On a day in which the Twins' "hungover" lineup (a day game after clinching the Central) can best the Indians…well, would you say "C" lineup for Chris Gimenez or "D" lineup for Drew Sutton, and just a few days removed from the whole "the Tribe just needs to win one more game to avoid 100 losses" thing, the Indians' season has officially bottomed out as even the most ardent fans are struggling to feign interest in playing out the string this year. Thus, while all of us would like to spend the day reveling in the triumphant return of "Fire Joe Morgan" to the Interwebs (for a day…and this is the funniest thing that you will read today), the sweep of the Indians at the hands of the Twins over the last couple of days has forced some serious reflection.

This is not "new" news, but the Twins captured their 6th AL Central crown in the past 9 years and while that was not an unexpected outcome in the Spring, how about the manner in which this 2010 Twins' team overcame a mountain of adversity to get to this point?

The day after they clinched the Central, Craig Calcaterra summed up that "mountain of adversity" thusly :

The Twins lost their All-Star closer to Tommy John surgery in March. They lost their MVP candidate first baseman to a concussion in July. Their reigning MVP catcher's OPS is down 150 points from a year ago. Going in and along the way there was much reason to doubt. In the end they become the first team to clinch.

Success was predicted for the Twins prior to the season, but if someone would have said that Nathan would have missed the year, Morneau would have been out since the All-Star Break and that Joe Mauer would have 9 HR with a week left in the season, where would you have placed the Twins' chances to contend, much less clinch, even in a weak AL Central?

This is not meant to heap praise on the Twins (as the assembled Cleveland announcers and press corps have done enough of that to make me want me stick my finger down my throat) nor is it meant to proclaim that the Twins have figured out how to compete in an unbalanced marketplace, considering that they've won a total of two playoff games in four trips since 2003. Rather, it's meant to put into perspective how the Twins have somehow persevered and succeeded, even with lofty expectations, when everything seemed to go against them, something that the Indians in recent memory (notably 2008) were unable to accomplish.

You remember that, right?

WAY back in 2008, when the popular WS Champion pick, YOUR Cleveland Indians were deep-sixed by injuries to Martinez and Hafner as Carmona completely fell apart and every single bullpen arm (notably Betancourt and Perez) worsened while CC counted the days until Free Agency.

Compare what the Twins are doing this season to what that 2008 Indians' team did…and don't you dare say that the Indians were "broken up" too soon that year because that notion is revisionist history at its very worst.

What is most intriguing about the Twins this year is how they got to this point and how, despite monumental mistakes in terms of player trades and letting players simply walk away, they have never failed at putting complementary pieces around their "core" group of players and the Twins just keep rolling on.

To look at the Twins' offense this year, figuring that Morneau has been out since July and Mauer has been significantly less effective, consider the OPS+ numbers for what you would have to consider the the complementary Twins offensive players:
Delmon Young – 116 OPS+
Michael Cuddyer – 102 OPS+
Jason Kubel – 102 OPS +
JJ Hardy – 93 OPS+
Orlando Hudson – 93 OPS+
Denard Span – 86 OPS+

Nothing too impressive there (though I know that I'm omitting Thome), but even Delmon Young, with his "breakout season", is sitting on that OPS+ of 116 after posting a cumulative OPS+ of 96 in his first two years as a Twin while the main player he was traded for (Matt Garza) has a 3.89 ERA (109 ERA+) in his first three years as a Ray. Even the auxiliary player dealt for Young (Jason Bartlett) had outperformed Young in his first two years (Bartlett's OPS+ for 2008 and 2009 was 109) as a Ray, so the Twins traded a front-to-middle-of-the-rotation starter and a serviceable middle infielder for a player whose "breakout" year involves 18 HR…and yet the Twins just keep rolling on.

Just to use the Young deal as an introduction here, it stands to reason that there is no "perfect" organization (and I'll have you notice here that the Rays are about to slash payroll significantly in 2011, regardless of what happens in the playoffs
), and the the Twins are by no means a "perfect" organization. To wit, the three players they acquired for Johan Santana (the winter before CC was dealt) that have played in MLB have all found their way out of Minnesota. Carlos Gomez was dealt to Milwaukee for JJ Hardy and Kevin Mulvey was the PTBNL last August when the Twins acquired Jon Rauch, meaning that the Twins have Hardy and Rauch to show for Santana not quite two years after making the deal. Beyond that, the team let Torii Hunter walk after the 2007 season, meaning that they had no return to show for him, outside of draft picks.

You wouldn't know that from where the Twins have finished in the standings however because (and I don't mean this to turn into a love-fest or admiration from afar of the Twins…I really

don't), but the Twins have soldiered on through the losses of Santana and Hunter (with little to nothing to show for them), the injury and long road back for Liriano and just this year have made it through Nathan's injury, Morneau being gone for the last two months and the player that they just signed to an 8-year, $184M deal falling back to his career numbers after what could have possibly been an all-too-perfectly time career year.

As a quick aside on that "player that they just signed to an 8-year, $184M deal", check this:
Mauer's first 4 full years
.318 BA / .408 OBP / .451 SLG / .852 OPS with an average of 12 HR per 162 games

Mauer 2009
.365 BA / .444 OBP / .587 SLG / 1.031 OPS with 28 HR in 138 games

Mauer 2010
.331 BA / .407 OBP / .473 SLG / .880 OPS with 9 HR in 133 games

That's not to discount Mauer as a player or his value behind the plate, but he is now 27 years old with his recent deal keeping him under contract for $23M per year through the 2018 season, at which point he will be 35 years old. While I'll stop short of intimating any kind of Pronkian future (as we are talking about the Twins, who simply overcome adversity and the Indians, who are overcome by adversity)...they, um, they might that want that one back eventually.

