As Eric Wedge apparently lives to manage another day and voices on each side of the debate as to whether he is to blame (or how much blame can be placed on him) for the mess of the 2009 season on top of the 2008 season, the question comes rattling from the rooftops - who is to blame for the mess that the Indians find themselves in? Enter the always rational Paulie Cousineau, who gives us his thoughts on the matter.

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While the fickle finger of fate has blame resting on shoulders as varied as Wedge, Shapiro, Wedge AND Shapiro, the Dolans, and Luis Isaac (OK, I made that last one up), why does this suddenly feel like the climax of "Reservoir Dogs" where everyone is staring down the barrel of a gun, voices in the room rising, and the knowledge overwhelming all of us that this isn't going to end well?

Starting with the man who must be feeling cold steel on his forehead with the events of the past week, how culpable is Eric Wedge for the hole that the Indians find themselves in?

At the top, let's forgo the notion that the Indians have "quit" on Wedge as their current 6-game losing streak at the hands of the Brewers and Cubs

included two 2-run losses and three 1-run losses, so it's not as if the players are simply going through the motions and getting blown out on a nightly basis. Rather, look at the manner in which they lost those games in that they were outscored by a slim margin and if you believe (as I do) that a manager earns his stripes by winning these close games as opposed to losing them as strategy often plays a factor in close games or extra-inning games, you start to see where the frustration with The Atomic Wedgie is starting to boil over.

All season long, the Indians have found themselves in winnable games only to see the bats go silent or the bullpen explode at the worst possible times, resulting in the demoralizing come-from-ahead loss that has colored the Tribe's 2009 season. Put away for a moment that this is on the players and their lack of execution (which is certainly part of the equation) and realize that a manager's main functions in MLB are to fill out a lineup card which divvies up AB, to set a rotation, and to decide which relievers come into the game at which time.

Sure, there's are daily questions that come up in terms of managerial decisions (a favorite quote of mine is that every man thinks he can do two things better than anyone else on the planet - grill a steak and manage a baseball team), but a manager's job in MLB is essentially to put his best players on the field and to give those players the best opportunity to succeed in a given situation.

For a moment, let's remove ourselves from the emotional train wreck of the past week and take a longer overview of the Indians performance under Wedge as a manager by analyzing how he's stacked against a formula that actually exists to predict how many games a team should win and should lose (please not the "should" and realize that this is not a hard-and-fast formula) by taking the number of runs scored by a team and the number of runs allowed by a team. Created by Bill James (and tweaked a few times), it's called the Pythagorean Winning Percentage
and it's used to take "luck" out of the equation.

Now, if we're taking luck out of the equation, I'd like a quick answer on why exactly a formula that generally is off by only a couple of wins and losses from year to year (with one or two outliers) has these results for the Indians for the past 5 years, which would be the years in which the Indians did contend in the AL Central or were thought to be among the contenders when the season started:

2009 Actual Record (rank among 30 MLB teams)

29-42 (29th of 30)

2009 Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage (rank among 30 MLB teams)

34-37 (19th of 30)

2008 Actual Record (rank among 30 MLB teams)

81-81 (17th of 30)

2008 Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage (rank among 30 MLB teams)

86-76 (14th of 30)

2007 Actual Record (rank among 30 MLB teams)

97-66 (1st of 30)

2007 Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage (rank among 30 MLB teams)

94-69 (3rd of 30)

2006 Actual Record (rank among 30 MLB teams)

78-84 (18th of 30)

2006 Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage (rank among 30 MLB teams)

90-72 (5th of 30)

2005 Actual Record (rank among 30 MLB teams)

93-69 (5th of 30)

2005 Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage (rank among 30 MLB teams)

97-65 (2nd of 30)

If you're keeping score at home, that's 4 out of the last 5 years (I'm not anticipating a HUGE turnaround this year) that the Indians have underperformed their Pythagorean Expected Winning Percentage, some of which happen to represent a pretty big disparity:

2009 - 5 more losses thus far
2008 - 5 more losses
2007 - 3 more wins
2006 - 12 more losses
2005 - 4 more losses

Obviously, the quick answer to why this is happening (without laying blame at any one person) is that a lousy bullpen can go a long way in losing a number of games that would otherwise be winnable, skewing the numbers to the negative.

But why is it, then, that Wedge keeps presiding over these horrific bullpens?

Is it really that the arms aren't there to populate the bullpen to become effective as a unit or does usage of the available arms in the bullpen play a factor?

Want to know who the 4 best relievers are in the second best bullpen (ERA-wise) in MLB?

Mark Lowe - Age 26 - ERA+ 120
Miguel Batista - Age 38 - ERA+ 131
Sean White - Age 28 - ERA+ 234
David Aardsma - Age 27 - ERA+ 264

There's the back end of the Seattle bullpen...are you telling me that those guys are that much more talented than the arms that have played a role in the Indians' bullpen this year? Is it really just a case of getting guys who are cresting or is something more at play here?

I'm not going to pretend to know how to handle a pitching staff, but if the same guy is pulling the levers in the bullpen over a prolonged stretch and the pulling of those levers continually results in an explosion, isn't there something to be questioned about the lever-puller, particularly when other teams are able to

cobble together effective bullpens with cast-offs and young arms? I know that it's probably unfair to simply say that Wedge is consistently pulling the wrong lever when it's up to the players to execute, but unfortunately Wedge's track record of handling usage for players (both pitchers and non-pitchers) has come under fire with the flame getting ever hotter this year.

