With team payrolls ranking 26th and 30th respectively, the Indians (11-4) and Royals (10-5) will meet this week for a series that's abruptly evolved from a meaningless cellar scrum to a small market survival guide. Together, the two clubs have already frightened and confused national prognosticators by transforming the once stable AL Central Division into a "topsy-turvy, bizarroland of insanity," or something along those lines. And while the food chain may realign itself in due time, KC and Cleveland have already succeeded in one critical respect. They've injected some optimism back into two beleaguered fan bases. Question is, how'd they get here?

First things first. I refuse to use the phrase, "it's still early, but…" except in cases where I'm referring to my refusal to use the phrase. Of course it's early. Of course it's possible-- if not highly likely-- that neither the Indians nor the Royals will be within sniffing distance of first place come June. For the time being, however, let's consider this week's four-game series at Kauffman Stadium as a fascinating examination of two franchises with recent histories more akin to building contractors than baseball teams. Since the year 2000, Kansas City and Cleveland have a combined 5 winning seasons and 2 playoff appearances (the Indians in 2001 and 2007). The Royals haven't played a postseason game since they won the World Series in 1985. In recent years, the clubs have rebuilt, demolished, and rebuilt again—developing and dealing three Cy Young winners (C.C. Sabathia, Cliff Lee, and Zach Greinke) and a number of all-stars (Johnny Damon, Carlos Beltran, Victor Martinez, etc. etc.).

Back in 2003, Tony Pena's Royals got out of the gate in April at 12-3 after 15 games. A year earlier, Charlie Manuel's Tribe started 11-4. Both teams wound up finishing in third place in the Central (KC at 83-79, Cleveland at 74-88). So, yes, April can be a deceitful little bastard of a month. But it ain't always smoke and mirrors. The Indians were introducing a new core of young players that would eventually carry the team back into contention from 2005 to 2007. The Royals, meanwhile, were enjoying their last desperate drive before an inevitable free agent freefall (Beltran and several other key players were gone by 2004). By the time 2008 rolled

around, both clubs were back at square one yet again, forced to rely on savvy drafting and multiple rolls of the dice to counteract the rapidly accelerating gap between the game's haves and have-nots.

Which brings us up to the present, with the latest rebuilding efforts of Royals GM Dayton Moore and Tribe GMs Mark Shapiro / Chris Antonetti starting to take on the appearance of actual, inhabitable structures—as opposed to straw shacks. To arrive at the same point, however, the two clubs did not follow quite the same blueprint. Yes, Cy Young pitchers were dealt, bundles of prospects were brought in, and veteran, bargain free agents were signed. But when it comes to how the two teams built their current core of "keepers" (to borrow a roto term), the differences are clear. Here's a hint: It's the draft, stupid.

Impressively, **Kansas City has FOUR of its own recent first round picks currently playing major roles on the 2011 squad** : Billy Butler (2004), Alex Gordon (2005), Luke Hochevar (2006), and Aaron Crow (2009). When you consider that their #1 picks from 2007 (Mike Moustakas) and 2008 (Eric Hosmer) are also among the top 10 rated prospects by Baseball America in 2011, the Royals draft success looks all the more remarkable.

By contrast, the Indians have precisely ZERO of their past #1 draft picks on the active roster. In fact, **among Cleveland's position players (starters and reserves), not a single man was actually drafted by the Tribe-- in any round** . As for the pitching staff, Fausto Carmona and Rafael Perez were both amateur free agent signings, leaving only Josh Tomlin (selected in Round 19 in 2006), Tony Sipp (Round 45, 2004) and My Cousin Vinnie Pestano (Round 20, 2006) as original Cleveland draft selections currently on the squad. Every one else on this year's club was brought in via trade or free agency. And while names like Lonnie Chisenhall and Drew Pomeranz may soon turn the tide for the Tribe's first round draft debacles, the names of Beau Mills (2007), Trevor Crowe (2005), Jeremy Sowers (2004), Michael Aubrey (2003), Brad Snyder (2003), and Dan Denham (2001) paint a mighty illuminating picture as to why this franchise hasn't been able to sustain any prolonged runs in the 21st century.

For a bit more clarity (or to muddy up the waters, depending on your perspective), here's a position-by-position breakdown of how the Indians and Royals gradually constructed their primary rosters for the 2011 season.

