

Aeros capture Eastern League title Barnes, Santana end Akron's Championship Series jinx

By John Torenli / Special to MLB.com

Scott Barnes gave his former organization a good look at what it traded away two months ago and helped the Akron Aeros end their recent run of futility in the Eastern League Finals.

The 22-year-old left-hander struck out seven over five innings and league MVP Carlos Santana homered and drove in three runs Saturday as the Aeros claimed their second championship in five years with a 10-6 victory over the Connecticut Defenders.

Barnes (1-0), traded to the Indians organization in the deadline deal that sent power-hitting first baseman Ryan Garko to San Francisco, went 2-2 with a 5.68 ERA in six regular-season starts for Akron before making his playoff debut in Game 4 before a crowd of 3,275 at Canal Park.

"I tried to treat it like a it wasn't a really big game, which it was," Barnes admitted. "I didn't really feel any pressure because I'm really confident with the guys behind me."

The 6-foot-4, 185-pound southpaw, touted as one of the Giants' top Minor League hurlers, allowed two unearned runs on two hits and three walks before turning the game over to the Aeros' bullpen.

"I thought he really stepped up for us tonight," said Akron manager Mike Sarbaugh. "He really pounded the strike zone and established his off-speed pitches. He gave us five solid innings and was a big reason why we won this thing."

Carlton Smith followed with two one-hit frames before surrendering two unearned runs on three hits while retiring the first two batters in the eighth.

Zach Putnam finished off the frame before Josh Judy gave up two runs on three hits in the ninth, striking out Eddy Martinez-Esteve for the final out to help Akron shake off three straight Finals losses and grab its first crown since 2005.

Sarbaugh, in his second year as Aeros manager, secured his third title in the Indians system. The 42-year-old also guided short-season Mahoning Valley (2004) and Class A Advanced Kinston (2006) to championships.

"You know, [the championships are] all special, especially with the team that's been here all year long," Sarbaugh said. "It's a pleasure to manage them. Whenever we brought a new guy in, they bought into it."

"I think it's all about the players. The Indians have done a great job with their scouting department and the players they bring in. I've been fortunate."

Santana, who went 3-for-12 with a solo shot in Akron's three-game sweep of Reading in the semifinals, collected three hits, including a homer, and three RBIs in the Championship Series before breaking out in the clincher.

The 23-year-old catcher walked in the opening frame, singled and scored on Beau Mills' double in the third, walked again during the Aeros' five-run fourth and belted a two-run blast in the fifth to stretch the lead to 9-2.

"He's just a big presence in our lineup," Sarbaugh said of Santana, who hit .290 with 23 homers and 97 RBIs in 130 games during the regular season.

"His strike-zone discipline is off the charts. That two-run homer really helped push the lead for us. He's a really special player."

John Drennen also homered and drove in two runs, while Mills and Jose Constanza added two RBIs apiece as Akron pounded out 15 hits to overcome three errors.

Mike McBride ripped a two-run double in the ninth and Bobby Felmy and Brad Boyer each had two hits and an RBI for the Defenders, who knocked off New Britain in four games in the semifinals before falling short of their first EL title.

Connecticut starter Ari Ronick (1-1) gave up five runs -- four earned -- on six hits and three walks with two strikeouts in three-plus innings.

Short day for Sowers, long one for Tribe Bullpen a small silver lining as lefty struggles against A's

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- There's only so much Eric Wedge can say these days when it comes to his team's ever-increasing growing pains.

The seventh-year manager, whose job may be on the line following the season, continually attributes young at-bats, along with a few mental mistakes, to the club's limping race toward the finish line.

But in Saturday's 8-4 loss to the A's -- the Tribe's season-high seventh straight defeat -- Wedge really had no reason to point any fingers at his large group of rookies.

After all, it's hard for said rookies to do much of anything when they're already six runs behind after just two frames.

With Cleveland starter Jeremy Sowers surrendering that many runs in one-plus innings, that's exactly the situation the Indians were forced to overcome.

Not exactly the easiest of challenges for an already struggling offense, which entered the game having scored just 13 runs on 42 hits while striking out 50 times in its previous five games.

But the Tribe was left with no other choice but to try after Sowers allowed four runs in the first -- equaling the total he surrendered in his past three starts -- and giving up two more with no out in the second. He threw 45 pitches in that span.

"He just didn't have it today," Wedge said. "He didn't have much on his fastball, didn't have the command like he's had. He was up a little bit, didn't have that late life, that action over the plate like we've seen from him recently."

Following a strikeout to Rajai Davis to lead off the game, the left-handed Sowers gave up six consecutive hits, including a solo shot off the bat of Mark Ellis that gave the A's veteran his 77th career home run, passing fellow Rapid City, S.D., native Dick Green for the A's franchise lead in homers by a second baseman.

"Ellis, when he started it with that homer, he kind of got everyone pumped up," Oakland's Kurt Suzuki said. "His hit was huge."

Offered Sowers, who moved to 6-10 on the year: "I left it up, and he hit it out. Those solo home runs, it's no big deal because you don't start rallies off solo home runs. They just kept getting guys on base.

"Unfortunately what could go wrong, went wrong. It can get you frustrated. When it comes down to it, it's just a matter of being up in the zone or behind in the count. There's really no other way to explain that outing."

Sowers proceeded to load the bases in the second before giving way to reliever Tomo Ohka, who pitched the next four innings and gave up two runs on four hits in the process.

Every member of Oakland's starting lineup tallied a hit, while six enjoyed multi-hit games for a total of 18 on the afternoon. The same could not be said of the visiting dugout.

The Tribe did, however, manage nine hits off six Oakland pitchers after collecting just 12 in the first two matchups of the four-game set. Furthermore, the club pushed A's starter Gio Gonzalez out of the game after the southpaw allowed three runs -- one earned -- on 83 pitches through 3 2/3 innings.

"He has a great arm," Wedge said. "I felt like his breaking ball was real good. We made him work a little bit, and that did help us."

A fourth-inning error by third baseman Bobby Crosby on a ball hit by Kelly Shoppach offered a welcoming two-run gift to Cleveland, which then got an RBI groundout from Trevor Crowe to make it 7-3.

After Ohka allowed a fourth-inning home run to Suzuki -- who needed just a triple by day's end to complete the cycle -- and an RBI single to Cliff Pennington in the fifth, the A's bats cooled off while the Indians snagged one final run in the eighth thanks to an RBI single from Jamey Carroll.

Jensen Lewis, Rafael Perez and Kerry Wood combined for three innings of shutout ball to limit the already large dose of damage dealt from a hot-hitting A's club, winner of 11 of its past 13. Meanwhile, Brad Kilby notched his first Major League victory for the A's after relieving Gonzalez.

"I thought Ohka came in and did a good job," Wedge said. "I thought everyone did a good job. It was good to get Kerry out there after he hadn't been there in five days.

"We fought back. I thought we gave ourselves a little bit more of a chance offensively today. It's not enough, but it's a step by these young kids."

That's all Wedge can ask for from a team that owns baseball's worst record for the month of September, a time when he's been faced with the same questions following each defeat about managing such an inexperienced group of players.

"You take the good and learn from the bad, and you try to press forward," Wedge offered. "We still have a couple weeks left, and we need to make sure we keep fighting through to put ourselves in a better position to win ballgames."

Sowers, however, knows that can't happen without strong performances on the mound.

"Our team is struggling a little bit right now," he said. "And obviously the starting pitcher, with the exception of if we score a bunch of runs in the top of the first inning, has to set the stage.

"Today was just really bad on my part not giving us a chance out of the gate to stay in the game."

