Just one thing has been consistent during the four year reign of Eric Wedge and Mark Shapiro argues Erik Cassano. And that is the teams inability to win games when the pressure is on them. The team has gotten off to four consecutive slow starts, then rebounded to play better ball when the pressure was off in each season. Papa Cass argues that this is a dangerous trend, and an indictment on manager Eric Wedge.

Visit the Papa Cass weblog at http://papacass.blogspot.com/

The Indians, it appears, are back in their comfort zone.

The expectations of winning are off somewhere over the horizon yet again, and guess what? They're playing better.

From a low-water mark of 48-64 on Aug. 9, the Indians have gone 14-5 in their last 19 games to improve to 62-69. Without warning, the spiceless jambalaya that was the bullpen has suddenly found some semblance of stability behind the arms of Fernando Cabrera and Tom Mastny.

Mastny has come out of nowhere to become a certifiable flame-douser at the back of the bullpen. After a nonstop string of shaky work when the season still had a heartbeat, Cabrera has suddenly sprung to life as an all-but-unhittable strikeout maestro with the season reduced to extended spring training.

With Cabrera, with the entire roster and coaching staff, the mantra from the fans is the same:

"Where was this when the games mattered?"

To me, it perpetuates the idea that the Indians are breeding a culture more concerned with computation than competition. When winning is an abstract concept, when problems can be solved with hypotheses and players can be quantified with software, this organization seems to operate at its best.

When the focus shifts from the hope of the future to the demands of the present, then there are problems.

Under the Eric Wedge-Mark Shapiro tag team, the Indians have gotten off to four consecutive

slow starts. The first year, 2003, was a bottom-out year. In 2004, the Indians rebounded from their slow start to put a scare into the Twins before falling to a final record of 80-82. Last year was supposed to be the corner-turning year. After a slow start, the Indians kicked into high gear, won 93 games and came within a whisker of the playoffs.

Then came this past offseason, when the glow of the spotlight intensified and the expectation of winning shifted to "now." Shapiro, Wedge and owners Larry and Paul Dolan stared at the spotlight and were promptly blinded. The smart, tactical moves of previous offseasons were replaced by free-agent bungling and a trade of Coco Crisp that might have yielded a top prospect in Andy Marte, but destroyed the bullpen and put the 2006 season at risk in the process.

The head-scratching moves continued into spring training and the regular season. Brandon Phillips outplayed Ramon Vazquez, yet Vazquez made the final roster and Phillips was shipped off to Cincinnati for virtually nothing. Now, neither player is with the team.

It took nearly three months to deem the Jason Johnson experiment a failure, even with Jeremy Sowers more than ready at Class AAA Buffalo. Sowers has consistently impressed since being recalled, while Johnson is performing his same old loser routine with the Red Sox.

Fausto Carmona was pressed into service as a setup man and performed admirably. But then, Indians management jumped the gun big time by thrusting him into the closer's role, which he had never been asked to fill on any professional level. They went so far as to dump Bob Wickman for a Braves Class A prospect just to free up the role for Carmona.

Four blown saves later, the experiment was over, Carmona's confidence was shattered, and he was on the fast track back to Buffalo. He will finish the season as a starter.

Around the time that the Carmona experiment was breathing its last, the Indians apparently decided to stop consternating over their lost season and just start playing ball again. As the calendar has moved through August, the entire organization appears to have relaxed and re-focused on the basic goal of making the best out of a bad situation.

That's fine, considering what the season has become. But what about the factors that led to this unsalvageable year? One year, even two years, of slow starts and late collapses can be chalked up to the bumps in the rebuilding process. But three and four years? That's a trend, and it's becoming an alarming one.

For three straight years, the Indians have gotten off to a slow start and rebounded at some point during the year. In 2004 and '05, they faded at season's end. This year, what they do in September is a moot point with regard to the standings.

I'd hate to think that the Indians, populated by organizational whiz kids in key upper management positions, are great at re-stocking a farm system and giving us a cache of talented prospects to fawn over, but totally inept when it comes time to win with those prospects. But the proof, so far, is in the pudding.

On the field and off the field, whenever the Indians are expected to win, they choke in some form. Whether it's bad roster moves, fielding blunders, miscalculations or failure to spend money effectively, the Indians -- a trim, well-run organization by most standards -- turn into the bumbling, bungling Browns of the Butch Davis era when they are asked to make the moves to win now.

If it's a case of serial stage fright, the Indians' brass had better figure out how to get over it, or get some decision-makers in here who don't sweat under the spotlight.

The Indians only have so many seasons to waste before players like Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez and C.C. Sabathia are free to leave.