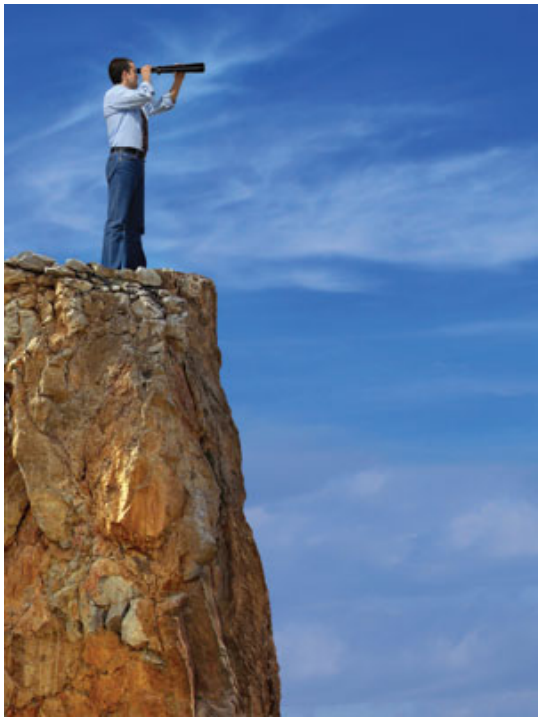

The more I see out of the Indians the more I see in terms of what this team could be next season and beyond. And the more I watch the team play the clearer it becomes that the Ubaldo Jimenez trade was not made for this season, though the Tribe may benefit from it through the end of the year if they get lucky and/or they get hot.

I know the Tribe lost a few heartbreakers on this trip through Boston and Texas but this trip actually improved my outlook on the Indians' future. They played the upper class of baseball dead even and probably could have/should have come back home with five wins in the bag. But young teams lose games like the Indians lost them in Boston and Texas. Those victories go to the teams with experience who know how to win them and don' just hope they can win them.

And the way you figure that out and become that team that ultimately wins close games (especially on the road) is to play in them, lose many of them and learn from them.

That's what this core of Tribe players is doing together right now and though the close losses are heart breaking when you're within reach of a division title, those losses aren't empty calories. Those losses aren't the losses of a 60-win ballclub. No, this group of Indians is benefitting from going through this crucible. Pressure bursts pipes and the Indians have had theirs popped a few times in the past six weeks or so but they have shown themselves to be, if nothing else, willing to get up off the canvas every time they get knocked down.

That's a trait or a characteristic of a young, talented team that's had their manager beating that philosophy into their heads for 5 months. It's not only a characteristic that will serve them well next season but it's also the main reason the Indians still have a chance to compete *this season* .

The odds are stacked against them in a big way in what remains of 2011 though. They are young at key positions with 80% of their infield (including catcher Carlos Santana) not having 100 major league starts at the spots they walk to at the beginning of each game.

They're also horrible defensively on the infield. For all that Asdrubal Cabrera has accomplished this season on both sides of the ball he's already set a career high in errors in just 110 games this season. And he's the best defender on the current infield.

There are times I'm convinced that Santana believes defense is only the time between at bats. He at times is the laziest catcher I've ever seen in terms of blocking balls in the dirt and making an effort to get his body in front of the baseball. I'd say the Indians have lost at least five games this season due to their poor defense and that figure may be higher.

That's kind of important to consider when you're currently four games back of the division-leading Tigers.

They're also dealing with a closer who has not been at all dominant this season . Chris Perez has had his moments and his weeks of dominance but for the most part this season his numbers are down. His ERA is much higher than last season, his WHIP is way up, his walks are up, his strikeouts are down and he's giving up the most hits per nine innings of his career.

Perez's save percentage still sits higher than Marian Rivera's and that's all that counts at the end of the day. But there aren't any Tribe fans out there who want to walk down the Joe Borowski save path again and while Perez hasn't been that…umm…interesting, he has been walking a tightrope lately and he's fallen more than a few times. When Perez falls off that rope the Tribe crashes with him. It could be that it's his turn to make some adjustments out there on the mound or it could be just a run of rotten luck. But if the Tribe is to challenge through

September they can't afford to cough up leads late.

Giving Perez the benefit of the doubt, it shold be noted that his save opportunities have been sporadic over the past three weeks which makes him getting into any rhythm very difficult.

The other big issue standing in the way of the Indians this season became clear Friday night when Jimenez made his first start. This team simply has very little familiarity with each other. Jimenez working with Santana brought that home but it really applies all over the diamond. At the major league level Jason Kipnis and Cabrera have almost no familiarity with each other. The same is true of Lonnie Chisenhall and Cabrera, Kosuke Fukodome and Zeke Carrera as well as with Carrera and Michael Brantley.

These guys don't know each other. They don't have 20 games much less 200 games of knowing where Kipnis likes the ball on the double play pivot, whether Chisenhall is more comfortable going to his glove side or his backhand, what pitch of the five he throws that Jimenez wants to throw in a 1-2 count to a power hitting left handed hitter and so on and so on.

It truly hit me Friday that the remainder of this season is a crash course in getting that kind of clutter out of the way and clearing the decks for an extended run next season. The Indians need to play and grow together over the next 50 games. The fact they get to do that in a pennant race is even better because those higher stakes will reveal more about these guys than just running out the string from July on.

Don't get me wrong, the Tigers are NOT unbeatable. They can blink for sure. They have a couple veterans who provide a lot of leadership but that team can get loose in the turns occasionally as well. They have guys in that lineup who have struggled and they have less depth in the pen and down their rotation than the Indians do. That's a veteran team that will sink or swim because they're a veteran team. If things go well they'll win the division. But if things get sideways that can split a club like Detroit who might begin to press when being hunted down by an underdog like the Indians.

The Tigers won't fracture and crack like the White Sox because guys like Victor Martinez and Brandon Inge won't allow it and because Jim Leyland is simply not an incendiary idiot like Ozzie Guillen. But the Tigers could get out of whack for a week or ten days and that's all it may take

to lose their lead and increase the pressure on them to knock off an upstart bunch like the Tribe.

The Indians have to stay close enough to make that happen and to keep the pressure turned up on Detroit. The teams still face each other 12 more times this season starting Tuesday night at Progressive Field. Who would have thought a critical series for the Indians would be played in the middle of August this season?

And the best part about it is the Indians win no matter how it turns out. It just may not be a victory until next season when it manifests itself as invaluable experience but I'm already excited for the 2012 potential.

Conditioning Drill

I'm not talking about training camp or players preparing for a 16-game NFL season. I'm talking about Mike Holmgren and Tom Heckert conditioning us fans that this is another year without any thoughts of truly competing for a division title or at the very least a playoff spot.

I've been around this block a number of times. I understand what needs to be done and that there's a plan in place to do it. I see the decks being cleared of the older, more expensive players and I see young, mean, hungry and nasty guys taking their places.

I understand that and I'm glad there's a regime in place with one voice and one methodology for building what they think will be a first class organization. I'm on board.

But the message they sent in the free agency period that ended without the Browns making a ripple much less a splash should be loud and clear: this year is clearly a rebuilding year.

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