Click here for Part I: The Rotation

Talk about experiencing both sides of the spectrum. In 2004, the bullpen truly was the Achilles Heel all season, but in 2005 the bullpen turned out to be The Rock of Gibraltar for the team. After Indians fans witnessed firsthand the abomination of a bullpen that Mark Shapiro assembled in 2004, watching lead after lead be blown late in games, fans were treated to the best bullpen in baseball in 2005.

The question now is, what are we in store for in 2006?

While the bullpen probably will have a hard time repeating the success it had last season, the bullpen should still be one of the top 5-10 bullpens in baseball. The bullpen is loaded with very good right-handed pitching, and the Indians may actually be 8-10 deep in the bullpen as some quality arms will be in Buffalo ready for use.

On the downside, only one left-hander should be in the bullpen to start the season, which may present itself to be a problem as the year wears on. Most likely, a left-handed reliever could be a mid-season acquisition Shapiro looks to make in June or July if the need does arise. And, as always, injuries will play a part in how successful the bullpen is in 2006.

The Bullpen:

Bob Wickman (RH)
Guillermo Mota (RH)
Scott Sauerbeck (LH)
Rafael Betancourt (RH)
Fernando Cabrera (RH)
Matt Miller (RH)
Jason Davis (RH)

Closer: Bob Wickman

After turning away from BJ Ryan when his pricetag went through the roof, and falling just short of landing premier closer Trevor Hoffman to a large multi-year deal, the Indians went with Plan C and resigned Wickman to a one year $5M deal. Wickman finished the 2005 season with his best year as a pro, piling up 45 saves with a 2.47 ERA and .247 BAA. His 2.47 ERA is only topped by his career-best ERA of 2.39 in 2001

After missing all of the 2003 season and half of the 2004 season recovering from Tommy John surgery, Wickman has since returned like a man with something to prove. Since Wickman returned in July 2004, he has settled the bullpen down and he is 58 for 64 in save situations

(91%). Those who did not get to watch Wickman pitch last year only need to take a quick look into his pitching splits to see he was his customary self as he typically pitched out of trouble. With no one on base, he allowed a .306 BAA and .854 OPS, but with runners on he was unbelievable allowing only a .149 BAA and .466 OPS. Wickman definitely benefited from a lot of luck, as suggested by his 4.64 DIPS last year.

Wickman is probably the most important player on the Indians roster this season. Not in that they need him to save 40+ games again, but that he needs to stay healthy since he is the only one who can really handle the closer's role at this point. In addition to the chances that Wickman gets, there will be other closing opportunities afforded to the likes of Guillermo Mota and Fernando Cabrera. At some point this season, Cabrera should get some work to help groom him for the role that he should be a favorite for in 2007.

RH Setup: Guillermo Mota

Mota was acquired in the Coco Crisp trade, and is one season removed from being regarded as one of the top setup man in baseball. The Indians will look for Mota to rebound from his down 2005 season that saw him post a 2-2 record and 4.70 ERA with the Marlins. For his career, in 389 games as a reliever, Mota is 22-24 with 81 holds and a 3.61 ERA.

Over the past three seasons, Mota has been just as tough on lefties as he has been on righties. As a result, his success against lefties may

lessen the need for a second left-handed pitcher in the bullpen this season. From 2003-2005, Mota has held lefties to a .204 BAA and .636 OPS, and righties to a .236 BAA and .634 OPS. Mota does have a penchant for walks, averaging a walk about every 2.5 innings in his career. Last year, his troubles can probably be attributed to control problems as he walked 32 batters in only 67 IP.

Mota does come with some question marks. Concerns over his shoulder almost nixed the Crisp trade, but since the Indians still requested Mota in the trade the concerns may only have been precautionary (and an attempt to get more from the Red Sox). If Mota can get back to his 2003 and 2004 form (combined 15-11 with a 2.49 ERA) when he was Eric Gagne's setup man in LA, he has the experience in the back of the pen that the Indians can rely on to help offset the loss of 2005 setup man Bobby Howry.

LH Setup: Scott Sauerbeck

The Indians resigned Sauerbeck this winter to 1 year $1.2M deal with a 2007 club option at $1.35M. Sauerbeck ended the 2005 season with a 1-0 record and a 4.04 ERA and .259 BAA. Before the All Star break in 2005 Sauerbeck pitched in 34 games and had a 3.24 ERA, but after the break he appeared in less games (24) and had a higher ERA 5.91. One has to scratch their head in wonder that for most of the last two months of the season Arthur Rhodes was away due to family reasons, yet Sauerbeck only chipped in with a little over 11 innings.