Wedge looking for Carmona to bounce back Oakland (70-78) vs. Cleveland (61-87), 1:05 p.m. PT

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Faith is one of the only things keeping Fausto Carmona on the mound every five or six days.

After all, his numbers sure aren't the reason manager Eric Wedge continues to put him out there.

The 25-year-old right-hander, called up July 31 after spending nearly two months in the Minors trying to repair his delivery, is 3-11 with a 6.58 ERA.

"We've got to ride this through," Wedge said. "It's frustrating. It's tough. You just hope he finds that zone where he can be consistent. That he can latch onto it and be able to reach for it when he needs it."

The only thing consistent about Carmona right now is his trend of giving up too many runs in too few innings. In his past three starts, he has surrendered 13 runs on 19 hits and nine walks through just 12 1/3 innings.

The young pitcher is 1-5 in nine starts since his midseason promotion but has yet to regain the formula he possessed in his 19-win season of 2007. Still, Wedge said there's been no discussion about pulling him out of the rotation for the last 14 games of the season.

"I'm never going to be frustrated," Carmona said following his most recent start -- a loss Tuesday against the Twins. "I'm giving my best. I know I'm a winner. Things aren't going well now, but I'm never going to put my head down.

"Whatever happens, I'm going to continue to go forward."

Carmona will receive another chance on Sunday as he makes his 21st start of the season and the Tribe completes a four-game set in Oakland.

Said Wedge: "We're going to keep running him out there."

Pitching matchup

CLE: RHP Fausto Carmona (3-11, 6.58 ERA)

Carmona got through the first inning against the Twins on Sept. 15, so that was progress over his two-thirds of an inning clunker against the Rangers in his previous start. But Carmona nevertheless turned in an outing that served as another bit of evidence that his rough 2008 and '09 seasons are more rule than exception. Carmona gave up five runs on nine hits over 5 1/3 innings against Minnesota. Carmona has allowed 19 runs over his past four starts.

OAK: LHP Dana Eveland (1-3, 7.26 ERA)

Eveland has pitched in the bullpen since Sept. 1 when he was recalled from Triple-A Sacramento for his third stint with the A's this season. He's pitched three innings of relief, allowing five hits and one earned run. Eveland made the A's Opening Day roster as a starter but was sent down May 5 after going 1-2 with a 7.40 ERA. He was recalled July 6 to start against Boston but lasted just 2 2/3 innings, giving up four earned runs, and was sent down the next day. Eveland made his only career start against Cleveland on April 5 last season and got the win, going seven innings. He struck out seven and allowed one earned run.

Tidbits

The Indians are owners of the worst record in the American League for the month of September with a 3-15 mark while the opposing A's share baseball's best mark with Boston (12-5). ... Asdrubal Cabrera, still nursing a sore right knee, went 1-for-4 with a walk in Saturday's game. "I wouldn't say he's 100 percent, but he was good enough to play," Wedge said. "He put up some good at-bats and made some plays, but we'll put him back out there tomorrow and hopefully by Tuesday he'll be 100 percent." ... "With a handful of rookies dominating the Indians lineup every night, Wedge likes to keep Kelly Shoppach and Jhonny Peralta in tow. "We'll send them back out there [Sunday]," he said. "We need them to step up to lead the way with these young kids."

Aeros win Eastern League title

By Stephanie Storm Beacon Journal staff writer

A five-run fourth inning was the spark the Aeros needed to claim their third Eastern League Championship title in seven years Saturday night at Canal Park.

Fittingly, it was a Carlos Santana two-run home run an inning later that provided the big blow that clinched the outcome early. Santana, the Eastern League Most Valuable Player piled on with a moon-shot that cleared the right-field bleachers and gave the Aeros an insurmountable seven-run advantage and ultimate 10-6 victory over the Connecticut Defenders in Game 4 of the championship series.

"It's been a real special year for myself and all these guys," Aeros manager Mike Sarbaugh said. "What a super group of guys. Every time new guys came up, they bought right in and helped us out."

The tone of the night was set by Aeros starting pitcher Scott Barnes, who was facing some of his former teammates for the second time after being sent to the Cleveland organization in the trade that sent Ryan Garko to the San Francisco Giants.

Ironically, Barnes made both his Aeros and Double-A debut Aug. 12 at Connecticut's Dodd Stadium, where he held the Defenders to two runs in five innings.

Had Barnes not been traded, he probably would have been pitching for the Defenders against the Aeros in the finals.

Instead, he took the mound wearing a purple Aeros jersey and went on to earn the win. Despite an 11-day layoff, Barnes limited the Defenders to two unearned runs on two hits and struck out seven in five innings.

"You couldn't have asked for a better performance out of Scott," Sarbaugh said. "He threw awesome, especially coming of an 11-day layoff."

Opposing Barnes (who was originally selected in the eighth round of the 2008 draft out of St. John's University) on the mound was Defenders starter and fellow lefty Ari Ronick, who was making just his second start at the Double-A level after being called up from low Class-A Augusta.

Ronick, the parent-club Giants' 12th-round pick also from the the 2008 draft class, didn't fare as well Saturday as he did in his debut last week against the New Britain Rock Cats when he pitched the Defenders into the Eastern League finals.

Against the Aeros, Ronick wasn't nearly as sharp. He lasted just three-plus innings, giving up five runs on six hits and three walks to take the loss.

The Aeros scored first with a run in the bottom of the second inning thanks to two walks issued by Ronick and an RBI-double by Jose Constanza. The Aeros came right back with another run in the second to take a two-run lead aided by an error.

It was two Aeros errors on the same play in the fourth inning that gift-wrapped two Defenders runs in the fourth inning and tied the game. With two outs, Barnes issued his first walk of the night to Eddy Martinez-Esteve and Brad Boyer followed with a single up the middle.

Castro then slapped a routine ground ball to Aeros third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall, who threw the ball wide to second base on what should have been the inning-ending force out.

But the ball ended up in shallow right field, where an overanxious John Drennen tried to get Boyer advancing to third. But Drennen put way too much on his throw, and it sailed into the stands and allowed Boyer to trot home.

Drennen made up for his mistake in the bottom of the inning when he sent Ronick's first pitch into the bleachers beyond the right-field wall to give the Aeros the lead again.

The home run not only ended Ronick's night, but it also sparked a five-run inning in which the Aeros took a 7-2 lead. The Aeros sent 11 men to the plate in the inning.

"It just imploded on us," Defenders manager Steve Decker said. "Once they got the momentum going, we couldn't stop them."

After Santana's two-run homer made it 9-2, the Aeros added one more insurance run in the sixth inning on a Constanza RBI single.

The Defenders scored two in the eighth and two in the ninth but it was little too late.

A's beat Indians for sixth straight win.

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OAKLAND, Calif. — Mark Ellis has a strong bond with former Oakland infielder Dick Green because the two men have a lot in common, from growing up in the same home town to playing the same position with the Athletics.

He was honored to pass him for the franchise record for homers by a second baseman.

"I actually forgot until (A's announcer) Ray Fosse said something," Ellis said after homering and scoring twice in Oakland's 8-4 win over Cleveland on Saturday. "It's neat whenever we're in the same sentence together. There are a lot of things that are similar between us, so it's pretty cool."

Ellis homered in the second inning off Indians starter Jeremy Sowers, the 79th of his career and the 77th he's hit while playing second base for the A's. That's one more than Green, who played for the team from 1968-74.

Every A's starter had at least one hit and five relievers combined to allow one run over the final 5 1/3 innings while helping Oakland extend its second-longest winning streak of the season to six games.

"We're playing good baseball and we're finding ways to score runs up and down the lineup," Ellis said. "Our bullpen has just been incredible. They've been our most consistent asset this year, without a doubt."

