The nightmare is upon us as CC Sabathia takes the mound tonight for the Yankees in Game 1 against the Philadelphia Phillies, boasting their own former Cy Young Award winner in Clifton Phifer Lee. The pain of seeing these two former teammates battle each other will come soon enough, but the fact that these two ex-Tribesman front rotations for participants in the World Series is enough to wonder what happened to the Indians' team that still boasted both of them on their roster. Paul takes a look back.

The nightmare is upon us as CC Sabathia takes the mound tonight for the Yankees in Game 1 against the Philadelphia Phillies, boasting their own former Cy Young Award winner in Clifton Phifer Lee. The pain of seeing these two former teammates battle each other will come soon enough, but the fact that these two ex-Tribesman front rotations for participants in the World Series is enough to wonder what happened to the Indians' team that still boasted both of them on their roster.

Two short years ago, the Indians were one game away from the World Series and while the turning point came in Game 5 of the ALCS , one can't help but wonder today what might have been had the 2007 ALCS hadn't ended differently. It's not a question that is reserved for just Tribe fans this week as Sabathia admitted last week to USA Today's Bob Nightengale that "I still can't believe what happened... I mean, we just have to win one more game. Just one game. And we would not have only gone to the World Series, but I'm sure we would have won it. I still think about that."

"What happened" was what happened throughout the 2007

post-season as CC was not able to defeat the Red Sox that night as his 2007 post-season would finish on that October night with a 1-2 record brought about by a 8.80 ERA and a 2.21 WHIP in 3 starts.
But that (as well as mentioning that CP Lee's 2007 post season record doesn't exist as it's neither here nor there) gets away from the crux of the issue at hand.

That issue is that it can be argued that the loss to the Red Sox in the 2007 ALCS should not have represented the end of the line for the assembled talent as the pieces and parts that made the run down the stretch in 2007 and made the playoff push at the end of the season was nearly identical to the team that would break camp to start the 2008 season. The performance of that team in 2008 is perhaps what should be examined at length (instead of "just one game", as important as that game was with everything out there for the Indians to go to the World Series) and it goes back to another CC quote in terms of the 2008 club as he told Nightengale in the aforementioned piece that "with the young guys we had, I was sure we'd be back. I really thought we'd be together for a long time. But once we got off to a slow start, things changed so quickly. Now, the only guy really left is (center fielder) Grady (Sizemore). It's weird."

"Weird" is not the word that most Indians' fans would use to describe the sequence of events for the organization from Game 5 in the 2007 ALCS to where the Indians sit today, with a new manager and a nearly completely different set of players. There are other choice words that could probably better articulate how Tribe fans feel about the shocking slide into rebuilding, but when asked what he would tell fans in Cleveland about the Game 1 match-up, pitting Sabathia and Lee, CC just flashed that mega-watt smile that we all keep reading about and said...wait for it... "I don't know what to tell them. It's not our fault."

While we can sit and debate whether the fall-off was tied directly to the disappointment of the starting pitching in Game 5 of the ALCS, it's brings up the pertinent question as we sit and wait for the FOX coverage of Game 1 of this World Series to bring about ulcers and groans across the North Coast.
That question of course is - whose fault is it?

Whose fault is it that the promise the shone so brightly at the beginning of 2008 has been reduced to barely a flicker, where contention in 2010 seems unlikely and contention beyond that is dependent upon too many variables to count?

If you'll remember, the 2008 season started with essentially the same team that finished the 2007 season in a flurry of success:
Lineup
Victor Martinez
Ryan Garko
Asdrubal Cabrera
Jhonny Peralta
Casey Blake
Franklin Gutierrez
Grady Sizemore
Jason Michaels
Travis Hafner

Starting Rotation
CC Sabathia
Cliff Lee
Fausto Carmona
Jake Westbrook
Paul Byrd

Back-End of Bullpen
Joe Borowski
Rafael Betancourt
Rafael Perez
Jensen Lewis

Joe Borowski...Jason Michaels...I know, blame it on those guys.
But with that assembled group of players, THAT team had a record of 37-51 on July 7th, a solid 14 games out of 1st place, a game and a half behind the Royals in the AL Central further than halfway into the season. Again, that would be the team WITH CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee, two pitchers who would end the season among the top four starters in terms of ERA+
, healthy and starting 40% of the games over an 88-game stretch.