Indians vs Royals: Position By Position Acquisition Comparison

Catcher

Carlos Santana (age: 25) vs **Jason Kendall** (36)

Salary
$416,600 vs $3,750,000

Acquired
Casey Blake Trade, 2008 //// Free Agent, 2009

First Base

Matt LaPorta (26) vs. **Kila Ka'aihue** (27)
Acquired Trade, 2008 ///// Round 15, 2002 Draft

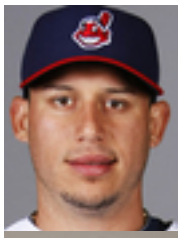
Second Base

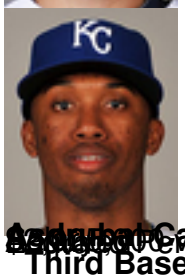
Orlando Cabrera (36) vs. **Chris Getz** (27)

Salary
$1,000,000 vs. $443,000

Acquired
Free Agent, 2011 ////// Mark Teahen Trade, 2009

Shortstop





Asdrubal Cabrera (25) vs. **Alcides Escobar** (24)
Sandy Crezo Trade, 2006 ///// Zack Greinke Trade, 2010

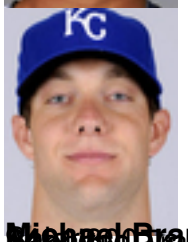
Third Base

Jason Donald (26) vs. **Mike Aviles** (30)

Salary
$423,200 vs. $640,000

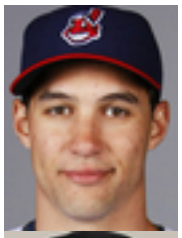
Acquired
Cliff Lee Trade, 2009 //////// Round 7, 2003 Draft

Left Field



Michael Brantley (24) vs. **Alex Gordon** (27)
Bartolo Trade, 2008 ////// Round 1, 2005 Draft

Center Field



Grady Sizemore (28) vs. **Melky Cabrera** (26)

Salary
$7,666,666 vs. $1,250,000

Acquired
Bart Colon Trade, 2002 ////// Free Agent, 2010

Right Field

Shin-Soo Choo (28) vs. **Jeff Francoeur** (27)
Einar Diaz/Ryan Drese Trade, 2006 ///// Free Agent, 2010
Designated Hitter

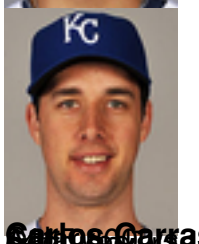
Travis Hafner (34) vs. **Billy Butler** (24)

Salary
$13,000,000 vs. $3,500,000

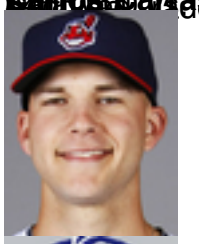
Acquired
Einar Diaz/Ryan Drese Trade, 2002 /////// Round 1, 2004 Draft

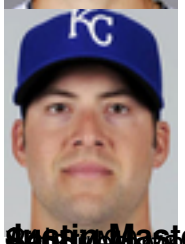
Starting Pitchers

Fausto Carmona (27) vs. **Luke Hochevar** (27)



Carlos Carrasco (24) vs. **Jeff Francis** (30)





Justin Masterson (26) vs. **Kyle Davies** (27)

Josh Tomlin (26) vs. **Bruce Chen** (33)
Acquired Mark DeRosa Trade, 2009 ////// Free Agent, 2009

Mitch Talbot (27) vs. **Sean O'Sullivan** (23)
Acquired Mark DeRosa Trade, 2009 ////// Alberto Callaspo Trade, 2010

Bullpen

Chris Perez (25) vs. Joakim Soria (26)

Salary
$2,225,000 vs. $4,000,000

Acquired
Mark DeRosa Trade, 2009 /////// Rule 5 Draft, 2006

Tony Sipp (27) vs. Aaron Crow (24)

Salary
$436,800 vs. $1,400,000

Acquired
Round 45, 2004 Draft //////// Round 1, 2009 Draft

Rafael Perez (28) vs. Jeremy Jeffress (23)

Salary
$1,330,000 vs. $414,500

Acquired
Amateur FA, 2002 /////// Zack Greinke Trade, 2010

Average Player Salary (from USA Today)

Indians: $1,640,000 ////// Royals: $1,338,000

Median

Indians: $484,200 /////// Royals: $850,000

Average Age of Players Above

Indians: 27.2 ////// Royals: 27.1

Players (from above) Acquired Via Amateur Signing or Draft:

Indians: 4 /////// Royals: 6

Players (from above) Acquired Via Trade

Indians: 12 /////// Royals: 5

Players (at all levels) Currently Ranked in Baseball America's Top 100 Prospects

Indians: 4 /////// Royals: 9

Central Division: Homegrown Players as Current Core Contributors

Minnesota Twins: 10 (Mauer, Morneau, Valencia, Span, Kubel, Cuddyer, Duensing, Baker, Blackburn, Perkins)
Detroit Tigers: 7 (Avila, Rhymes, Inge, Raburn, Boesch, Verlander, Porcello)
Kansas City Royals: 6 (Butler, Gordon, Hochevar, Crow, Aviles, Ka'aihue)
Chicago White Sox: 5 (Beckham, A. Ramirez, Morel, Buerhle, Sale)
Cleveland Indians: 4 (Carmona, Tomlin, R. Perez, Sipp)

So, are we looking at two paths to the same destination (a pennant race)? Or are these two teams still a couple years away from seeing their efforts truly pay off? Is the Royals' fantastic draft success finally going to lift them back to their Brett-era glory? Did Shapiro and Co. manage to clean up the mess of their draft failures by trading away the old core for a new one? Well, it's still early, but…