Kurt Suzuki had three hits, including a solo homer in the fourth, and scored three runs. Suzuki doubled and scored in the first, singled and scored in the second then homered leading off the fourth. Oakland's catcher walked and flew out to center in his final two at-bats.

Matt LaPorta had two hits and scored in the fourth when the Indians scored three of their four runs. Cleveland has lost 10 straight on the road and 17 of 21 overall.

"They're battling and still making some mistakes, but that's part of a young team," Indians Manager Eric Wedge said. "You take the good and learn from the bad, and you try to press forward."

Oakland rookie Brad Kilby (1-0) struck out three in 1 2-3 innings for his first major league win. Kilby, who replaced starter Gio Gonzalez in the fourth, retired the first five batters he faced before giving up a one-out single in the sixth.

Jeff Gray, Jerry Blevins, Brad Ziegler and Michael Wuertz completed the nine-hitter for Oakland, which can match its longest winning streak of the season by beating completing the series sweep Sunday.

Ellis is a big reason why the A's have that chance. He's hitting .400 in the series against the Indians and has committed just one error in his last 82 games at second base.

"If you could just see a person that you'd want to be really successful, that would be the guy you root for just because that's who he is," Geren said. "He's very consistent in the clubhouse and off the field. He does everything the right way."

After Rajai Davis struck out leading off the first, the next six Oakland batters had hits, including Ellis who got the rally started with his home run to right center. Scott Hairston, Bobby Crosby and Cliff Pennington all had RBI singles to help the A's to a 4-0 lead.

Ellis scored on a wild pitch and Crosby singled in Suzuki to make it 6-0 in the second when Oakland chased Sowers (6-10) after one-plus innings. The Cleveland lefty allowed nine hits and walked one in the shortest start of his career.

"He just didn't have it today," Wedge said. "He didn't have much on his fastball, he was up a little bit (and) didn't have that late life, that action over the plate like we've seen from him recently."

Gonzalez allowed just one hit through the first three innings but ran into trouble in the fourth. Shin-Soo Choo doubled leading off the inning and later scored along with LaPorta when Kelly Shoppach's grounder went between the legs and under the glove of third baseman Bobby Crosby for an error.

Trevor Crowe added an RBI single to cut the A's lead to 6-3 but Suzuki homered in the fourth and Oakland added another run in the fifth to pull away.

Crowe and Jamey Carroll, who singled in Shoppach in the eighth, had two hits apiece for the Indians.

Notes: Oakland OF Matt Carson singled to right in the fifth for his first major league hit. He finished 2 for 4. ... Suzuki has 79 RBIs and is attempting to become the first catcher to lead the A's in that category since Frankie Hayes in 1944 when the club was still in Philadelphia. ... Indians CF Michael Brantley walked twice and has reached base safely in 16 of 17 games since being called up from the minors on Sept. 1.

Tribe coasting on downward ride

By Sheldon Ocker Beacon Journal staff writer POSTED: 12:12 a.m. EDT, Sep 20, 2009

OAKLAND, CALIF.: The Indians picked up where they left off Friday and the day before that and the day before that, going back seven games.

That is, the Tribe has lost seven in a row, a season worst, and 16-of-19, the latest being 8-4 to the Athletics on Saturday at Oakland Coliseum.

The formula for ineptitude remained the same: no hitting and erratic pitching. That is, some days the pitching is competent enough to win, Saturday, it wasn't. In either case, the offense has offered little support.

But what about those four runs? Shouldn't that be enough to prevail? Sometimes. But when the opposing team gives away two runs because of a ground ball that practically rolled right through the third baseman and the team total is only four, the hitters are not doing their job.

With one left on this trip, the Indians are 0-6 and have averaged 21/2 earned runs a game. And despite the A's hot streak of six wins in a row (half at the expense of the Tribe), they are not one of the more formidable teams in the American League or the Western Division.

"We had poor at-bats early, but we got their starter out of there," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "I thought we gave ourselves a little more of a chance, but that wasn't enough."

Athletics left-hander Gio Gonzalez, the team's third novice starter in a row, was forced out of the game after only 32/3 innings, because he had already thrown 83 pitches and walked five batters. That was not a credit to the Tribe attack, which managed to score only three runs, two unearned.

Gonzalez gave up two hits. Only one played a part in the three-run rally, Shin-Soo Choo's double to lead off the fourth inning. Two walks and Bobby Crosby's error were the other key factors.

For the trip, Choo has been one of the few hitters worthy of that designation. He is batting .368 (7-for-19) with two doubles, one home run and one RBI. Matt LaPorta has been holding up his part of the bargain, batting .391 (9-for-23) with one double, two home runs and six RBI.

Kelly Shoppach is batting .417, but he has only 12 at-bats, the same number as Lou Marson, whose average is .333.

Then there are the laggards: Asdrubal Cabrera and Travis Hafner are each batting .133 (2-for-15), Jhonny Peralta is hitting .083 (2-for-24) and so is Luis Valbuena (1-for-12).

The middle ground is held by Trevor Crowe with a .273 (6-for-22) average, Jamey Carroll .238 (5-for-21) and Michael Brantley .231 (6-for-26) with a double and an RBI.

Wedge often cites youth and inexperience for the batting skid, but there are as many young players hitting as slumping — LaPorta, Marson, Crowe on the plus side; Cabrera, Valbuena, Brantley struggling.

Do the kids feel pressure to step it up? Because several are in the lineup daily, do they feel a special responsibility?

"It's a team effort, one through nine," Brantley said. "You can't win a game by yourself. Everybody has to stay level-headed. We're all going to work hard to finish strong."

The other problem was Jeremy Sowers, who has been one of the club's more reliable starters in the second half. Since the All-Star Game, he had posted a 3.18 earned-run average and a 4-2 record in nine starts. Until Saturday.

Sowers (6-10, 4.92 ERA) was eminently hittable against the A's. He almost didn't get out of the first inning and was replaced after the first three batters of the second, having given up six runs on nine hits and one walk.

Ten A's batted in the first inning, four scoring, seven hitting safely, including six in a row. It almost looked as if they knew what pitches were coming.

"Sometimes it looks like that," Sowers said. "When the count is 1-and-0, you look for a pitch and you give 110 percent effort with your swing. You're not going to get into a good rhythm when you're out there throwing 30 pitches in an inning."

Mark Ellis' home run with one out and nobody on started the first-inning rally. Sowers followed that by giving up five consecutive singles, retired a batter, then allowed another hit.

When the second inning began with a walk and two singled to load the bases, Wedge summoned long reliever Toma Ohka from the bullpen.

"Jeremy just didn't have it today," Wedge said. "There wasn't much on his fastball, and he didn't have the command he's had lately."

Sowers' postmortem listed a litany of things he tried to do but couldn't: "I didn't get started when I wanted to. I was up in the zone, and my command was not what it needed to be. The umpire wasn't necessarily great, but he was fair for both sides. Whatever could go wrong did, and I didn't throw the ball very well."

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Brantley to work on bunting

By Sheldon OckerBeacon Journal staff writer

OAKLAND, CALIF.: Michael Brantley has foot speed, but he still needs to refine his techniques. That doesn't just mean stealing bases.

"I'm a bunter, and I have to start taking advantage of my speed that way," he said, referring to bunting for hits. "I didn't have as many bunt hits in the minors as I should have this year, but it's something I want to do."

Brantley made an error in center field when he failed to pick up a single cleanly and intends to make amends.

"I'm going to take extra ground balls so that doesn't happen again," he said.

CABRERA RETURNS — Asdrubal Cabrera returned to the lineup after missing two games with a bruised knee.

"I wouldn't say he's 100 percent, but he's good enough to play," manager Eric Wedge said. "I hope he'll be 100 percent by Tuesday."