Perhaps it's the most recent issue, the handling of a particular OF being promoted earlier than expected this year only to sit on the bench while players whose track records where known and did not justify his prolonged absence from the lineup that has cast more doubt than ever before in terms of Wedge maximizing the talent available to him or, at the very least, putting his best talent on the field and putting them in the best possible situations for success. However, if we can throw doubt on the handling of LaPorta - which may be the tipping point in terms of the "attached-at-the-hip" relationship in terms of Shapiro making an option available to Wedge to improve the team and Wedge simply ignoring him for lesser players - doesn't it suddenly (or maybe not so suddenly) become a questioning of every personnel move that he makes, where the focus of the magnifying glass grows hotter by the day?

And that's where we stand now, unfortunately, as the news that a Wedge move may not come until after the season only allows this lost season to become an episode of "Cold Case" where we may not ever find out what happened and the longer the time gets between our last observance of any semblance of a season makes a recovery less likely. At a certain point, we just wish we could have it back.

Obviously, however, Wedge is not alone in his responsibility for the 2009 season and to simply lay the blame on his shoulders is folly. No, the issues go much deeper than that as Mark Shapiro is the man who oversaw the mishandling of personnel over the last few years, as Brendan Donnelly and Juan Rincon continued to see innings down the stretch last year and as Dave Dellucci arrived to the team this season to essentially take AB away from players that figured into the Indians future because Wedge apparently had more trust in a known quantity (even if not known for doing much good) than the development of players.

With the Indians, the buck ultimately stops at Shapiro's desk as the Dolans have given him control of the baseball side of the team and, while maybe not always providing him with a payroll found in other larger markets, asked him to keep the product on the field competitive to a point that the playoffs was always a rational

thought as each season began and to keep the flow of players coming to infuse the team with young talent.

To that end, Shapiro has not held up his end of the bargain, particularly this year where it was almost expected that the rotation would be a mishmash of players who would hopefully evolve into something effective by the time that Jake Westbrook returned. Or where it was expected that some of the players that were fighting to earn everyday AB to fall into the complementary roles that they should be finding themselves in.

Who among us counted Francisco and Garko as linchpins to the season?

How about Dellucci...Sowers?

Wasn't the thought that if (that should be a big IF) the likes of Sowers, Francisco, Garko, and Pavano could hold on until the cavalry arrived from that the Indians could still compete in a very winnable division?

Regardless, the team wasn't able to even hold ground in the Central and the player acquisition through the draft ultimately comes down as another culprit. Just as Shapiro is culpable for allowing Wedge to misuse and waste the players given to him, he bears just as much responsibility for "overseeing" John Mirabelli as he ran the draft from 2000 to 2007. As we sit here today, the pitcher drafted in those 8 years with the most wins (Sowers) for the Indians with 13 career wins also possesses a career ERA+ of 86 and the player drafted in those 8 years with the most HR (Garko) as an Indian with 48 now owns a .796 career OPS as a 28-year-old 1B.

There's no question that mistakes have been made and as much as most of this was foreseen coming into the season (and exposed to the bone by injuries), the cupboard to me still doesn't look as bare as most make it out to be. Pardon me while I put on these rose-colored glasses, but I don't see the Indians suddenly entering a period of massive losing if only based on what the Indians lineup should look like at the end of July, with the current ages listed in parentheses below:

C - Martinez (30)
1B - LaPorta (24)
2B - Valbuena (23)

SS - Cabrera (23)
3B - Peralta (27)
LF - Brantley (22)
CF - Sizemore (26)
RF - Choo (26)
DH - Hafner (32)

Yes, the offense hasn't been the problem this year and if you'll remember, I was the one decrying the shortage in the bullpen and rotation as this season ground to a halt, but look again at that list above and see how the Indians have put themselves in this position, offensively at least.

The players acquired via trade include everyone listed above but Martinez and Peralta...every other piece of talent that the Indians should expect to be in their lineup some time after the All-Star Break came from elsewhere, and for whom? Yes, CC and Colon...but also Broussard, Perez, Gutierrez, and Einar Diaz.

And, yes, the reason for that needed infusion of talent that was needed is directly related to a failure to acquire and develop young talent from within (which is precisely what we're seeing bear out in the pitching staff), but if you're talking about who's acquiring that talent, you're back to the GM whose moves to counteract problems (that truthfully shouldn't have been problems in the first place) earn him some credit for the young talent on the offensive side of things. How he manages to do the same for the pitching side of things will likely determine his ultimate fate but the track record of overcoming obstacles (albeit self-inflicted obstacles) is there in terms of augmentation of the roster.

Ultimately, however, the culpability falls to Shapiro whose attitude of "trust us, we know what we're doing" has come crashing around him as staying the course and sticking with people around him who seemingly do not know what they're doing (or are some of the most historically unlucky people in history) have laid waste to the best laid plans.

If we've been told to trust, the statute of limitations on that has run out and the state of love and trust is moving to revolution as moves need to be made in this organization as the stability and the status quo that have run amok (and run in the wrong direction for too long) have taken us to the path that we now find ourselves upon.

Is it hopeless and are we readying ourselves for another 40 years in the desert?

I don't think so, but a change in culture is needed and while that change may not go all the way to the top of the organization (yet), a message that the results of this season and last are unacceptable needs to be sent. If that means that Wedge is jettisoned, so be it with the idea that finding a suitable long-term replacement is not going to be as easy as simply picking up a phone in late June and seeing if Option #1 has some free time.

Change is needed and not just for change's sake and every day that passes until a change (any change) is made makes the idea that 2010 becomes another rebuilding or re-loading year all the more obvious, where hopes and prayers take the place of known quantities and realities...because hopes and prayers are all we have now in the face of a very cold reality.