After spending a birthday weekend spent enjoying Tribe games (regardless of the result, there's still nothing like going to the ballpark on a summer evening), a trip to the West Side Market, and attempting to figure out the intricacies of my new Roku (which, if you subscribe to MLB.tv looks like almost too much of a natural not to have), let's get going on a Lazy Sunday so I can stack up my Netflix queue with movies that I can now watch immediately (in my TV) thanks to Roku…

Is anyone else a little taken aback by being bludgeoned over the head with the idea that the Reds, in town for this contrived "Ohio Cup" hold the keys to the "blueprint" that the Indians should be following
?

Everyone realizes that the Reds' last winning season was 1999, that they've had 3 winning teams since 1991, 1 playoff appearance in the last 20 seasons, and no playoff series wins in the same timeframe, right?

Yeah…let's follow that blueprint because they're 7 games over .500 in a weak NL Central at the end of May. I can't wait for the next 7 years of losing seasons so we can follow that same blueprint of finding young talent and trying to add some veterans to the mix in an attempt to win…you know, because that isn't exactly what happened here in 2005 and 2007.

Every season presents a new small-market team that “has figured it out” for pundits to point to and ask why every small-market team can’t win. It’s akin to saying “don’t the Rays have it all figured out” after the Rays spent 10 consecutive years with more than 90 losses and with as many 90-win seasons as the Indians in the past 4 years.

Is that to say that the Rays aren’t trending in the right direction?

Absolutely not (though I’m not as sold on the Reds pointing up), but rather that back in 2005 and 2007, the Indians were the team that everyone pointed to as having the blueprint and for having “figured it all out”. Now, just 2 ¼ seasons removed from being 1 game away from the World Series, the Indians find themselves back at the beginning, attempting to bring their young talent to the Big Leagues, a fate that could easily befall the Reds or the Rays or any other example of that small-market team that currently has it “figured out”, which may turn out to be as short-lived as what we saw in Cleveland.

In case you didn’t notice, two of the young, small-market “teams on the cusp” back in 2007 and 2008 (Milwaukee and Arizona) sit below .500 as they are forced to face the very same realities that the Indians encountered over the last two seasons.

This has been beaten to death all off-season and throughout the first few months of the season, but the windows of opportunity for small-market teams are narrow and are shrinking in the current economic structure in MLB. It would seem that, for most small-to-mid-market teams, either they’re climbing up the mountain or they’re coming down – there is no treading water that amounts to anything in MLB, other than unnecessarily wearing oneself out.

With the 2010 season going as it is, is there any doubt now that the Indians have been coming down since the beginning of the 2008 season and, while there’s plenty of blame to go around for that, I bring it up in the context of hearing a local sports-talk radio host (I know, I should listen at my own risk) asserting that this team lacked a plan and that, had the Indians not traded Lee and Martinez, the product would not be nearly so reprehensible and perhaps the Indians could be…you know, winning some games this year.

Want to know something?

Last July, I thought that moving Lee and Martinez last year was a mistake because it essentially punted on the 2010 season, one in which I thought the Indians could re-group, hope for a couple of “breaks” and shorten that timeframe between contention, if not eliminate it altogether.

So what do we know now?

This team wasn’t a “break” or two away from contending and the tear-down was coming. Could the Indians have held onto these guys for another year to see if that lightning in a bottle was coming? I suppose so, but the Indians said that they didn’t think that they could contend in 2010 with Lee and Martinez while keeping the rest of the roster intact and while that rationale was questioned by many (including me), how is that decision looking today?

Does anyone doubt that, had the Indians held onto Lee and Martinez for 2010, that we would be suffering through not only the “Summer of LeBron” but a malcontent in Lee, throwing teammates under the bus on a bad team and likely requesting a trade?

In the context of the Fire Sale that took place last summer and just to debunk this idea that the Indians’ 2010 would be appreciably different had they held onto some of these players, let’s take a look at what the Indians who were traded in the 2009 calendar year have put forth with their new teams:

Victor Martinez – Age 31

.255 BA / .305 OBP / 431 SLG / .736 OPS with 9 2B, 6 HR in 164 PA

While he’s improved as of late, if you haven’t heard the wailing from Beantown, Victor ranks 21st in OPS among the 32 catchers in MLB with 75 or more plate appearances and his OBP is .022 points higher than one Louis Marson…but we’ll get to that.