That's when the Indians begin the final homestand of the year.

EXPERIMENT OVER? — Andy Marte has started only one game on this trip, which might indicate that Wedge has seen enough of him to make an evaluation.

The priority now seems to be to get as long a look as possible at Matt LaPorta at first base, a wide-open position for next season.

"We want to see LaPorta and we also want to see Trevor Crowe play as well," Wedge said.

When Crowe plays left field, the only way for LaPorta to be in the lineup is to play first base.

OTHER STUFF — The one-inning start was the shortest of Jeremy Sowers' career. His previous low — two innings against the Orioles on May 5, 2007. . . . Jhonny Peralta is hitless in his past 18 at-bats.

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Wedge's fate is anyone's guess

By Sheldon OckerBeacon Journal staff writer

OAKLAND, CALIF.: Remember when Eric Wedge's job was the biggest issue on the planet?

Less than three months ago, fans and many in the media demanded that Wedge be fired as manager of the Indians. General Manager Mark Shapiro cut off the speculation and lowered the temperature by announcing that Wedge would remain at his post until the end of the season, at which time the entire realm of baseball operations would be scrutinized and evaluated.

Of course, Wedge's job is no more or less secure now than it was in July. The only difference: People have stopped talking and writing about it.

Presumably, the question of who will manage the Tribe next year will be answered in a few weeks. Maybe the decision already has been made. More than likely, it already has been made, but that knowledge is a tightly held secret.

In July, with the fans up in arms, with radio talk show hosts and members of the print media voicing negative opinions of Wedge, with the team in a tailspin and club President Paul Dolan — whose father, Larry, bought the team — revealing that the franchise would lose \$16 million this year, it appeared almost certain that Wedge's days as skipper were numbered.

Now, I'm not so sure. I don't know what to think at this point, and there doesn't seem to be a sense of what the future holds for Wedge among the folks who work at Progressive Field. That is a credit to Shapiro, Dolan and their associates who have kept their mouths shut.

That is, presuming a decision has been made, which seems probable. Certainly, Dolan and Shapiro are not waiting for the season to end before they begin an examination of the baseball department's practices.

Weighing the alternatives, there are advantages to keeping Wedge. I know many of you can't imagine what those would be, and that is one reason he might be fired. The fans have been vocal and active in expressing their dissatisfaction with the club, and Wedge has been one of their favorite targets.

Not just this season but in the past. Would Shapiro and/or Dolan dump Wedge to mollify the fans? Usually, the answer would be no. But in addition to the ever-present criticism of the manager and the club's poor performance, the trades of Cliff Lee and Victor Martinez stirred many fans to back up their discontent by vowing to shed their season tickets.

The dwindling base of paying customers might spur the Tribe's deep thinkers to get rid of Wedge as a way to foster good will, even though they know very well that nothing short of trading for Albert Pujols and Justin Verlander will bring the fans back to Progressive Field in 2010.

Moreover, with a rebuilding year ahead and several rookies and near rookies likely to dot the roster, keeping Wedge might be advantageous. Many fans would disagree, but Wedge has been an effective mentor to young players trying to take that final step from the minors to the majors.

And keep this in mind. The players have never quit on Wedge. Even the veterans who have no reason to play hard through the last meaningless game of a meaningless season have not let down. That is a credit to the manager.

Dolan has portrayed the club's financial situation as ominous, not only for this year but also the next, which is mostly the reason Shapiro traded away \$21 million worth of contracts in the past 21/2 months. With an expected payroll (it hasn't been determined yet) of no more than \$65 million, can the club afford to oust Wedge?

Having to eat his salary of about \$1.5 million probably won't sink the ship, but unless Shapiro and Dolan think the manager no longer can be effective, that might be too big a price to pay as a public-relations gimmick.

Contrary to the perception of the fans, Shapiro and Wedge are no longer joined at the hip. At one time, they seemed to think and react in lock step, but over the years, they have developed differing opinions on various issues that diminished the coziness of their relationship. In other words, if Shapiro thinks Wedge should be fired, he'll fire him.

But I'm not so sure he believes that his manager no longer is an asset. I can't help but think that if Wedge is banished from the clubhouse, Dolan will make the call. Dolan has said in the recent past that he will be involved in the decision.

Potential candidates

If Dolan and Shapiro opt to bring in a new manager, who would it be? The conventional wisdom is that Shapiro would try to lure John Farrell back to Cleveland, where he still lives in the winter.

Farrell has deep ties to the Indians. Not only did he come up through the Tribe farm system and pitch in the major-league rotation, but he also was the club's farm director until the opportunity arose to become the Boston Red Sox pitching coach.

He has earned high praise in that job, plus a lot more money than most coaches. Including postseason bonuses, Farrell is said to earn about \$800,000 a year. That means the Dolans would have to offer Farrell the kind of salary that Wedge makes now, rather than start him on the low end of the managerial pay scale because he's a rookie.

If Wedge is cut loose and Farrell is not offered the job or declines it, then what? I think it's unlikely the Indians will hire someone who lacks major-league coaching or managerial experience. Columbus skipper Torey Lovullo is regarded highly by the front office, but I don't believe he will be elevated to the job in Cleveland.

The only thing we know is that the Indians will have a manager next year. My hope is the topic of who is hired or who is retained won't dominate the offseason, because it will mean there's nothing else to talk about.

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 09.20.2009

Gammons

[Martinez has been huge addition for Red Sox](#)

Leadership a big part of catcher's game

September 18, 2009

By: Peter **Gammons**

The pennant race play of the week may have been made on Sunday in Boston. The Rays had tied the game 1-1 in the seventh inning on an infield grounder, and [Gabe Gross](#) chugged toward home with the go-ahead run when [Dustin Pedroia](#)'s throw to first base got away from [Casey Kotchman](#).

Victor Martinez has hit .331 in 41 games with the Red Sox.

Kotchman's throw home was low and away and [Victor Martinez](#) caught it, slid in front of the plate and blocked the path of Gross, a onetime Auburn football player. Out. "He could easily have blown his knee out in the collision," ESPN comrade John Kruk said, watching in the plush confines of the Bristol studio. "That was incredibly dangerous. How often do you see a guy sacrifice himself to save a run?"

"How many people do you meet that are like Victor Martinez?" asks Red Sox hitting coach Dave Magadan. "Special isn't a big enough word."

Martinez once caught for three months with a broken toe with the Indians. "He never told anyone," says Indians general manager Mark Shapiro. "Do you know how hard it is to catch with a broken toe? He knew we needed him. That's Victor. Everyone knows that trading him was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. There aren't many people who care more about winning and teammates than Victor. In one way, I'm happy for his success in a pennant race. In another way, it tears at me."

The July 31 trade has turned out to be one of Theo Epstein's foundation moves. He immediately filled a leadership role for a club that needed someone around 30 years old to step in. When they needed someone to catch [Tim Wakefield](#), Martinez gladly volunteered. He worked hard with bullpen coach Gary Tuck's knuckleball machine, caught Wakefield with a first baseman's glove and after the first pitch of the game did not drop a ball.

He has done a superb job handling the pitching staff, especially [Clay Buchholz](#), who has become more comfortable throwing his changeup early in the count and letting his four above-average pitches take shape naturally. "I love catching. I love the relationship a catcher has with pitchers and the responsibility," says Martinez. "But if we have had success with me catching, it's because of [Jason Varitek](#). He has been unbelievable working with me to know the pitchers and work on game plans. I am very fortunate to be able to work with Jason. I look up to him."

