At the All-Star break, if we didn't know better, we'd say that this edition of the Cleveland Indians harkens back to the unbelievable ineptitude that was on display at old Municipal Stadium during the ‘60s, ‘70s and '80s. Shades of Jack Perconte, Oddibe McDowell and Luis Aponte!

Eager as we might be to compare this team to those losers of decades past, all the comparisons are not valid.

If you can believe it, there actually are reasons for optimism! Certainly not for this season; perhaps not for next season; but with a few key personnel moves, the Indians have the potential to not only compete for a division title, but to compete for a World Series title.

Optimism starts with the team's key players (and ends, abruptly, with the pitching staff).

**Key Players**

Centerfielder Grady Sizemore is in a season-long slump. The former All-Star is bouncing from first to second in the lineup, from the active roster to the injury list. He's currently batting just .235, and he's striking out way too much. Yet we all know that he has potential and that his potential may be realized when the purple haze that accompanies a 35-54 won-lost record is wiped clean. The most pressing problem our erstwhile centerfielder needs to address is all those K's. The obvious answer is that he needs to downsize his swing when he's got two strikes. That's all. Pretty simple, actually -- if the coaches can just pound it into his apparently thick skull. Sizemore, realistically, can hit .280 to .290 and slug 30 to 40 home runs in coming campaigns.

Meanwhile, designated hitter Travis Hafner is still recovering from a much, much, much, much, much worse injury than we fans were led to believe by the team's "brain trust" (and I use the term loosely). Although he's only playing three of every four games, he's showing signs of becoming the Pronk of old. In limited duty, he's batting .289 with nine homers -- and he claims that the doctors say that he will be completely recovered by October. That will give him a running start on preparing for 2010, when we hope we'll see the old Pronk.

On the other hand, catcher Victor Martinez (.294, 14 HR, 50 RBI) does not appear to be a part of the Tribe's long-term plans, for the simple reasons that (1) he is valued by contending teams (more on that later); and (2) some minor-league catching prospects are showing worlds of promise.

**Position Players**

First-baseman Ryan Garko has been the target of much criticism this year. But Garko is steady and consistent -- which you can't say about everybody. At the break, he's hitting .274 with nine home runs. His RBIs (34) are down a little, but he has significantly improved his defense. Garko is a serviceable first baseman -- at least until one of the minor-league phenoms proves himself.

Asdrubal Cabrera is obviously a fantastic defensive shortstop, and he's batting .300 while currently holding down the leadoff slot. And he's young (23). What's not to like about any of that? If he can keep up his offensive stats, he's the Tribe's starting shortstop for years to come.

Shin Soo Choo, despite bouncing back and forth between left field and right field has been one

of the team's most pleasant surprises to blossom in many a moon. Thirteen homers, 54 RBI and a .292 batting average, not to mention a cannon arm. What's not to like?

**Pitchers (Ugh)**

Beyond Cliff Lee and Carl Pavano (more about them later), there aren't many decent starting pitchers on the roster, nevermind the entire system. And Fausto Carmona has a whole slew of problems to fix before he's even mentioned in this section.

The bullpen shows some promise. Because it's been so taxed during the first 89 games, it's not exactly been consistent. But with the addition of some steadier starters, the relievers could again be put into consistent slots reminiscent of 2007.

Rafael Betancourt (3.45 ERA) is showing some signs of regaining his 2007 form. If Tony Sipp (2.77 ERA) can overcome his arm problems, he could be a valuable addition. Aaron Laffey (4.24 ERA) also has some health issues to work out, and management has to figure out whether he's a starter or reliever, but he clearly has the talent to pitch in the majors. Lefty Mike Goslin also shows promise. Called up from Columbus, he was 7-1 there with a 3.77 ERA and 51 Ks in 43 innings.

And closer Kerry Wood (5.28 ERA)? The jury's still out, but the guy throws 95-96 mph!

**Trade Bait**

If I had to guess, I'd say that lefty Cliff Lee, righty Carl Pavano, Martinez and perhaps third-baseman Jhonny Peralta will not be with the team when spring training opens in 2010. In the cases of Lee and Martinez, they are simply too valuable to the Indians as trade bait. Both could be dealt to add much-needed young pitching -- in much the same way CC Sabathia was used to add position players Matt LaPorta and Michael Brantley to the system last year.

Because Pavano has been the team's second-most-reliable starter, he has probably increased his value on the open market. If the general manager can get some more good, young arms in return, Pavano is gone before the trading deadline.

And Jhonny Peralta ... I could write a 100-page thesis on the guy. The conclusion would be that he has tremendous potential (as a third baseman), but he needs a drastic change of scenery. Thus, he becomes trade bait, too.

**Other Good Options**

In the Give-'Em-Another-Shot category: second-baseman Josh Barfield, third-baseman Andy Marte (.315, 11 HR, 51 RBI in Columbus) and Jensen Lewis (2-3, 5.03 ERA in the majors this year).

In the Up-and-Coming category (in no particular order) with their minor-league averages:

>> Matt LaPorta, OF-1B, Columbus: .307, 11 HR, 43 RBI
>> Michael Brantley, CF, Akron: .260, 31 SB
>> Nick Weglarz, OF, Akron: currently injured, but .250, 12 HR, 55 RBI on the year
>> Trevor Crowe, OF, Columbus: .287, 10 SB
>> Jordan Brown, LF-1B, Columbus: .322, 10 HR, 45 RBI
>> Beau Mills, 1B, Akron: .262, 7 HR, 46 RBI
>> Wes Hodges, 3B, Columbus: .280
>> Wyatt Toregas, C, Columbus: .279, 7 HR, 27 RBI
>> Carlos Santana, C, Akron: currently injured
>> Hector Rondon, RHP, Akron and Columbus: 7-5, 2.75 ERA, 73 Ks in 72 inn. at Akron
>> Vinnie Pestano, RHP, Akron: currently injured; 2.86 ERA, 24 SVs, 31 Ks in 34 inn.
>> Ryan Edell, LHP, Akron: 2-1, 2.43 ERA, 69 Ks in 67 inn.

**The Future Is Tomorrow**

Yeah, yeah, we've heard it before. Wait 'til next year. But the Indians have a fine core of

position players in both the majors and minors -- something we couldn't say in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. The everyday lineup is stronger than most people admit, ranking third to fifth in the A.L. in runs scored most of the season.

There's even an abundance of intriguing players at certain positions (C, 1B, OF) that might be used in trades to obtain either major-league-ready or promising high-minor-level pitchers.

If Mark Shapiro (or whoever's the general manager) can obtain some starting pitchers when he deals Lee, Martinez, Pavano, Peralta and/or some minor-leaguers, and if Eric Wedge (or whoever's the manager) can prod the newly configured pitching staff to reach its potential, contention for a World Series title is NOT out of the question for 2011. If I live that long.