With Indians season getting close to kicking back into gear, so will "Minor Happenings", the wildly popular Tribe minor league weekly recap column Tony Lastoria does for us. And for the next six weeks, Tony has also agreed to put together a "Spring Happenings" column that will recap the past week of Indians Spring Training action. This week, Tony is apalled that the Tribe brass is making Garko fight for a roster spot. Lastoria also hits on his sleeper to win the utility infield job, how the team will compensate for the loss of Keith Foulke, and Trot Nixon's injury developments.

For those familiar with the *Minor Happenings* piece from last year where I recapped all the news and developments in the Indians farm system each week, for the next six weeks I'll taking that same approach with the news and developments with the Tribe this spring, but with a little more commentary. Look for *Spring Happenings* each Saturday from here on out until camp breaks, and then for *Minor Happenings* to return every Thursday starting on April 12th.

Our Front Office Needs To Buy a Vowel…

…if they seriously decide to send Ryan Garko to Buffalo. Eric Wedge acknowledged in the ABJ this week that "Ryan's stats were legit (last year), and we were playing legitimate teams with legitimate pitchers….The only (mitigating) thing is that we were out of the race." Oh, ok. I see. I guess we now know the reason why Grady Sizemore almost did not make the team two years ago in camp, or why they chose Ramon Vazquez over Brandon Phillips last year. Pennant race experience. Guh.

Memo to Shapiro and company: Garko should be a lock to make this team. No question. Maybe this is all just lip service and he actually is on the team, and they just want to play it out publicly that there really is a competition for his roster spot. I hope so. Otherwise, this will be yet another example where the Indians once again pass on one of their own young prospects for yet another veteran retread.

The bottom line is this: there is no one in camp who can do what Garko does, which is provide a legitimate power right-handed bat to use off the bench late in games. Considering many-a-night they will have Trot Nixon and David Dellucci in the starting lineup because of a right-handed starter, the Indians need a viable alternative on the bench to turn to late in games when a lefty is brought in to face them. Lefties to Dellucci and Nixon are like kryptonite to Superman, they render them powerless and weak, and Garko would make an excellent substitute in such situations. I mean, come on, who would you have more confidence in as a pinch-hitter: Garko or someone like Hector Luna or Keith Ginter? Garko should also be the other half of the 1B platoon with Casey Blake and start at 1B against lefties when Blake replaces Nixon in RF.

So, if they do indeed send down Garko, this brain trust has a lot of explaining to do.

Rivas A Sleeper?

Count me as one who believes the utility infield job is Luis Rivas' to lose. He brings everything that the Indians are looking for in a utility player: very good defense and speed. Now, the one looming question about Rivas is whether he can handle shortstop since he hasn't played there in years. He originally was a shortstop in the minors, played well there for several years and had very good range with a good arm, but was moved his last minor league season to 2B to pair him up with Christian Guzman at SS. So, I am not concerned with his abilities at SS.

He will use the six weeks of camp as a refresher course at shortstop and by the end of camp, assuming he doesn't flame out, he'll win the utility infield job. Hector Luna would appear to be the favorite for the job, but I am going on a hunch Rivas gets the gig due to his superior defensive abilities and speed. Do note, I am not lobbying for him to be the guy, just predicting who I think will win the job.

Left-handed Head-scratcher

Apparently, Wedge is fine with opening the season with only one lefty in the bullpen, Aaron Fultz. I might be fine with having only one lefty if that one guy was a top shelf left-handed reliever, but to go into the season with Aaron Fultz as THE guy, much-less the ONLY guy is a disaster waiting to happen. Fultz is far from a dominating or even very good left-handed reliever. In fact, he is very average.

Now, I can't blame Wedge for this, as it is Shapiro's job to provide Wedge ample ammunition to go into a gunfight late in games and be able to matchup well and come out victorious many more times than not. But, Shapiro did not do this, and not properly addressing the left-handed relief pitching need is probably Shapiro's biggest mistake this off-season. The hope here, is that as camp moves along, one of the kids Juan Lara or Rafael Perez impress and show enough where the Indians add them to the opening day roster. However, given Shapiro's history with giving kids a job over veterans, those chances are extremely remote.

For a more detailed breakdown of Fultz, check out the bullpen preview from earlier this week.

Oops, They Are Doing It Again

According to Wedge , the problems the Indians had with shutting down the opposing team's running game last year is not solely the fault of Victor Martinez. Wedge claims that the burden also falls in the laps of the pitchers and the coaching staff, and that this spring the pitchers are working on holding runners.