Martinez has caught, played first base and been the designated hitter. The headline is a 17-game hitting streak he carried into Saturday's game in Baltimore, and a .331 average. But what he has added in the third hole in the order is invaluable -- a patient grinder who has had a .401 on base percentage and a .917 OPS with the Red Sox. With Martinez in between the leadoff tandem of [Jacoby Ellsbury](#) (.397 on-base percentage in September) and Pedroia and in front of two of the top four hitters in the AL in OPS -- [Kevin Youkilis](#) (.981) and [Jason Bay](#) (.931) -- the Red Sox lineup is much deeper. "Victor has really lengthened our lineup," says Terry Francona.

The fact he is one of those rare switch-hitters whose swing is very similar from both sides of the plate is invaluable. And so is his knack for driving in runs.

Go early and watch Martinez take batting practice. He doesn't try to play home run derby. He doesn't wait for perfect pitches. You'll see him swing at pitches off the plate and dump ugly line drives into the outfield. His BPs are reminiscent of one of the great RBI machines of the '70s and '80s, Eddie Murray.

It's no coincidence. "Eddie was my hitting coach when I came up with the Indians," says Martinez. "He taught me so much about what pitchers might try to do, what to look for, how to prepare. He told me to take BP at 70 percent. Don't try to hit everything hard. He taught me that when there are runners on base, take what the pitcher gives you and get the runners in. It doesn't matter what it looks like, what's important is knocking in your teammates and winning."

How much Martinez will catch next season is an unknown. Indians people have warned the Red Sox that Martinez will wear down if he catches 130-something games. Varitek can exercise his player option for \$3 million for 2010 or the club can bring him back for \$5 million. Or the Red Sox can find a veteran catcher who can start 80 games or they can bring along one of the young catchers in their organization. No one knows for now, especially considering what Varitek has meant to the Red Sox.

What's important is that they have Martinez in the third hole, and in the clubhouse, and laying his knee out in front of home plate, all to win.

Kotchman a valuable addition

An overlooked deadline acquisition for the Red Sox is Casey Kotchman, who has yet to start hitting, but has clearly exhibited gold glove defensive capabilities. He had played in only 26 games and had 57 at-bats since coming over from the Braves for [Adam LaRoche](#). There was a time when the Angels thought Kotchman was going to be a star or at worst [Nick Johnson](#). He had more walks (158) and extra-base hits (148) than strikeouts (139) in his climb through the minor leagues.

"I still think he'll hit, and I think he'll hit big," says Angels hitting coach Mickey Hatcher. "I hope he gets the chance in Boston, because this park is made for him. A lot of things have happened. He's been hurt. He's put too much pressure on himself. He gets too mad at umpires. But he's only 26, and there's plenty of time left. He could be a very important player with the Red Sox."

Lurie: Many major leaguers who struggled in 2009 may never bounce back

By Marty Lurie Special to Oakland Tribune

September baseball represents many things on the diamond. The teams battle for the playoffs. MVPs are crowned. Cy Young award winners cement their credentials. Young players are called up to the big leagues to show what they can do.

It's also a time for major league teams to evaluate the future of veteran players who have had subpar seasons.

Is a bad season an aberration for a player? Is a poor year a sign that a career is on downside?

Let's take a look at 25 players who have stumbled during the 2009 season and examine what their prospects are for a bounce-back season in 2010.

Vladimir Guerrero, Angels: Guerrero suffered injuries that curtailed his playing time early in the year. Since coming back the Angels DH has been less than spectacular, hitting .297 with 15 home runs. Guerrero is not the threat of year's past, but if healthy he can still hit with power. Guerrero can help a contender next season.

Jimmy Rollins, Phillies: The Phils shortstop, hitting .247, never got untracked at the plate this year. The power is still there as Rollins hit 19 home runs. Rollins is an excellent player with lots of protection in the potent Philadelphia lineup. Expect a bounce-back season in 2010.

J.J. Hardy, Brewers: Hardy lost his job midseason to highly-touted rookie Alcides Escobar. Hardy's .226 batting average and lack of power (11 home runs) is alarming. Hardy will play elsewhere in 2010. A bounce-back season seems unlikely.

Garrett Atkins, Rockies: This third baseman is only two years removed from a 100 RBI season. With the emergence of Ian Stewart, Atkins playing time was reduced significantly. Even though he is hitting .222 with 9 home runs and 45 RBI, Atkins can help a new team next season. The 29-year-old Atkins would be a good fit for the A's, Twins, or Giants.

Jermaine Dye, White Sox: Dye's power stats are there (25 home runs), but most of his production took place during the first half of the season. Word is Dye can't get around on the fastball. Seems like the beginning of the end for this player who's had a good major league career.

Magglio Ordonez, Tigers: Detroit is on the hook for Ordonez's \$18 million dollar salary for 2010 as the outfielder's option vested this week. The power is gone (7 home runs and 40 RBI) and so are Ordonez's days as a force in the lineup. Ordonez is a very expensive extra outfielder.

David Ortiz, Red Sox: Big Papi got off to a horrible start at the plate for Boston this year. Ortiz's power returned (24 home runs), but the batting average settled around .230 for most of the year. Can't see any more productive seasons in Big Papi's future. The question is will Boston bring him back in 2010? If Ortiz doesn't play in Boston next year, it's hard to imagine another team picking him up.

Alex Rios, White Sox: Toronto essentially gave Rios to the White Sox for nothing. Chicago picked up the remainder of a very expensive contract. Rios has been just as bad, if not worse, in Chicago than he was in Toronto. Rios has problems with his swing. Would not be surprised if Rios' days as a productive hitter are behind him.

Yuniesky Betancourt, Royals: Betancourt showed promise as a young player with the Mariners. This shortstop is a wild swinger who rarely sees a pitch he doesn't like. The Royals won't have any more success than Seattle did in trying to hone Betancourt's game in the middle of the diamond.

Gil Meche, Royals: Meche signed a big contract with Kansas City as a free agent in 2007. The right-hander, when healthy, is an innings eater type pitcher. If the Royals will assume part of his remaining contract, Meche could be traded. I think he can fill a void on a team looking for a veteran pitcher, much like Carl Pavano did this year for Cleveland and Minnesota.

Gary Matthews, Angels: This outfielder has never lived up to his big contract in Los Angeles. He complains about not playing, yet doesn't produce (.238, 3 home runs) when he gets a chance. Matthews is not a helpful offensive player, although his defense is well above average. If the Angels could unload Matthews, they would without hesitation.

Jack Cust, Athletics: The likeable Cust hits home runs (22), walks (88) and strikes out (167) virtually at the same pace each year. At some point, the A's will turn the DH role over to one of their young, minor league power hitters. Cust makes too much money for the A's. If he asks for a raise in 2010, he likely will be non-tendered. Cust can help a club if used low (seventh) in the batting order.

Adrian Beltre, Mariners: Injuries have held Beltre back in 2009. The third baseman never seemed comfortable hitting in Seattle's spacious park after coming over from the Dodgers in 2005. As is the case with many American League players, Beltre—only 30 years-old—will be much more effective if he goes over to the NL in 2010.

B.J. Upton, Rays: The star of the 2008 playoffs had an awful season in 2009 (.231, 10 home runs and 43 RBI). This 25-year-old center fielder still has a tremendous upside and will be worth the gamble if Tampa decides Upton doesn't fit with their club. Injuries, as well as some attitude issues, held him back in 2010. A five-tool player doesn't come along too many times; I'd make the Rays a serious offer for Upton this winter.

Pat Burrell, Rays: Burrell was brought to Tampa from Philadelphia to fill the club's need against left-handed pitching. Burrell's days as an effective power hitter appear to be finished (.228 average, 14 home runs).

Vernon Wells, Blue Jays: Toronto couldn't find a taker for Wells in July because of his enormous salary. Wells is no longer a productive middle of the order hitter (.265, 14 home runs). A bounce-back season is unlikely.