Apparently, Wedge lost faith in Sauerbeck as he made only 10

appearances in the team's final 40 games for a total of 5 innings. Granted, Sauerbeck lost it some in the second half, but Sauerbeck DID hold lefties to a .162 BAA and .605 OPS on the season. Plus, the Indians still needed a lefty to turn to in the pen. His problem, like most lefty specialists, was in getting right-handers out (.377 BAA and .949 OPS on the season).

When healthy, Sauerbeck has been one of the better left-handed relievers in baseball. In 425 career games, which covers six major league seasons, he has a career ERA of 3.74 with a .242 BAA, and an average of more than a strikeout an inning. While Sauerbeck was used mostly as a situational lefty last season, his role will increase this season now that Arthur Rhodes is gone. With no other lefties in the pen, Sauerbeck becomes the only option that can be called upon late in games to get key outs against left-handed batters.

Middle Relief: Rafael Betancourt

Betancourt had a breakout year in 2005, flourishing in the 6th and 7th inning relief role going 4-3 with a 2.79 ERA and .224 BAA. In his short three year career, Betancourt has compiled an 11-11 record with a 3.08 ERA and .236 BAA.

There was not much difference from Betancourt's 3.92 ERA year in 2004 and his 2005 season as his innings pitched (68.2 to 67.2), walks (17 to 18), and strikeouts (73 to 76) all were pretty much the same. The big difference was he gave up 14

less hits in 2005 (57 to 71), which resulted in a drop from a .268 BAA in 2004 to the .224 BAA in 2005. Betancourt also flat out dominated righties in 2005, holding them to a .204 BAA and a .549 OPS.

The Indians have control over Betancourt for at least four more seasons, so he could be a fixture in the bullpen the next several years. Betancourt's emergence as a dominating right-handed reliever may have opened the door for him to assume some duties in the later innings as a 7th and 8th inning reliever this season.

Middle Relief: Fernando Cabrera

Cabrera is one of the Indians top young pitching prospects whom we saw a lot of late last season in key situations. Cabrera is a power pitcher, boasting a fastball that hovers around 95 MPH and a splitter that has good action. He is widely considered one of the top young relief prospects in the game, recently ranked as the 46th best prospect in all of baseball by Fox Sports Dayn Perry.

Before being called up to the Indians, Cabrera was downright filthy in Buffalo as he posted a 6-1 record in 30 games with a 1.23 ERA, and struck out 68 batters in 51.1 IP. Upon being called up to Cleveland, Cabrera posted a 1.47 ERA and .212 BAA in 15 games and 31.2 IP. Also, Cabrera proved to be very effective against both lefties and righties, holding lefties to a .196 BAA and .584 OPS and righties to a .224 BAA and .596 OPS.

In 2006, he most likely will take over Rafael Betancourt's 6th and 7th inning relief role from 2005. With Wickman getting up there in age and only signed through this year, the Indians will need to find a suitable replacement for Wickman next season. Cabrera just may be the best in-house candidate to take over the closer's role in 2007, or even as early as late 2006.

Middle Relief: Matt Miller

Matt Miller was the one disappointment in the bullpen in 2005, as an arm injury ended his season in early July. Before going down with the injury, Miller filled a role in the bullpen as a situational righty posting a 1-0 record with a 1.82 ERA and .212 BAA in 23 games. Like Mota, Cabrera and Betancourt, Miller has shown to be just as effective against lefties as righties. Last year, he held righties to a .221 BAA and .589 OPS, while lefties only had a .196 BAA and .548 OPS.

In 2004, Miller was 4-1 with a 3.09 ERA and .216 BAA in 57 appearances. Even more impressive, he allowed only one home run all year in those 57 appearances, which covered a total of 55.1 IP. Miller also finished that season strong, as from August 1st through the end of the season, he was 1-0 with a 0.39 ERA in 25 appearances.

Undrafted in 1996 out of college, Miller toiled in the minors for 8 ½ years with several teams before getting his first shot at extended time in the majors in 2004 with the Indians. He has found a home in Cleveland, and reportedly is 100% healthy. With his uncanny sidearm delivery, he is a good contrast to the other power right-handers in the pen in Mota, Cabrera, and Betancourt.

Long Relief: Jason Davis

The final spot in the bullpen will be the only roster spot on the 12-man pitching staff open for competition. The five starting pitchers and other six bullpen members

already have jobs locked down, so there could really be a dogfight for the last bullpen spot between up to five to six different candidates.

Going into camp Davis has to be the early favorite. After going 8-11 with a 4.68 ERA in his rookie campaign in 2003 at 22 years of age, Davis went into Spring Training in 2004 as the Indians #2 starter. However, Davis struggled in his sophomore season finishing the year with a 2-7 record with a 5.51 ERA and horrifying .311 BAA. Since then, Davis has been up and down between Buffalo and Cleveland as a quasi-6th starter and long man in the bullpen.

