting pitchers.

While it was necessary to augment the position players via trade en masse, the acquisition of arms lagged behind (perhaps because they simply weren't available), laying waste to the idea that the Indians would see arms periodically arrive in Cleveland at a steady and consistent rate as the players that they had developed on their own were found to either be lacking or just never made it to MLB due to injury issues and the net result is that that "depth" becomes compromised or becomes so watered down that you're not really talking about "depth" at all in terms of quality, you're just talking about arms who can start a game.

As my friend Tyler Chirdon so eloquently points out on the topic, "Depth is not having a second string in place when you break camp, because you have to assume that a number of your starters AND your first-choice replacements will get injured, such that you don't know what your real roster issues are until you're about 5 weeks in. Depth is having a full roster's worth of replacements in late May... not about emergency options, but replacement-level-plus guys."

Usually, the Indians stress going "7 or 8 deep" into their AAA rotation, but if the quality from #4 to #8 isn't all that different and isn't all that great, doesn't that scream for an infusion of talent in the rotation, perhaps not to save the 2009 season, but at the very least to give a better sense about 2010?

What does 2010 look like, assuming Lee's staying and Pavano's cashing in elsewhere?

Lee
Carmona
Westbrook
Laffey
Huff

Knowing nothing about what Westbrook's going to look like and seeing Carmona

struggle with every inning that can snowball on him, how comfortable are you with that going into next year?

Sowers and Zachson are out of options, so count them out unless you put them in the Opening Day rotation, and Ant Reyes and Scott Lewis may be looking at going into 2010 with their arms held together by chicken wire and bubble gum...feeling any more confident yet?

Of course, the argument can be made that there's another batch of arms in AA with Hector Rondon and Jeanmar Gomez, as well as other talented players like Chuck Lofgren and Josh Tomlin; but which of these players is going to come to the parent club and legitimately establish himself as a viable MLB starter? Dave Huff blew away AA and AAA hitting in 2008 and has struggled in his first few starts and, while that's obviously making an unfair knee-jerk reaction, the idea that Huff would be have to be counted on to come into the rotation and perhaps immediately become the 3rd or 4th best starter on the team goes back to the idea that the talent just doesn't seem to be there in the rotation.

Yes, there are arms there, but what I'm referring to is pitchers that legitimately sit at the top or the middle of the rotation and don't simply represent back-end-of-the-rotation fodder or depth options in that the team would be happy if they were able to contribute a 5-inning outing once in a while.

Seven years and not one consistently effective starter has been developed by the team. Think about that...sure, Laffey has had his moments, as has Sowers in 2006, and if you want to include Carmona (signed in 2000), you start to see some stretches of effectiveness by players signed or drafted by the Tribe, but where are the long-term, legitimate replacements that plug the holes in the team's rotation?

You want a problem for this team in 2009 and this organization as a whole? Go ahead, blame the bullpen and blame roster mismanagement in terms of which players are playing and where they're playing the field...there's plenty of blame to go around. But for this organization, allegedly adhering to this "PLAN" in which starting pitching is the bedrock which the whole idea of consistent contention is built upon, the failure of the organization to see those "waves of arms" hit with consistency and effectiveness looks to be the glaring area of this team that is lacking for this year and into the near future.

Beyond that, the scariest part of this revelation is that the water looks pretty calm

here on the shore and the next waves look to be a good distance away from the beach as days, months, and seasons begin to pass.