Eric Byrnes, Diamondbacks: Byrnes has never been accused of not hustling on the field. Unfortunately, the outfielder has suffered leg and hand injuries the past two seasons. Byrnes projects as a fourth outfielder who can entertain the fans with his aggressive play. It's unlikely that Byrnes will ever recapture the magic he showed in 2006-07.

Chipper Jones, Braves: Chipper said if this season (.268, 16 home runs, 64 RBI) is an indication of what he is capable of achieving as a big league player, then he would retire in 2010. Jones has an upside, if healthy. Even though he has had an awful second half in 2009, he is worth the gamble in 2010.

Garret Anderson, Braves: Anderson is a very good hitter (.275, 12 home runs, 54 RBI) who lost his true power stroke while in Anaheim. Anderson's day as an every day player appear to be over.

Alfonso Soriano, Cubs: Chicago signed Soriano in 2007 with the hope that the player could be a 40-or-more home run slugger in Wrigley Field. Soriano hasn't been able to stay on the field and now, as a 33-year-old with bad knees, his future value is in doubt. If the Cubs could find a taker they would move Soriano in a flash. Soriano still has some productive at-bats ahead, but not like the old days.

Milton Bradley, Cubs: Not sure if there is a team that can cope with Bradley's negative ways. Bradley can hit from the right side, but has fallen off noticeably as a left-handed hitter. It will be interesting to see where he plays next season. Bradley is young enough (31) to help a club, but not as an everyday outfielder.

Rick Ankiel, Cardinals: Ankiel, a pitcher converted to an outfielder, has one of the most respected throwing arms in the game. Ankiel appears not to be in the Cards plans for 2010 (.233, 11 home runs, 88 strike outs). He has a chance to help another club in 2010 and is a candidate to recapture his power (25 home runs in 2008), under the right circumstances.

Jason Giambi, Rockies: Giambi's days as a full-time DH are over. The lefty can be a very productive hitter off the bench, a la Matt Stairs for the Phillies. When Giambi hits late in the game, the pressure is on the pitcher. Giambi will not swing unless he sees a strike, leading to many excellent RBI opportunities as he bats most often with runners on base. If Giambi will take a pay cut, there is a place for him in the game. If he chooses to retire, he will be remembered for his warm nature, among other things.

Russell Martin, Dodgers: Where did this 26-year-old's power go? In 2007, Martin hit 19 home runs. In 2008, he had 13 homers and he's followed that up with six home runs this year. The Dodgers are still waiting for the power to return. Is it the toll of catching full-time that hurt Martin? Did the pitchers spot a weakness? Doesn't seem likely that he will ever hit with the sock seen early in his career,

Chris Young, Diamondbacks: Strikeouts have plagued this outfielder since his first full major league season in 2007 (435 K's in 459 games). Yet, power and speed have been a huge part of his game. His home run totals have dropped from 32 to 13 to 6 over the past three years. Like B.J. Upton, the tools are there. If Arizona decides he is expendable, a team with patience that is looking for a five-tool player should jump at the chance to acquire him.

There are many variables to consider in determining a player's future worth? Is he through because of his age? Drug testing? Can't hit the fastball?

This winter, general managers throughout the game will weigh the variables and decide who deserves a shot with their club in 2010. This will be a tough winter of negotiations for players coming off sub-par years as teams look to go younger when filling their rosters.

Stay tuned.

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Jim Salisbury / On Baseball: A full roster of thriving ex-Phillies

By Jim Salisbury

The sight of Houston's Michael Bourn stealing bases last weekend and slimmed-down Washington reliever Zack Segovia giving up a grand slam to Matt Stairs on Thursday night got us thinking about former Phillies.

There's a whole bunch of them out there, and many have had interesting seasons.

Some of those seasons have been great (Ryan Franklin); some good (Gavin Floyd); some surprising (Brian Sanches); some up-and-down (Pat Burrell); and others downright poor (Adam Eaton).

On a rainy Friday we decided to put together an all- former Phillies team for the 2009 season. Here goes:

Starting pitchers

Gavin Floyd, White Sox - He was the fourth pick in the 2001 draft, a big, hard thrower with a killer breaking ball. He made several big-league cameos before Phils officials concluded he wasn't tough enough and sent him to the White Sox as part of a package for Freddy Garcia during the 2006 winter meetings. He has manned-up in Chicago. He won 17 games last year and last weekend held Boston to three hits and a run over eight innings.

Randy Wolf, Dodgers - It was sad to hear that one of the game's good guys had to skip Friday's start with elbow soreness. The lefty, primed for free agency this winter, had rung up quality starts in 13 of his last 14 outings in running his record to 10-6 with a 3.22 ERA. His absence will allow Vicente Padilla, another former Phil, to get work.

Robinson Tejeda, Royals - The 27-year-old righthander makes this staff because we've always liked his power arm, competitiveness and potential. He's improved his off-speed stuff, and if he can throw strikes, can still blossom into a winner. The Royals are giving him a look in the rotation and he has responded with 11 1/3 shutout innings over two starts against the Angels and Tigers, a pair of October-bound clubs. Tejeda has an important place in recent Phils history. He was the team's first big signing when it recommitted itself in Latin America a dozen years ago. The Phils dealt him to Texas at the start of the 2006 season for David Dellucci.

Kevin Millwood, Rangers - He got himself into better shape and had a terrific first half, recording a 2.64 ERA in his first 16 starts. However, over his next 11 starts, his ERA was 5.92. We'll find room for him on this staff with Padilla, Paul Byrd and Gio Gonzalez waiting to take his job.

Justin Lehr, Reds - He was in spring training with the Phils, went to triple A, and was sold to the Reds in May when the Phils needed room for Antonio Bastardo at Lehigh Valley. He went 13-3 with two triple-A clubs, then 4-1 in his first seven Reds starts.

Bullpen

Ryan Franklin, Cardinals - Along with starters Chris Carpenter, Adam Wainwright and Joel Pineiro, Franklin, a first-time all-star in 2009, has been one of the big contributors to a staff that ranks third in the NL in ERA. He went 1-5 with a 4.58 ERA in 46 games with the Phils in 2006. Working with Dave Duncan, one of the best pitching coaches in the business, Franklin has put together three strong seasons in the Cardinals' bullpen and recently earned a two-year contract extension. He was tied for the NL lead with 37 saves (in 41 chances). He was 11 for 11, allowing no runs in 12 games, in August. "He's the same pitcher he was all those years ago in Seattle," one scout said. "He's making them miss the ball somehow. He's got plus command and big [guts]."

Brad Ziegler, A's - Ryan Howard's former college teammate at Missouri State, he was released by the Phils at the end of minor-league spring training in 2004. He played independent ball, turned himself into a side-armor, and became a stud setup man with Oakland last season. He had a 2.05 ERA in 106 big-league games.

Arthur Rhodes, Reds - Everyone thought he was done after going 0-5 with a 5.32 ERA in 55 games with the Phils in 2006. He had elbow surgery, missed 2007, then came back and had a 2.04 ERA in 61 games last season. At 39, he's still getting outs, especially against lefthanded hitters, who had a .123 batting average against him.

Trevor Miller, Cardinals - The Phils acquired the lefty for Yorkis Perez at the end of spring training 2000, then let him go after he recorded an 8.36 ERA while allowing 19 hits in 14 innings over 14 games. Miller entered Friday with a 1.86 ERA in 61 games.

Brian Sanches, Marlins - He was an inventory arm, riding the shuttle back and forth from Philadelphia to triple A in 2006 and 2007. After opening this season in the minors, he got a chance in Florida and was 4-1 with a 1.45 ERA in his first 39 games.