But I digress and to get back to the matter at hand, the manner in which the Twins have been constructed is to rely on their middle-of-the-order presences (Mauer and Morneau) and generally complementary pieces around them to pester the opposition into defeat while generally average starting pitchers give way to a consistently outstanding lockdown bullpen, which has always been anchored by Nathan.

All of which makes this year so intriguing as the Twins have won without Mauer at full strength and simply without Nathan and Morneau for half the season. While it is true that Liriano has finally re-emerged as the pitcher that everyone was hoping that he would one day be once more, that maturation is not all that different from the roller coaster ride that has been the renaissance of Fausto Carmona. Liriano has unquestionably been much better than Carmona, but the rotation past him is a reclamation project that the Tribe pulled off the trash heap last year and a pitcher in Brian Duensing who started the year in the bullpen. Just as amazing is the fact that the bullpen consists of six (SIX!) relievers that have appeared in 40 or more games, all of whom have an ERA+ of 124 or better. Throw in the fact that a seventh (Matt Capps) was acquired mid-season and has posted a 193 ERA+ in 24 games and it becomes amazing as to how the Twins find these guys to plug in and…say it with me, just keep rolling on.

Going further, the amazing aspect of the Twins' success this year is where those "guys" are coming from and where that production is coming from, and (just to keep this in the proper context and mildly related to the Indians) here are the Twins' players listed by WAR (Wins Above Replacement), listing only those who have compiled a WAR above 1.5, and how each

player was acquired by Minnesota:

Twins 2010

Mauer: 5.3 – Amateur Draft
Pavano: 4.8 – Free Agency
Liriano: 4.8 – Trade
Morneau: 4.0 – Amateur Draft
Duensing: 3.8 – Amateur Draft
Thome: 3.0 – Free Agency
Slowey: 2.1 – Amateur Draft
Baker: 2.1 – Amateur Draft
Valencia: 2.0 – Amateur Draft
Crain: 1.6 – Amateur Draft
Hudson: 1.5 – Free Agency

Notice a trend there, even among those "complementary pieces" that fill out the rotation and the bullpen?
You'll notice that Cuddyer, Kubel, and Span (all also acquired the Amateur Draft) are not listed because…well, because they're not having good years and if you're wondering how much those three FA cost the Twins this year, that number is $13.5M, with all three players working on one-year deals and with Pavano earning the lion's share of that money with his $7M salary.

For some (sickening) perspective, here are the Indians' players listed by WAR (Wins Above Replacement), again listing only those who have compiled a WAR above 1.5, and how each player was acquired by Cleveland:

Indians 2010

Choo: 6.4 – Trade
C. Perez: 2.6 - Trade
Santana: 2.2 – Trade
Carmona: 2.1 – Amateur Free Agency
Hafner: 2.0 – Trade
Peralta: 1.9 – Amateur Draft
Branyan: 1.6 – Free Agency

Outside of the alarming notion that there are only 7 players on this list (compared to 11 for the Twins), only 4 of the Tribe contributors are currently playing for the Tribe…but, really that's an ancillary point. The main point lies in the idea that the Twins have somehow mastered the art of finding and developing complementary pieces that do their job and the players that they develop are kept around while they are useful (and if you've never noticed, the bullpen just plugs in new pieces and parts with somebody making an incredibly fortuitous decision as to when to hold onto a particular player or let one go), they are also cheap and under club control because they've been drafted and developed by the club.

Perhaps if the Indians of the past few years had those complementary pieces to plug in, the lifeline of the Tribe may have taken a different path, but that's a topic that's been beaten to death, exhumed, and given the ol' "once over" again…

Maybe Gardenhire does have something to do with all of this (and Posnanski never hesitates to posit that opinion), but what the Twins have done is not live from one "window of contention" to the next as most other small-market teams have done. They've drafted well, were the beneficiaries of incredibly fortune to draft Joe Mauer with the #1 overall pick, and added pieces and parts to what looks to be a machine capable of finding spare parts to replace what looked to be irreplaceable parts.

Whether any of the good fortune and amazing perseverance that the Twins have shown this year will translate to the playoffs (and it should be pointed out that the Twins are 46-20 against the AL Central and 38-30 against the rest of the AL this year and were 46-27 against the AL Central and 29-43 against the rest of the AL last year) remains to be seen as the Twins represent the small-market model by which a team strives to contend year with the idea that "anything can happen in the playoffs" not quite bearing fruit for them.

Meanwhile in Cleveland, the strategy seems to fall more in line with the idea to load it all up for one run, with the notion that the team will be built to succeed not only in the regular season, but to line up with the superpowers of the AL and stare them in the eye.

Ultimately, the Indians have won more playoff series (one) than the Twins in the past eight years, despite making it to the playoffs only once to the Twins' four trips, with Minnesota's fifth trip coming the next few weeks. While neither teams' "strategy" has resulted in the achievement of the ultimate goal, watching the Indians and Twins (the teams, not the strategies) face off on the field this week, there should be no question as to which most fans would prefer.