Thome could help either squad, but the Indians have a more pressing need because of Hafner's situation.

CLEVELAND - Manager Manny Acta and several of the Cleveland Indians spent part of a much-needed day off bowling for charity.

They could use a helping hand -- or two.

With injuries taking their toll and their pitching staff dragging, the Indians are quickly fading from contention in the AL Central.

Their unexpected season has taken a dramatic turn for the worse. They've lost six of seven games and entered Thursday trailing first-place Detroit by six games. In less than a week, the Indians slipped 4 1-2 games in the standings, a plunge they may never recover from.

"This week is not going to make or break us -- hopefully," said Indians pitcher Josh Tomlin, who failed to pitch five innings for the first time in his career in a loss on Wednesday to Seattle. "What happened to us, it can happen to anybody."

But it's all the other things that have happened to the Indians that will make it extremely tough for them to get back into the race.

There may not be a team in the majors that has suffered as many costly injuries as Cleveland. For Thursday's series finale with the Mariners, Acta had only three players -- Carlos Santana, Matt LaPorta and Jack Hannahan -- who were in his lineup on opening day. The Indians are a shell of what they were early this season, when they got off to a 30-15 start as baseball's biggest surprise.

They're not the same.

Outfielder Shin-Soo Choo joined a long list of injured players on Wednesday, when he was scratched with a sore back. Choo got hurt checking his swing in Tuesday's game and said it bothered him while warming up in the indoor cages. The loss of Choo , who homered twice the previous day, was another blow to a batting order missing Travis Hafner (foot), Grady Sizemore (knee), Michael Brantley (wrist) and Jason Kipnis (hamstring).

On top of that, Santana was pulled in the ninth inning after taking a foul tip off his catcher's mask. Santana was knocked onto his backside by the hard wallop, a visual that sums up Cleveland's current state -- groggy.

Still, the Indians are hanging on to the hope they can make another run.

"It's just one more thing to overcome," reliever Joe Smith said. "That's what this team has done all year, and I can promise you this team will still fight. I expect nothing except this team will find a way to turn it around."

Choo and Santana expect to play Friday, when the Indians open a three-game series with Kansas City. Shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera will be back too after sitting out on Wednesday.

What remains to be seen is if the Indians will add any new faces for the stretch.

General manager Chris Antonetti has been searching the waiver wire for a bat to help the Indians' weakened offense, which was outhit by Seattle's cast of rookies for three days.

There are reports the Indians made a claim for slugger Jim Thome, the club's career home run leader, who was placed on waivers earlier this week by Minnesota. However, it's also been reported that Thome was claimed by the Chicago White Sox, who like the Indians are searching for some middle-of-the-order pop. It's possible neither team could end up with the 40-year-old Thome, who last week became the eighth player in history to hit 600 homers.

Thome could help either squad, but the Indians have a more pressing need because of Hafner's situation.

He's on the disabled list with a foot sprain, and it's very possible Hafner will need season-ending

surgery. Without a legitimate threat in the heart of their order -- Shelley Duncan batted fourth on Wednesday -- the Indians could have trouble scoring. And with the way their starting pitchers have suddenly fallen on hard times, that's a major problem.

In the past seven games, Cleveland's starters have gone 0-5 with a 9.61 ERA. With the exception of Justin Masterson, all of the Indians have been roughed up lately. Pitching has been the Indians' strength all season, the single biggest reason they're still in the postseason discussion with September looming. If it doesn't improve, it may be the reason October is just another month on the calendar.

"I don't think I've seen that the whole year," Acta said after Wednesday's 9-2 loss, when Tomlin had his streak of consecutive starts of at least five innings stopped at 37. "I don't think I've seen four out of the five guys not have a quality start. I don't think we had four non-quality starts in a week. I don't think we even did it last year when the guys weren't as good. It's the wrong time. "

Time may be running out on the Indians. Still, they believe it's not too late.

"We're still going," Choo said. "It's tough. But we're still going."