Justin Miller, Giants - He has so many tattoos on his body that he spawned a rule. Baseball requires him to wear long sleeves when he pitches so his artwork won't distract hitters. The righthander was released from the Phils' triple-A club after three games in 2007. He went on to pitch in 62 games for the Marlins that season. Though he's struggled recently, he's had a solid season for the Giants.

Billy Wagner, Red Sox - He's come back strong from Tommy John surgery. We'll find a place for him. If nothing else, the postgame quotes will be great.

Catcher

Rod Barajas, Blue Jays - He did not block the plate that May 2007 night in Miami and fell out of favor with Phillies fans. Barajas has put up good numbers in Toronto with 16 homers and 61 RBIs, the sixth most among big-league catchers. He had thrown out 29.6 percent of base-stealers to rank in the top third in the majors.

First base

Russell Branyan, Mariners - He had two hits for the Phils in 2007. Both were home runs. He ranked third in the AL in both homers (31) and strikeouts (149).

Second base

Placido Polanco, Tigers - His batting average has slipped this season, but has the second-best fielding percentage having made just two errors all season. He hit .353 with a .980 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in his first nine games in September.

Third base

Scott Rolen, Reds – The guy can still pick it, and he was hitting .312.

Shortstop

Nick Punto, Twins - This utilityman will have to hold down the position.

Outfield

Bobby Abreu, Angels - He had 75 RBIs in 92 games dating to May 25, the most in the American League over that span. He is headed for his seventh straight 100-RBI season. The only others with at least 100 RBIs over the last six seasons are Albert Pujols and Alex Rodriguez.

Michael Bourn, Astros - The Phillies' base-running/outfield guru, Davey Lopes, was right. While some were skeptical of Bourn, Lopes thought he could become a regular centerfielder who would get on base and do damage. Bourn's on-base percentage was .368, up from .288 last season. That's the biggest improvement in the majors. He was leading the league in steals (53), triples (tied with Shane Victorino at 11), infield hits (39), and bunt hits (15). He was also the toughest guy in the league to double up, having hit into one double play in 522 at-bats.

Marlon Byrd, Rangers - It took time and tutelage from Rudy Jaramillo, arguably the best hitting coach in the game, but Byrd has become the player many thought he'd be when he was the Phils' top position prospect earlier this decade. In three seasons with the Rangers, his batting average is .297 and OPS is .823.

Aaron Rowand, Giants - Rowand had a career year with the 2007 Phils, and it earned him a big payday in San Francisco. Though he hasn't matched his 2007 totals (.309, 27 homers, 89 RBIs, .889 OPS), any team would benefit from his toughness.

Designated hitter

Jim Thome, Dodgers - He's still a scary lefthanded power bat at DH or off the bench. Give him something out over the plate and Big Jim, whose 23 homers this season have given him 564 for his career, will hurt you.

Pinch-hitter

Wes Helms, Marlins - His 15 pinch-hits are one off the big-league lead, and he was hitting .366 with 12 RBIs in the role, three fewer than Matt Stairs' major-league-leading 15.

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Nick Cafardo / BASEBALL NOTES / Measuring the managers

Scioscia and Tracy led the way this year

By Nick Cafardo | September 20, 2009

A common theme heard about Yankees manager Joe Girardi is, "Even I could manage a team of All-Stars and with a payroll that big."

There's some truth to that, but there's a flip side. Girardi has to handle the egos, manage the veteran players through injuries, and pacify high-priced players. It is often a slippery slope. The last thing you want is a \$20 million player nursing an injury for two months because he was overused.

Girardi has managed on both sides of the spectrum: with the young, low-payroll Marlins in 2006, when he won National League Manager of the Year honors, and with the Yankees, who have the highest payroll in the majors.

"The best thing Girardi has done is that he's learned to stay out of the way," said an American League general manager. "He's let the players play, and if he needs to step in, he's done that wonderfully."

In an informal poll of writers, executives, and scouts last week, Girardi did get some love for leading the Yankees to first place after missing the playoffs last season, but not as much as the Angels' Mike Scioscia, who received first mention from 18 of the 25 people asked their choice for AL Manager of the Year.

Others receiving consideration, in order, were Ron Washington, who transformed the Rangers into a wild-card contender; Don Wakamatsu, who inherited a 101-loss team in Seattle and has a winning record; Jim Leyland, who resurrected the Tigers from the ashes of last season; Terry Francona, who had to deal with numerous injury and personnel issues; and Ron Gardenhire, who brought the Twins back into contention in the AL Central.

In the National League, Colorado's Jim Tracy received 16 first mentions. He inherited an 18-28 team from the fired Clint Hurdle, the architect of the first Colorado miracle in 2007, and will likely lead the Rockies to a playoff berth, if he can stave off the Giants.

Others receiving consideration, in order, were Tony La Russa, for his work with the Central-leading Cardinals; Bruce Bochy, who has restored the Giants to respectability; the Marlins' Fredi Gonzalez, who seems to do a lot with a little; the Dodgers' Joe Torre; and the Phillies' Charlie Manuel.

Scioscia annually has one of the best regular-season teams in baseball. This year, he had to deal with the death of pitcher Nick Adenhart in a car accident in April. There were injuries to Vlad Guerrero and several starters, and he has a subpar bullpen that includes heart-attack closer Brian Fuentes. He seemed to receive the most respect for his handling of Adenhart's death.

"There's no manual out there for how you handle the death of a player," said an AL general manager. "Mike Scioscia proves time and time again that he understands the entire spectrum of managing a major league franchise. There aren't many you can say that about. He's right there with La Russa, [Bobby] Cox, Francona, Leyland."

There was a lot of sentiment for Washington, whom many had picked to be the first manager fired this season. He survived, stressing defense and pitching, and now earns major praise.

"He makes everyone accountable," said a Rangers player. "He stresses the importance of avoiding mental errors and keeping your head in the game. He's earned the respect of everyone."

The biggest thing in Wakamatsu's favor is that he changed the culture in the Mariners' clubhouse, though the acquisition of veterans Ken Griffey Jr. and Mike Sweeney helped.

Leyland believed he had the talent to win last season, but injuries and off seasons by several players changed that. He felt the defense had to be improved for the Tigers to win. That happened when Adam Everett was brought in at short and Brandon Inge went back to third.

How do you explain Tracy? He's taken basically the same players Hurdle had and made them winners.

One veteran executive said of Tracy, "He had this strength when he managed the Dodgers. He knew what buttons to push with every single player. It doesn't surprise me that when you look at individual players with the Rockies, they've improved their game since he took over."

Bochy has always been considered one of the better managers but hasn't always had the players. GM Brian Sabean has done a good job filling in the blanks, and the pitching staff is strong.

La Russa has been one of the best year after year, and while he's been a master at putting people in the right roles, he's always said, "It comes down to the players." And his players - particularly Albert Pujols, the best in baseball - can make a skipper look smart.

Great debate: Holliday or Bay?

While money for free agents should continue to shrink, two who could get their share are Jason Bay and Matt Holliday. They are similar in a lot of ways, which raises the question: Which would you rather have playing for the Red Sox?

Holliday's stats have always been linked to Coors Field, but this guy can hit, period.

He hit .319 with 128 homers and 483 RBIs in five seasons at Coors. He started out poorly in Oakland, but before he was dealt to the Cardinals, he was up to .286 with 11 homers and 54 RBIs. In St. Louis, he's hit .358 with 12 homers and 48 RBIs in 187 at-bats. Don't tell me Busch Stadium is Coors Field. And what do you think Holliday would do at Fenway?

