As the fickle finger of fate looks for a final resting spot to blame for the abyss the Indians find themselves in as the final remnants of the 2009 season circle the drain, the popular culprits are well-known and much-maligned. Whether the fault lies with the ownership, the Front Office, or the manager (or maybe some convoluted combination of all of them), how about taking a look at some of the figures in the background whose roles may not be well known, but whose influence on the team is unquestioned. Paulie speaks of ... wait for it ... the coaching staff.

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For a moment, let's ignore the issues with roster management and putting players in the best positions to succeed in terms of game usage (that would fall squarely on the shoulders of The Atomic Wedgie...also known as the man responsible for bringing us "Garko in the Outfield", usually with Dave Huff on the mound, and making sure that Kelly Shoppach received more than 4 consecutive starts only once after the second half of his 2008 season, among other indiscretions) and focus on the only group of players unaffected by the massive overhaul of the roster, perhaps pleasing only the team's seamstress in charge of

sewing new names onto jerseys. Throughout this lost season, the coaches have remained intact and since the middle of 2005 have all enjoyed job security, with the notable of exception of Luis Isaac, jettisoned (despite the moaning and wailing from the assembled press corps) after presiding over a relief corps that had finished 11th or worse in the AL in ERA three times from 2004 to 2008.

The collective group of Carl Willis, Derek Shelton, Jeff Datz, Luis Rivera, and the newly minted Chuck Hernandez have all played a role in the mess that the Indians now find themselves in, and while the blame certainly gets heaped onto more-well-known shoulders, how much culpability lies with a coaching staff that has been charged with readying the team for the season and attempting to make adjustments for a team that has now egregiously disappointed for three of the last four years?

Of course, I'm not just talking about Luis Rivera's ability to take rub shoulders while whispering sweet nothings into occupants of 1B or holding their batting gloves or body armor for them.

Nor do I care to delve into Joel Skinner's "ability" to coach 3B and whether or not his reluctance to send Kenny Lofton home in Boston cost the Indians a chance to go to the Fall Classic.

I'm not even going to focus on the purported "contributions" of Jeff Datz - which (on the surface at least) seem to be limited to inspiring a couple of people to create a sign that says "DATZ AWESOME"...which is not to say that he's not contributing as those words got me through some tough times.

Taking cheap shots like pointing out that Detroit's new pitching coach Rick Knapp are among the "unsung heroes" of the season because he is stronger than the previous pitching coach (ahem, Chuck Hernandez) at "fixing pitchers' mechanics"
?

No interest...oh, wait.

Rather, what about the functions of a coach?

What about things like helping players progress to maximize their talent, or making adjustments to improve them as hitters, pitchers, or fielders, teaching

players the idiosyncrasies of the game that occur during practice, but show up on the field of play to assist in the development of players on a team?

What about...you know, coaching?

I'm not going to pretend to be Tom Emanski or Charlie Lau here and point out what fundamentals are missing or what certain players are doing wrong and how the coaching staff has failed to make the proper adjustments to specific players as, frankly, people get paid a lot of money to figure that out. But those people that are paid a lot of money to figure that out now are sitting on a body of work in developing players for an organization that is as long as six or seven years to adequately give a feeling about how much they're helping these players develop or their inability to do so.

Looking at the body of work then as Ryan Richards and Jay Levin have already pointed out, there is a growing sense that the coaching staff has trouble in assisting a player's progress to maximize their talents or to allow them to develop to the point of putting finishing touches on them as they evolve as players. Certainly no player's development is a nice, clean, linear path upwards, but one would think that the players that came into the organization, either through internal development or from outside of the organization, should show a level of improvement from year to year, even if bumps in the road are inevitable in any players' progress.

Of course, some of this is certainly on the players and nobody's raking the coaches over the coals about the lack of development of guys like The Looch and Masa, as often the coaching staff is left to play with the hand that's been dealt to them. Nor is anyone saying that players that looked to be mediocre throughout their MiLB career, like The Ben Francisco Treat, should have suddenly morphed into perennial All-Stars.

But it's not outside the realm of reason to suggest that players who had experienced success throughout the Minors at a young age, who succeed in their first taste of MLB, should progress to the point that they show at least a modicum of improvement from their initial successes.

But what about those players that arrive full of promise, only to not even sniff similar success or even the top of that plateau?