Kelly Shoppach – Age 30

.250 BA / .333 OBP / .375 SLG / .708 OPS with 1 2B, 0 HR in 9 PA

Shoppach went on the DL in early April with a knee injury and has yet to return to the Rays' lineup, although whether he returns to steady AB remains to be seen, given the early success of John Jaso.

Mark DeRosa – Age 35

.194 BA / .279 OBP / .258 SLG / .537 OPS with 3 2B, 1 HR in 104 PA

DeRosa went on the DL in early May with a wrist injury and has yet to return to the Giants' lineup, as the Giants hope that his post-DL numbers are in stark contrast to his pre-DL numbers.

Ryan Garko – Age 29

.091 BA / .167 OBP / .091 SLG / .258 OPS with 0 2B, 0 HR in 38 PA

Garko was outrighted off of the Rangers' 40-man roster last Tuesday, cleared waivers, and will now be plying his craft in Oklahoma City. That's right, Garko went unclaimed by all 30 MLB teams and now finds himself in the Rangers' organization (which has Justin Smoak and Chris Davis as viable 1B options) as a now-29-year-old player.

Ben Francisco – Age 28

.200 BA / .259 OBP / .240 SLG / .499 OPS with 1 2B, 0 HR in 28 PA

The Ben Francisco Treat has started 4 games for the Phillies in 2010 and doesn't look to be in line for much more playing time as the Phillies are using The Frisco Kid in the role that suits him best, that of a 4th OF who receives sporadic playing time.

Cliff Lee – Age 31

3.44 ERA, 1.04 WHIP, .614 OPS against with 32 K, 1 BB in 36 2/3 IP

WOW…just, WOW! 32 K and 1 BB in 36 2/3 IP as he just waits for the Yankees to add enough zeroes (and years) to their offer so he can replace Andy Pettitte in their rotation! Of course, the Mariners actually had a worse record than the Indians as of Friday and are further out of the AL West race than the Indians are of the Central, so it's possible that we'll be able to see what kind of return CP Lee would bring at 3 different points over the course of a year if Seattle parts with him, and it certainly looks that way right now.

Carl Pavano – Age 34

4.11 ERA, 1.21 WHIP, .725 OPS against with 36 K, 7 BB in 50 1/3 IP

You read that right…7 BB in 50 1/3 IP for Hot Carl as it would seem that the BB totals for Lee and Pavano over 80 some innings look like a quick outing for Justin Masterson or Dave Huff.

Rafael Betancourt – Age 35

6.28 ERA, 1.67 WHIP, .845 OPS against with 17 K, 3 BB in 14 1/3 IP

Betancourt remains a late-inning option for the Rox, despite giving up earned runs in 6 of his 15 appearances to date. He's allowed more than a hit an inning and his low BB numbers are the only thing that's preventing that WHIP from approaching Rafael Perez territory.

Obviously, injuries color some of this as Lee missed the first month of the season and DeRosa (who, truth be told, was a FA at the end of 2009, like Pavano and Betancourt) and Shoppach have been injured and/or shelved for a good portion of the year, but if anyone's suggesting that putting these guys back on the Indians' roster makes them a contender in 2010…well, they're wrong.

As easy as it would be to say that adding CP Lee and Victor to the current roster "puts the Indians in the mix" for the AL Central or even the Wild Card, the 2009 team had both of those players going at full capacity and the team still scuffled out of the gate. Jumping to the assumption that a healthy Lee and a healthy Westbrook combined with a now-effective Carmona would have given this team a chance to contend is to overlook the main issue facing the current Indians team – the offense.

Would the presence of Martinez have helped that?

To a degree (although he's finding out that being a slow starter in Boston is a completely different animal than being one in Cleveland), but even swapping Marson's bat out for Vic's stick wouldn't put this team on par with the Twins, particularly given that the veterans that the Indians thought would carry the offensive load in 2010 have either been ineffective, injured or both.

Thus, in hindsight (even if we're not even to the quarter-pole of the season) were the Indians correct to punt on 2010, given the talent on hand?

At this point, it looks that way (and is a stunning indictment of the lack of talent on the team two years removed from an ALCS appearance if you INCLUDE these guys in the mix), so the question (premature as it may be) becomes whether the Indians were able to maximize their return on these players, most notably Lee and Martinez.

