If the Cleveland Indians are guilty of anything this season, it's mismanaging expectations and nothing more.A fast start out of the gate, something the fans aren't particularly used to, fueled an optimism that the underlying talent ultimately just can't fulfill.

Making it all the more frustrating is the fact that the fast start was in large part due to ank incredible streak of timely hitting. Now that it has ended and the players have mostly regressed to their norms, many fans are apoplectic.

It didn't need to be this way.

Had those norms taken hold as they should have earlier on, the Indians would probably be sitting in about the position most had staked out for them before the season began. In that context, the recent call up of Lonnie Chisenhall, for example, would look a whole lot less desperate. But the Indians did get off to that fast start, fans got to thinking that this could be the year and Tribe management was left with the rather vexing conundrum of how to make it look like the team is trying to win it all while knowing that there aren't nearly enough horses to make a legitimate run.

So what did they do? Of course, they fired the hitting coach. There's precedent for that move. Almost 6 years to the day from when current manager Manny Acta sacrificed Jon Nunnally to the god of swings and misses, his predecessor Eric Wedge did likewise to Eddie Murray. This isn't to make the case for Nunnally one way or the other so much as it is to underscore that Nunnally was sacrificed on the altar of unreasonable expectations. But that's just the kind of

move teams like the Indians tend to make to placate the fans.

In truth this year's team is hitting remarkably similar to last year's squad. It's a little ahead of last year's pace in terms of runs scored, but the batting averages, on base percentage, slugging percentage and OPS are virtually identical. And why not? It's pretty much the same team or at least the same type of team. Travis Hafner is hitting this year while Shin-Shoo Choo, now on the disabled list, is not. Grady Sizemore was on the DL last year but his contributions this year, particularly lately, have been minimal. And then there's Austin Kearns, taking up space once again but at least doing so on the cheap.

Maybe that actually makes the case for dumping Nunnally because the Indians were a lousy hitting team last year. But at the very least it makes the case that from a hitting standpoint the Indians weren't ready to compete this year at a playoff level. The only reason anyone thought otherwise was skewed expectations and nothing more. But just as water finds its level so too do major league baseball teams. The Indians are no exception and this perhaps is what fans need to remember most. The grind of a 162 game schedule allows for several peaks and valleys but ultimately it provides sufficient time for a team to reveal its true self.

Where it would really pay for the Indians to better manage fan expectations is in better explaining that while this team isn't playoff ready it isn't a miserable mess either. Indeed there are some building blocks exactly in the place they need to be, on the pitching staff.

There have been a few hiccups lately but the bullpen has been more than just a pleasant surprise. Chris Perez is having an all star season. Tony Sipp has been excellent as have Rafael Perez, Vinnie Pestano and even Joe Smith. Any team with a bullpen that is pitching like the Indians' bullpen is going to be competitive. The starting rotation has three very solid pitchers at the moment in Justin Masterson, Josh Tomlin and Carlos Carrasco. Fausto Carmona has a wicked good arm and a wicked awful mental approach. He doesn't need a new team to get straightened out, just a mentor and more nurturing.

You don't need tape of the late Pete Franklin screaming in your ear to know that the only real way to build a team is through pitching. Once that's in place then you get more of it. And once you have more of it you get even more of it. The game of baseball has changed a million ways in the last 100 years but the one thing that hasn't changed is that the teams with the best pitching usually prevail.

Assuming Indians general manager Chris Antonetti understands this point, and he certainly seems to, it could hardly be argued that he doesn't have the team pointed in the right direction. But pointing in the right direction and actually arriving at the destination are hardly the same thing. There's a pretty bumpy road in between and that's what the team is really experiencing at the moment. The fast start made it seem like the Indians long strange trip to respectability had maybe arrived at the outskirts of their playoffs destination when in reality all that happened is that the team bus hit a particularly smooth stretch of highway where they could hit the accelerator without worrying about any speed traps.

But then people started to notice and not surprisingly it's gotten tougher, much tougher. As a result fans are coming to the rather halting conclusion now that was staring them in the face all along--not this year folks, and it's making them a little angrier than they probably should be.

Fortunately, this is Cleveland where don't stay mad at our teams, only certain players and owners. The resignation that comes when the expectations get rightly downsized has creeped in as evidenced by the ever increasing refrain, spoken seemingly every year, to "just let the kids play." What many fans didn't realize is that's what the team had be mostly doing all along.