Many baseball pundits consider Davis a very good candidate for a late inning relief role because of how hard he throws, and because of his difficulties maintaining his stuff in the middle innings. Many times in his short career Davis has pitched well the first 2-3 innings of a game only to fall apart in the 4th or 5th inning. With a fastball that consistently hovers around 95 MPH (but can touch 98-99 MPH), and a very good splitter and slider, he has the stuff to be a good late inning reliever. The only question is if he has the right mindset to handle such a late inning role, which is something the Indians may explore from time to time this season.

Buffalo Bound: Steve Karsay, Danny Graves, Andrew Brown, Jason Stanford, Kaz Tadano, Jeremy Guthrie.

All of these pitchers should be able to provide depth in the bullpen throughout the season in the event the Indians need spot bullpen relief, or if a pitcher goes on the disabled list.

Karsay enjoyed his best seasons as an Indian from 1998-2001. In a three year span from 1999 until the time he was traded to Atlanta in the John

Rocker deal in mid-2001, he was 15-12 with 22 saves and a 2.87 ERA. After signing a lucrative deal with the Yankees in December 2001, Karsay ended up really only pitching one season in New York. Since the 2002 season, Karsay has appeared in only 13 games in three years, pitching a grand total of 30.1 innings and compiling a 5.64 ERA.

Karsay himself has admitted that he was not 100% (he said more like 60-70%) the last three years, and that he now feels close to 100%. It will be interesting to see if the Indians can

catch lightning in a bottle here, but the Indians have durability concerns with Karsay, so there really is no way he gets an Opening Day gig until he proves he can stay healthy. Therefore, he goes to Buffalo for a few months, but if he maintains his health he could be a quality midseason addition to the roster.

Unlike Karsay, Graves has been healthy. The question with him is whether or not he still can be effective as a pitcher. After saving a career high 41 games in 2004 for the Reds, Graves career took a nosedive in

2005. In 40 games with the Reds and Mets, Graves ended the season with a 1-1 record with 10 saves and an utterly revolting 6.52 ERA and 2.04 WHIP.

Graves is only 32, and aside from an injury in 2003, has been healthy his entire career. Whether 2005 was an off-season, or if he really is in decline is unknown at this point. In any case, the Indians will take a long look at him this Spring. Graves probably gets strong consideration for the final bullpen spot up until the end of camp.

If Karsay and Graves don't make the Opening Day roster, they will have to accept an assignment to Buffalo or be granted free agency. It is not known whether or not they would accept such an assignment, but it is possible Graves and Karsay could start in Buffalo and pitch half the season there building up arm strength and working on their mechanics. This was the path Bob Howry took before debuting with the Indians in late June of 2004, and could be the same way the Indians handle them.

Andrew Brown may be the dark horse

in the battle for the final bullpen spot. The Indians love his electric fastball and power slider, and since his move to the bullpen last year he has been more aggressive as a pitcher. Per a Baseball America report, over his final 31 innings in Buffalo last year he posted a 1.43 ERA and only allowed 12 hits. The Indians may elect to go with the more experienced pitcher in Davis to start the season, and since Brown does have one option remaining, he likely does start the season in Buffalo. He will be the first call-up when a bullpen arm is needed.

Jason Stanford recovered from Tommy John surgery in 2004 to pitch in a combined 15 games last year at Mahoning Valley, Lake County, Akron and Buffalo. In those 15 games, Stanford compiled a 2-1 record with a 2.59 ERA in only 24.1 IP. Stanford may get a look-see as a potential second left-hander in the bullpen, but should start the year in the Buffalo rotation and be the Indians #7 starter this year.

Tadano pitched very well for the Indians in 14 games in 2004, compiling a 1-1 record and 4.65 ERA,

including a memorable 10 strikeout performance against Cincinnati in July that year. In 2005, Tadano was 5-5 with a 4.39 ERA, mostly in a bullpen role. Tadano has one option remaining, and should start the season in Buffalo.

Guthrie is the former 1st round pick in 2002 out of Stanford that has struggled somewhat since a dominant quick start in AA Akron in 2003. Guthrie possesses a mid-90s fastball and plus offspeed pitches, but the problem for him has been mental and his control of his pitches. After a

disastrous 2004 and 2005 season, this year is the last season the Indians will have options on Guthrie, so 2006 could be the last go-around for Guthrie and the Indians.

Up Next: The Lineup

Coming Up: Starting lineup and pitching rotation previews of the minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.