Fernando Cabrera

2004/2005 - Age 23/24
1.75 ERA (241 ERA+), 1.08 WHIP, 35 K, 12 BB in 36 IP over 19 games

2006
5.19 ERA (87 ERA+), 1.40 WHIP, 71 K, 32 BB in 60 2/3 IP over 51 games

2007
7.21 ERA (82 ERA+), 1.78 WHIP, 39 K, 22 BB in 33 23/ IP over 24 games

Jeremy Sowers

2006 - Age 23
3.57 ERA (127 ERA+), 1.19 WHIP, 35 K, 20 BB in 88 1/3 IP over 14 games

Since 2006
5.48 ERA (82 ERA+), 1.48 WHIP, 132 K, 103 BB in 295 2/3 IP over 54 games

Fausto Carmona

2006/2007 - Age 22/23
3.67 ERA (125 ERA+), 1.31 WHIP, 195 K, 92 BB in 289 2/3 IP over 70 games

2008-2009
5.92 ERA (76 ERA+), 1.70 WHIP, 121 K, 133 BB in 222 IP over 42 games

Jhonny Peralta

2005 - Age 23 (first full season)
.292 BA / .366 OBP / .520 SLG / .885 OPS - (137 OPS+)

Since 2005
.269 BA / .332 OBP / .425 SLG / .757 OPS - (96 OPS+)

"You're just cherry-picking the failures, though...nobody's been able to fix Cabrera and Sowers' peripherals showed that this is who he is, even given his initial success"...right?

Sure, but what about the guys who experienced that initial success, then remained steady after their first exposure to MLB, continuing on that path?

They've improved, right?

Grady Sizemore

2005 - Age 22 (first full season)
.289 BA / .348 OBP / .484 SLG / .832 OPS - (123 OPS+)

Since 2005
.273 BA / .373 OBP / .489 SLG / .862 OPS - (123 OPS+)

Victor Martinez

2004 - Age 25 (first full season)
.283 BA / .359 OBP / .492 SLG / .851 OPS - (125 OPS+)

2005-2008
.304 BA / .375 OBP / .466 SLG / .841 OPS - (120 OPS+)

Where's the growth?

Group Grady and Vic with Peralta's failure to take that next step and suddenly you're looking at three players thought to be the "core" of the "core", in terms of position players who basically remained similar players (or worse) than the players they arrived as to Cleveland.

Certainly there are some players that unquestionably improved, like the Cy Young winners CP Lee and the (deposed) aCCe, just as there are success stories like that of Lacey Cake and Rocky Betancourt. However, if you're looking for that player that broke into MLB with great success and continued to a steady ride up the ladder, you're not going to find it with the Indians outside of CC Sabathia.

Maybe a player like Asdrubal or The BLC (or some of these younger players that we're getting a look at, like Louie the Fifth or LaPorta or Brantley) break that mold, but success and continued progress shouldn't be the exception to the rule when looking at a collective body of players that ascend to MLB.

Unfortunately, the severe regressions of players like Rafael Perez and Jensen Lewis have become more of the norm than the exception for the Indians in recent years, where players have failed to take the "next step" predicted for them, often falling so far off of the map that their long-term future with the club goes from solid to spotty in short order. Talent has arrived topside for the Indians, but that talent has never evolved into top-shelf talent (with a few exceptions), leaving the Indians where they were in June, stuck with middling players on a middling team unable to compete in a middling division.

It all comes back to how much of a role you feel coaches have in terms of the performance of particular players of a team. That is to say, is success or failure attributable to them any more than it is to the players, or is the affect of coaching something that gets overstated in thinner times?

How much of it is coaching and how much of it is what they have to deal with?

Is the complaint valid about the lack of progress valid or is it akin to complaining out of a collective attempt to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear?

It's often said that baseball is about adjustments, with hitters adjusting to pitchers and vice versa, followed by counter-adjustments from both parties in an endless dance. But if the adjustments being made never improve a player past the level of production that they attained in their first exposure to MLB, or saw that production drop - where does the onus of blame lie?

Are we to believe that these players have arrived to Cleveland as finished works of art, with the brushstrokes complete, with not much room for improvement? Or does the idea that these players still represent a largely empty canvas, where success at a young age portends more success through maturation and more brushstrokes still hold water?

How much of a difference does a coach make in the development of players (or lack thereof) and who's ultimately to blame for the Indians' failure?

Looking at the body of work before us, let's take a broad brush stroke and just say everyone...