Okay, I could swear I have seen this movie before. Didn't the Indians have their pitchers work extra hard on holding runners and all that fundamental stuff last year? That sure worked out well last year….not. While the coaching staff and pitchers can help limit the running game, the burden of this task falls squarely in the lap of the catcher. The Indians were tied in the AL for most attempted steals allowed with 162, while the Tigers were #1 in this category with 84 and the Twins #2 with 85. Now I am sure the Twins and Tigers coaching staff is a lot more in tune with what is happening on the field, I mean it is Leyland and Gardenhire versus Wedge here….but come on. Methinks those two outstanding defensive catchers in Detroit (Rodriguez) and Minnesota (Mauer) have a ton to do with limiting those attempted steal numbers. You think?

It is time for the organization to stop coddling Victor's deficiencies behind the plate. Sure, the Indians pitchers could use some additional work holding runners as there were times last year they inexplicably never checked the runners on base before throwing home, which gave several opposing runners huge jumps and left Victor with no chance at throwing them out. But, the onus here is on Victor to get his mechanics straightened out, which reportedly were all out of whack last year. If he can get out of the 15-18% range and back up to the low-to-mid 20% in caught stealing percentage, he'd be right around league average which is where he had been prior to last season and is acceptable considering the offense Victor provides.

Goleski Watch

One of the interesting subplots to watch develop during Spring Training is what happens with outfielder Ryan Goleski. For those that need a quick refresher on who Goleski is or what happened to him, I recapped the Goleski situation here back in December. In a nutshell, Goleski put up a great season in the minors last year, was left unprotected by the Indians in the Rule 5 Draft, and the Oakland Athletics quickly gobbled him up.

At this time, there appears to be no penalty coming the Indians way for the snafu with his injury listing. So, knowing that, Goleski will need to make the Athletics opening day roster or be sent back to the Indians. Right now, there does not appear to be an open spot for him on the Athletics opening day roster, and really only an injury to one of the other outfielders or an injury to Goleski can save him in Oakland.

More than likely, this will play out one of two ways: The Athletics give Goleski back to the Indians, or the Indians and Athletics agree on a trade so the Athletics gain full rights to Goleski to do as they please. Most people might say that given the Indians depth in the outfield in the

upper levels of the minors, the latter scenario is most likely to occur. But, I think the former happens as the Indians want him back and really hated losing him considering he was one of their only true big power right-handed bats in the system.

Stanford Sighting

Some may have forgotten about left-handed pitcher Jason Stanford, but he is still with the organization. After a nice debut in late 2003 and making the team out of Spring Training in 2004, Stanford was shelved after he was injured early in 2004 and had to undergo Tommy John surgery. Since then, Stanford has hung around in the minors rehabilitating his arm and trying to get to where he was physically prior to the injury. Stanford appeared to make it all the way back last year when he made 21 starts in Buffalo going 6-6 with a 4.01 ERA. Stanford is reportedly completely healthy now, is a quality left-handed pitcher, and is yet another starting pitching option the Indians should be able to call on from Buffalo this year if a need arises.

Jhonny Peralta, Meet Ray Charles!

Probably the biggest news from camp so far outside of the Keith Foulke retirement was the news that apparently Jhonny Peralta had some Lasik surgery done this off-season to correct a near-sightedness issue that plagued him all last season. Fielding the ball and throwing it has never been Peralta's problem, but getting to the ball - or in this case finding it - HAS been his issue at shortstop. Peralta's lack of range and poor positioning all last season was a huge problem, but with the news coming forth this week of his eye issues last year, it pretty much explains his Ray Charles impersonation at SS each night.

And you know what, I'm buying it. Most fans would be surprised that Peralta was actually a very good defensive shortstop last year when he got to the ball (this will be talked in more detail in the upcoming infield preview), but his big issue last year was his range. If in fact his eye problems did hamper him so much as to where he could not read the catcher's signs and properly position himself and anticipate where the ball would be coming, I can buy that argument. I'm game.

Maybe I am a sucker, but I think the eye issues may have had more an effect on his defensive performance last year than many think. Even his offensive game probably suffered from it, as how much did it affect him being able to read pitches and the spin on the ball? Yes, I admit to being overly positive on the Indians a lot of times, but this is not hyperbole on my part. We'll see, but color me excited after hearing of this news as I think Peralta may in fact be up for a nice rebound season. Now all that is missing is a story in camp to come forth that Victor was diagnosed with gout in his throwing arm last year, and that it has been medically treated and his arm is in great shape and better than ever.