Bay is a .280 career hitter, compared with Holliday at .318. Their career on-base percentages are pretty comparable - .386 for Holliday, .377 for Bay. Holliday strikes out far less; his high is 126, while Bay should surpass his high of 156 this season.

Holliday is only 29 while Bay turns 31 today.

Bay, of course, is tried and true in Boston. When he first came over in the Manny Ramirez deal, we thought it might take Bay a while to adjust to big-market Boston from Pittsburgh, where losing is a ritual. That wasn't the case.

Is Holliday a National League player? He has spent 5 1/2 of his six years in that league, so you'd have to say yes. Was Oakland an aberration or did he merely get off to a poor start?

In the field, "Bay is more athletic," said one talent evaluator. "He has the clear edge out there."

Both have a high percentage in base stealing.

So who gets the bigger contract?

One prominent agent who doesn't represent either player said, "Holliday will make the most, because he's a better overall pure hitter. I think scouts would say Holliday has fewer holes in his swing."

Holliday or Bay at Fenway?

"I think Holliday would be as prolific at Fenway as he was at Coors," said the talent evaluator.

In an otherwise lost season, Greinke is mound royalty

There's nothing to watch in Kansas City these days except for one man: righthander Zack Greinke. When he pitches against the Red Sox at Kauffman Stadium Tuesday, it will be as big a challenge as the Sox have faced.

His 2.14 ERA is utterly remarkable, and though he has only 14 wins, he has to be the American League Cy Young winner. If you buy the theory that pitching in the AL adds a run to a pitcher's ERA, then would Greinke's be 1.14 in the NL? That's sick.

The lowest win total for a Cy Young winner (non-reliever, and non-strike year) was 16, most recently by Brandon Webb in 2006.

In the AL, you'd have to go back to 1994, when David Cone won 16 for the Royals.

"He's the best pure pitcher I've seen in the league this year," said an NL scout of Greinke. "There might be guys like Felix Hernandez who have a better package or Roy Halladay, who knows how to pitch, but this kid makes you do a double-take.

"Sometimes you can't believe what you've just seen."

Royals great Frank White, a color analyst for Fox Sports Kansas City, said, "If you're looking for the best pitcher in the league, Zack Greinke is the best pitcher. If you're looking for wins, it's not Zack because he hasn't received any run support."

White said the remarkable aspect of Greinke's repertoire is that "he can throw his curveball three different speeds. He can throw it 63-68 miles per hour with the same command. He's a guy who has command of all of his pitches. He throws 96-97 on his fastball and then a slider and then the curveballs. It's fun to watch.

"The other thing he does is even though he has a lot of strikeouts, he's learned to pitch to contact. He'd rather get you out by contact, but if he's got two strikes on you, he'll strike you out."

In 26 of his 30 starts, Greinke has thrown 100 or more pitches. He has struck out 224 in 210 1/3 innings, with only 44 walks.

"He's an event," White said.

Etc.

Touching the bases

Apropos of nothing: 1. The Nationals were 43-75 (.336) when they signed Stephen Strasburg Aug. 17. They have gone 7-21 (.250) since; 2. How much production would J.D. Drew add if he hit the ball the other way at Fenway?; 3. Who knew? In the last five seasons, Edgar Renteria leads all major leaguers with a .484 average (31 for 64) with the bases loaded, and Jose Lopez is second at .462. And Mike Lowell's 85 bases-loaded RBIs rank fourth behind Justin Morneau (95), Alex Rodriguez (94), and Albert Pujols (88); 4. Naples, Fla., is making a push for the Cubs, which would make for a nice spring training rivalry with Boston; 5. When are the Orioles supposed to be good?

Updates on nine

1. Carlos Zambrano, RHP, Cubs - At some point this offseason, Theo Epstein will get a phone call from Cubs general manager Jim Hendry about a deal for Zambrano. Paul Sullivan of the Chicago Tribune first reported that the Cubs will explore a deal for Zambrano, who will consider going only to the Red Sox, White Sox, or Dodgers. At the trade deadline this year, the Sox explored Cliff Lee, Felix Hernandez, and Roy Halladay; they will likely make another attempt at Hernandez, whose price tag on a long-term deal might be too rich for the Mariners.

2. Cliff Lee, LHP, Phillies - If Indians fans wanted instant gratification from the players they received in return for Lee, it isn't happening. Righty Carlos Carrasco is 0-2 with a 9.64 ERA (six homers in 14 innings); catcher Lou Marson is hitting .154; shortstop Jason Donald went on the disabled list in Triple A; and righty Jason Knapp underwent surgery to remove fragments from his shoulder.

3. Russell Branyan, 1B, Mariners - Branyan certainly is an interesting case. After a career year, the journeyman will be a free agent, a lefthanded slugger who has hit 31 homers and knocked in 76 runs in 116 games. Some believe he will re-sign with Seattle at a reasonable if discounted rate because of the loyalty he feels to the team that gave him a shot. But will he seek the big payday, and would anyone bite after one good year?

4. Delwyn Young, 2B, Pirates - He is being converted from outfield to second base, working with top infield coach Perry Hill. But the former Dodger is in an uncharacteristic slump (5 for 59, including 0 for 24) and his average has dropped from .311 to .268. Part of the problem is back spasms. "I'm sure it's a combination of the anxiety of switching positions, the back, and some mechanical things," said former Dodgers hitting coach Mike Easler. "I had him in Las Vegas [in 2007] and he had a great year for me. I remember when I was with the Red Sox, Ralph Houk moved me to first base and my average really suffered. That was one of the reasons they got Bill Buckner, and when I went back to DH, I started to hit again."

5. Mark Reynolds, 3B, Diamondbacks - He has surpassed 200 strikeouts for the second straight year and will shatter his mark of 204. Nevertheless, the homers keep on coming. "Other than a few guys in that steroid era, I've never seen a guy with more pop," teammate Eric Byrnes told reporters in Arizona. Reynolds has homered off some pretty good pitchers: Hernandez, Matt Cain (twice), Josh Johnson, Aaron Cook, Ubaldo Jimenez, Zack Greinke, Scott Feldman, Brad Lidge, Jonathan Broxton.

6. Ian Desmond, SS, Nationals - Wonder if the Nationals would have traded Cristian Guzman to the Red Sox had they been convinced at the time that Desmond would emerge as their likely shortstop next season. Desmond, once trumpeted by former GM Jim Bowden as the next Derek Jeter, has made such an impression that Guzman has been asked about moving to second base.

7. Ryne Sandberg, manager, Tennessee Smokies - A quiet, hard-nosed Hall of Fame player has become quite the outspoken, hard-nosed manager, and a possible successor to Lou Piniella as Cubs skipper. He has taken the Double A Smokies to the Southern League championship series. Sandberg started managing in Single A (Peoria) and has drawn rave reviews for his ability to work with young players.

8. Tom Werner, chairman, Red Sox - His new ABC sitcom, "Hank," premieres Sept. 30 at 8 p.m. Kelsey Grammer plays Hank, an executive who has lost everything because of the recession and is now adapting to life and downsizing. Pretty good concept (and one people can relate to).

9. Gerald Laird, C, Tigers - A scout who has been watching catchers closely the last month says nobody is throwing the ball better, with the Angels' Jeff Mathis a close second. "Laird has made some unbelievable throws lately," said the scout. "He's thrown out a couple of guys lately he had no business throwing out. Mathis threw the ball extremely well against Boston. Both of them put the ball in a beautiful spot for the tag."

Short hops

From the Bill Chuck Files: "Leading candidate for Walkoff Player of the Year is Andre Ethier, who has six game-winning hits, including four walkoff homers. Ethier is the first player to hit four walkoff blasts in a season since Roy Sievers of the Washington Senators hit four in 1957." . . . Happy 31st birthday, Jason Bay.