To that end, let's take a look at what the youngsters acquired in 2009 that have made it to the parent club (and there are 6 already) have put forth in the early going, and take note of the ages against those listed above:

Lou Marson – Age 24

.209 BA / .280 OBP / .253 SLG / .533 OPS with 4 2B, 0 HR in 102 PA

Not to wear my Pollyanna dress too tight, but in the last 3 weeks, Marson has a line of .281 BA / .349 OBP / .351 SLG / .700 OPS which isn't going to set anyone's world on fire, but for a 23-year-old catcher who was thought to be a high OBP/low-SLG guy when the Indians acquired him….that's what he looks like. Of course, his time as the Indians' starting catcher (and possibly his time within the organization) is already running out, so if his function was to be Josh Bard to Carlos Santana's Victor Martinez, he got the job done. Not necessarily well…but done nonetheless.

Jason Donald – Age 25

.167 BA / .211 OBP / .167 SLG / .377 OPS against with 0 2B, 0 HR in 19 PA

To draw much of a conclusion on Donald on the basis of what he's done so far in MLB is folly (but that's the whole point of this) although he has looked the part and his numbers in AAA (.277 BA / .396 OBP / .423 SLG / .820 OPS) suggest that he's ready for his close-up with the parent club.

Mitch Talbot – Age 26

3.88 ERA, 1.33 WHIP, .748 OPS against with 20 K, 24 BB in 53 1/3 IP

Unleashing his own peculiar brand of Fury upon the AL, baffling hitters (and me) as to how he's actually succeeding with more BB than K. Through a quarter of the 2010 season, Mitch Talbot has a lower ERA and a lower WHIP than Felix Hernandez…seriously.

Excuse me while I go eat this crow.

Justin Masterson – Age 25

5.65 ERA, 1.81 WHIP, .832 OPS against with 46 K, 24 BB in 43 IP

Yes, Masterson has been one of the most frustrating players on the Indians in the early going as we continue to hope (against hope…and probably logic) that he's much more than what the Red Sox had him pegged as – which is a late-inning reliever. He's still striking out more than a hitter an inning (though he's walking more than one hitter every two innings) and the "stuff" seems to be there (whatever that means) so perhaps he's most emblematic of this Indians' team – young, talented (though the talent level is not yet fully known), struggling to find his way, and impossibly frustrating.

Chris Perez – Age 24

1.84 ERA, 1.43 WHIP, .648 OPS against with 13 K, 8 BB in 14 2/3 IP

Regarded as the "Closer of the Future" (and maybe the present depending upon whether Kerry Wood recovered his glove from the 3B Field Boxes on Wednesday, Perez has shown to have the electric (if erratic) repertoire that the Indians have lacked for such a long time among their young relievers. While it remains to be seen if C.F. Perez can keep his emotions in check and his walks to a minimum, Perez misses bats and has proven to be among the most promising bullpen arms under the age of 25 in recent memory.

Thus, even taking a glass half-empty view of this, the Indians have a member of the middle-to-back-end of their rotation, two back-end of the bullpen arms, their likely 2B of the future, and a player who is likely to get moved in the off-season whose presence delayed Carlos Santana's arbitration clock for trades consummated less than a year ago.

While the feeling may persist that the Indians should have received more for the reigning Cy Young Award winner and El Capitan (among others) and that may certainly be a valid concern going forward, realize that the Rangers traded Mark Teixiera in 2007 to the Braves in what is looking like an absolute heist for Texas as they acquired SS Elvis Andrus, closer Neftali Feliz, SP Matt Harrison, and "C" Jarrod Saltalamachia.

Why is it important to bring that up?

Remember, the Rangers made that trade in mid-2007 and are just now getting the kind of contributions from trading 1 ½ years of their best player to the Braves that have allowed them to sit atop the AL West. It would seem that the Indians took a different tact in their deals with the Phillies and the Red Sox, opting for prospects who were further along in their development, but perhaps without the upside of a Feliz or an Andrus.

Whether that will prove to be a sound strategy or another nail in the organization's coffin, the 6 players who have already arrived topside from the 2009 deals only represent a portion of the acquired talent when you go down a little further in the organization, presented without comment as we have only the numbers to look at and not much more:

Carlos Carrasco – Age 23 (AAA)

4.12 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, .834 OPS against with 31 K, 19 BB in 39 1/3 IP

Yohan Pino – Age 26 (AAA)

4.96 ERA, 1.43 WHIP, .789 OPS against with 38 K, 14 BB in 45 1/3 IP

Jess Todd – Age 24 (AAA)

3.54 ERA, 1.38 WHIP, .716 OPS against with 23 K, 8 BB in 20 1/3 IP

Bryan Price – Age 23 (AA)

4.80 ERA, 1.40 WHIP, .805 OPS against with 19 K, 3 BB in 15 IP

Scott Barnes – Age 22 (AA)

6.17 ERA, 1.60 WHIP, .754 OPS against with 36 K, 22 BB in 35 IP

Connor Graham – Age 24 (AA)

5.57 ERA, 2.14 WHIP, .906 OPS against with 13 K, 17 BB in 21 IP

Nick Hagadone – Age 24 (A+)

2.79 ERA, 1.59 WHIP, .632 OPS against with 32 K, 22 BB in 29 IP

Do you notice that these are ALL pitchers, with only one of them (Hagadone) below AA with the likelihood that he's going to find himself following 2010 1st Round Pick Alex White to Akron in short order?