You want a period of time that killed this organizational window of winning, there it is - an 88-game stretch with both Sabathia (fresh off a 2007 Cy Young season) and Lee (working on a 2008 Cy Young season) going two times every turn through the rotation. As easy as it would be to say that the one game in October of 2007 killed the Indians, as they were constructed, a more complete explanation

comes over that set of games that comprised over a little over half of the next season.

CC says that the state the Indians find themselves in and the fact that the two starting pitchers for Game 1 of the 2009 World Series is not "their fault" and it's hard to argue that when you look at the numbers of Sabathia and Lee when CC was traded to Milwaukee on July 7th of 2008:
CC Sabathia - 6-8, 3.83 ERA, 1.23 WHIP in 18 starts
Cliff Lee - 11-2, 2.43 ERA, 1.04 WHIP in 17 starts

The team was designed to be built on starting pitching and it was, if you remember the 44 1/3 scoreless inning streak by the strong rotation (which by that time included an effective Aaron Laffey), so what went so horribly and irreparably wrong in those 88 games that forced the Indians to make a decision on Sabathia, beginning the quick organizational descent?

Obviously, some injuries to the rotation played a role (with Carmona and Westbrook both ailing that year), but the 2008 Indians boasted two of the best pitchers in MLB in the first half and still could not climb out of the cellar in a very weak AL Central in 2008.
So really, what went wrong?

It was a topic that was delved into back after the CC trade in 2008 in the "Things Fall Apart" series with some blame being placed on the bullpen, and specifically the struggles of Betancourt, Perez, and Lewis - all thought to be legitimate options when (not if) Borowski ran out of gas. Additionally, some blame was placed on the offense's inability to make up for the lost offensive output brought about by injuries to Victor and Hafner, most notably in terms of the regressions of Gutierrez, Cabrera, and Garko as they struggled to fill the offensive void. Finally, blame was placed on the Indians' strategy to stand pat in the off-season leading up to the 2008 season, as the Front Office's decision to remain content and to rest on the success of the 2007 season and assume that player development would progress without hiccups and the overall success of the team would continue.

Wherever the final blame is placed (and it could certainly be spread around pretty

evenly), the notion that the Indians could have made some changes to start the season - like waiting for the still-injured Choo to take over for Michaels (or Francisco), moving Grady to LF and Gutierrez to CF...or moving Blake to 1B, Peralta to 3B, Cabrera to SS, and finding a 2B, or even starting the season with Blake in LF, Marte at 3B and with the rest of the alignment in place - does not hide the fact that the past cannot be changed.

Perhaps some blame can be placed on the current structure in MLB that forces teams like the Indians to confront reality before they want to and make decisions based on their future, sometimes at the expense of the present. As Casey Blake stated in the Nightengale piece, "they had to make a decision...either stick with this group or start over again. Just one game changed the direction of that organization."

While his presumption that "one game changed the direction of that organization" may be little dramatic, there's no question that the direction of the organization was permanently changed by the time that Blake was moved to the Dodgers. Between Game 5 of the ALCS in 2007 and Casey going to Hollywood, the Indians needed to face their reality in terms of their situation in - they knew CC was leaving at the end of the 2008 season for the most money and the Indians had to decide what to do with him in terms of the realistic expectations for their future.

Should the Indians have "stuck with that group", despite the fact that the team was 14 games under .500 in the month of June, with the likelihood of making the playoffs being slim and none?

Regardless of that answer, all that's left is the regret and bitterness towards that three-month stretch that slammed shut the Indians' window of contention, as the 2009 team followed the path laid out by the first three months of the 2008 team and the franchise was irreparably changed. As the frustration of knowing that the players that made up that 2008 team were unquestionably talented, but simply did not win, descends like a gray cloud on Wednesday night when the first pitch is thrown, realize that the Indians' fortunes did not change in Game 5 of the ALCS on that October night...but it was certainly the beginning of the end.