Slowed To A Trot

First Keith Foulke, and now Trot Nixon? Reportedly, Trot has experienced some discomfort coming back from surgery this off-season to correct a herniated disc in his back and won't be ready to give it a full go until the end of the first week of March, and it will probably take all Spring Training to recover. Oh goodie. Shapiro is saying all the right things in that they fully expect him to be ready to play once the regular season starts, but anyone else see this as yet another of Shapiro's reclamation projects he signed this off-season blowing up in his face like a stick of dynamite yet again?

The one saving grace here, is that thankfully neither the Foulke or a potential Nixon loss are devastating. It would be the opportunity Shin-Soo Choo needs this spring to go out and perform well and effectively slap Shapiro in the face and say "What were you thinking?!" when Shapiro signed Nixon. By the way, the Nixon/Choo situation looks a lot like Grady Sizemore and Juan Gonzalez redux from 2004 if you ask me.

Sizemore Staying at the Top

Wedge seems to be in no hurry to move Sizemore out of the leadoff spot and down the order. Right now, Sizemore probably fits best hitting leadoff for this team. The guy is an extra base hit machine, and immediately sets the table for the middle of the order hitters. Plus, it ensures Sizemore gets as many plate appearances as possible in a game. But, Sizemore at some point needs to be moved down the order. Yes, those extra base hits are nice in setting up innings, but I would much rather have those extra base hits driving in players.

It is possible that when Indians mega-prospect Trevor Crowe finally breaks in with the team and settles in at the top of the order that Sizemore could then move down to 3rd in the lineup. But, that won't happen anytime soon, and probably not until mid-2008 at the earliest.

Hammy Goes Whammy

Probably the most comical news to come out of camp so far is what happened to Indians radio play-by-play announcer Tom Hamilton. Now, it is hardly funny when one tears their rotator cuff.

Ouch. Get well Tom. But how it happened should make Hamilton the brunt of jokes for awhile in the wigwam.

Hamilton injured himself in the Milwaukee airport recently while doing his best OJ Simpson Hertz commercial impersonation running *up* the *down* escalator. When Hammy got to the top he missed the last step and while falling used his arm to brace himself…..then rip. Needless to say, Hammy was embarrassed by the event but is having fun with the story. Hamilton will still be able to handle regular duties in the radio booth when Grapefruit League play starts March 1st, but as Hamilton would say, "How about that?!"

No Foulke? No Problem

The Indians writers here at TheClevelandFan.com recently opined on the loss of Foulke and what it means for the Indians. In a nutshell, it is not a disaster to the team, especially with Joe Borowski on the roster. And, it may be a blessing in disguise as it may have opened the door for a young pitcher to break camp with the team. It will be hard for one of the young arms like Eddie Mujica, Tom Mastny, Rafael Perez or Juan Lara to supplant Matt Miller or Jason Davis in the bullpen, but if one of those kids impresses don't be surprised for once to see Shapiro go with the young kid and ship out Davis.

The Marshmallow Diet

When the position players reported, Wedge commented on how a few players came to camp out of shape. There is no word on who they are since Wedge is not giving out names, but the two people mentioned often have been Hector Luna and Shin-Soo Choo. While Wedge did not openly name them, it appears that Luna especially came to camp out of shape, which is a red flag to me. Considering that the utility job is really the only position battle in camp, for one of the guys battling for the spot to come into camp out of shape is inexcusable. Especially the guy many thought was the favorite to land the gig.

Aubrey On The Mend

Indians 1B prospect Michael Aubrey is trying to re-establish himself this year and stay injury free. With the Indians in need of a 1B, getting Aubrey back and healthy would be a huge boost to the organization. Had Aubrey not been shelved with the injuries the last two years, he probably would have gone into Spring Training this year as the starting 1B. Aubrey's sweet stroke and slick glove would be a welcomed addition to the lineup, and if Aubrey ever can shake the injury bug, he and Garko would make a nice combination at 1B for a long time.

Random Happenings

After the starting five of Sabathia, Westbrook, Lee, Byrd and Sowers, the next four starters in line will be Fausto Carmona, Brian Slocum, Jason Stanford and Adam Miller. JD Martin could also enter that mix later in the season….According to Anthony Castrovince from MLB.com, the Indians did not forfeit a draft pick when they signed Keith Foulke. So, all the draftniks out there can rest easy….Paul Byrd's Back stiffened up on Thursday, but was expected to be back throwing batting practice in a few days…. Former Tribe 3B Travis Fryman is serving as an instructor this spring working with both big league and minor league players… The Indians Double-A affiliate Akron will play in an exhibition game against the Indians Single-A affiliate Lake County. The game is April 3rd, and will be played at Classic Park in Eastlake, home of the Captains.