Back to the deals of the 2009 season, and the Lee deal in particular, since it is still WILDLY premature to tag any particular player (or the deal as a whole) as a "bust", take a look at the two Phillies' prospects that most people who saw the Indians' return for Lee and identified as the ones that the Indians were wrong to not demand from Philly, Kyle Drabek and Michael Taylor. Lest you forget, Drabek and Taylor were moved to Toronto for Halladay, with Taylor making his way into the A's organization. Regardless, here's how each has fared in the early going with their new teams:

Kyle Drabek – Age 22 (AA)

3.06 ERA, 1.32 WHIP, .684 OPS against with 45 K, 21 BB in 47 IP

Michael Taylor – Age 24 (AAA)

.232 BA / .290 OBP / .408 SLG / .698 OPS with 8 2B, 2 HR in 138 PA

Just for some perspective, here are the lines for Carrasco and Donald…and please take note of the ages and levels, particularly for Drabek and Carrasco:

Carlos Carrasco – Age 23 (AAA)

4.12 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, .834 OPS against with 31 K, 19 BB in 39 1/3 IP

Jason Donald – Age 25 (AAA)

.277 BA / .396 OBP / .423 SLG / .820 OPS with 10 2B, 2 HR in 165 PA

In case you were wondering, among the 3 players that the Phillies received for Lee from the Mariners, two are above high-A ball (Phillipe Aumont and Tyson Gillies) and Aumont is currently sporting a 5.94 ERA and a 1.62 WHIP in AA Reading while Gillies has put forth an OPS of .642 at AA.

Is that pointed out to assert the prospects received from Seattle are inadequate or that Michael Taylor will never be a good MLB player because he's started slowly or that Carrasco is a better prospect than Drabek because of age and level, or vice versa because of performance?

Absolutely not…because it's TOO EARLY to tell on these young players.

And that's perhaps the point of this long-winded dissertation as the Indians are caught in this waiting game, as they wait for these prospects to first be ready for MLB, then to adjust to MLB with the hopes that they eventually thrive in MLB.

While it's easy to look at the current team on the field and put forth the idea that the Indians lack a plan and point out that the team looks dreadful and how horrific the Lee deal (in particular) looks because "Marson's a bum and Carrasco's a 4A pitcher", let's take a step back and realize that we're still not even a year removed from these deals.

If you want to complain about the organization, have at it…because there's plenty to complain about in terms of drafting their own players to complement the players they've been able to acquire via trades and the couple of trades (notably the Frank the Tank deal as Louie the Fifth should be joining Joe Smiff in AAA) that do look bad with a little more time to ruminate on them, not to mention misuse of talent that was on hand in 2007 or thereabouts.

However, with the events of the past week (the injuries, the horrific play on the field), everyone seems to think that it's time to blow it up and that the product on the field merits such a blow-up. However, the detonation already happened over the past two years and we're about to see whether some of the players that came over in those deals are able to play roles in what the Indians hope is the next incarnation of a contender, just as they did from 2002 to 2004, when the seeds were sewn for the (albeit brief) window of contention that followed.

We're back at Ground Zero (or still on our way down to it), a spot that every small-market team occupies from time to time, sometimes for a long time. The length of the stay at the bottom of the chasm is going to be determined by the performance of the players acquired over the last two years and whether they are able to mature and congeal as a team the way that the team did in 2004 and 2005. While those days may be some time off, let's realize that the Indians are back to the beginning stages of attempting to build this up from the ground up again.

Whether you want to look at it as the Indians sleeping in the bed that they've made for themselves or if you see it as the Indians proactively trying "manage the cycles" of contention and non-contention as aggressively as possible to shorten the timeframe between those cycles will likely bear itself out. The answers aren't going to come quickly or obviously, but what's being seen on the field these days is the result of the actions taken in the last two years, for better or worse.