Spring Happenings is a compilation of all the important news and developments from the past week from the various media sources that cover the Tribe. This past week, Cliff Lee was sidelined with an abdominal injury and eyesight problems continue to plague the Indians. Also, contract extension talks continue with Sabathia, Westbrook, Hafner, Shapiro and.....Wedge? Lastoria recaps the news...

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 rest of this month I'll be taking that same approach with the news and developments from the various media sources on the Tribe this spring. Look for *Spring Happenings* each Saturday this month until the final edition on March 31st, and then for *Minor Happenings* to return every Thursday starting on April 12th.

Mr. Versatility

Casey Blake will enter the season as the Indians regular first baseman when the Indians face a right-handed starter, but he will also play right field and sub for Trot Nixon when the Indians

face a left-handed starter, and at times he will also play third base to give Andy Marte a day off. Blake is the consummate professional, and always has a team-first mentality. Players like Blake are extremely valuable since having someone on the roster that can fill in at any infield and outfield corner position and be productive is a rarity. With Blake bouncing around the diamond, but yet playing virtually every day, he is what many consider a "super-utility" player.

For many players, this would be an extreme turnoff as most players do not like to be moved around the field so much. The Indians gave Blake the break he needed in 2003, and have stuck with him even in some tough times (2005). Blake knows that, so he is very open to bouncing around between several positions and doing whatever it takes to help the team.

Eyesight Epidemic

In 2005 and 2006, strained oblique muscles seemed to be an epidemic organization-wide. So, what is the he new plague? Well, it appears to be a rash of strained lateral and medial rectus muscles. In other words, eye problems. Last week, Jhonny Peralta came forth and mentioned he had eye issues all season last year and suffered from near-sightedness which affected his performance, so he had Lasik surgery performed in the offseason to correct the problem. Then, this week Brad Snyder pretty much put part of the blame for his problems at the plate last year on his poor vision.

Snyder commented this week that he had trouble seeing the ball all last season, especially at the plate. Snyder's eye issues stem more from an infection in his right eye in 2004 that reshaped his cornea. The infection left Snyder with blurred vision in his right eye, and while he uses contact lenses to help correct the problem, they have not helped much. After Snyder struggled so much the last two years (158 strikeouts in each of the last two seasons), the Indians put him in contact with eye specialist Dr. Bill Harrison in Laguna Beach, California. Dr. Harrison gave Snyder some eye exercises to use and a new contact lens prescription. To date, Snyder has raved how much clearer he is seeing, and that his eyesight is better than it ever has been.

Snyder has loads of potential. He has great bat speed and raw power, and can run and play defense very well. But the one thing that has held him back the last two years is his bat-to-ball ability, so hopefully the new contact lenses and eye exercises work for Snyder.

Cabrera a Utility Option?

Highly regarded shortstop prospect Asdrubal Cabrera is all but certain to start the year in Buffalo so the Indians can continue to groom him and work on his offensive deficiencies. That said, while it would be an extreme long-shot, Cabrera could possibly win the Indians utility job this spring. Cabrera definitely would fit the bill defensively at shortstop, which is something the Indians have stressed as the #1 need for the utility role on this team.

However, while Cabrera has gold glove ability at shortstop, he is still very raw offensively. In addition, the Indians usually do not like to have their top prospects fill key bench roles as they would rather have them play everyday in the minors. But, considering the Indians do have an open spot on the 40-man roster to add Cabrera, and also have a desire to fill the utility spot with a player who could fill the shortstop position long-term if needed, Cabrera is the best candidate of all the players in camp.

Gutierrez Doesn't Have Outfield Market Cornered

With Grady Sizemore firmly planted in center field for several more years, for Gutierrez to ever have a chance to make the Indians roster he will need to become not only a more consistent hitter, but also adapt and become a better corner outfielder. Gutierrez has proven to be an elite center fielder in his minor league career and short time in the majors, but for whatever reason Gutierrez has struggled when playing left field or right field. Gutierrez admitted this week that the outfield corners do give him some trouble because center field comes naturally to him since the game is in front of him, but in the corners things are so different considering the way balls come at different angles.

Prior to coming to the Indians, Gutierrez was once considered a good power prospect in the Dodgers organization, but an elbow injury in 2004 seems to have muted his power. His stature as a top prospect has taken a serious hit the past few years as injuries and a lack of production have knocked his projections considerably, although Gutierrez has taken huge strides with his plate discipline and cut down on his strikeouts. Gutierrez will likely start the year in Buffalo as the everyday center fielder, but he should get some time at the corners as well. It is also possible Gutierrez could be dealt by the end of camp as some teams (Florida) inquired of his availability in the offseason.

Fryman Mentors Marte

Fromer Indians third baseman Travis Fryman is in Winter Haven helping tutor some of the Indians young third base prospects, namely Andy Marte. During his time in Cleveland as a player from 1998-2002, Fryman established a strong relationship with Mark Shapiro. Recently, Fryman considered getting back into the game he loves in some capacity, and Shapiro afforded him the opportunity to work with the Indians as a third base instructor in camp. The timing is perfect, as the Indians probably could not ask for a better person to pair up with the promising Marte. Fryman was one of the best third baseman in the game in the 90s, and was a good producer, very good defender, and had an excellent work ethic. The 1990s Fryman is everything the Indians would be happy for Marte to become.

So far in camp, Fryman has been pleased with what he has seen from Marte. Fryman considers Marte "pretty darn solid defensively" and that he has "good hands, a great arm and he's good on his feet.' Fryman especially loves Marte's throwing arm and how he

trusts it to where he can play deeper because he knows he moves well coming in on slow grounders, and playing deeper gives him a that little bit of extra range. In addition to working exclusively with Marte, Fryman also will work with some of the other third baseman in the minors like 2006 second round draft pick Wes Hodges.

Atkins Settling into Director's Chair

Newly appointed Director of Player Development Ross Atkins is still settling into his role as the head man of the Indians minor league system. Atkins took over for former Farm Chief John Farrell when Farrell left this past offseason to be the Boston Red Sox pitching coach. Atkins and Farrell had a good working relationship for the past few years, as Atkins was the Indians Director of Latin American Operations and both he and Farrell worked hand-in-hand with overseeing the Indians academies in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

Because of Atkin's experience in the Indians organization for over a decade, the transition from his previous role to his new one has been pretty seamless, although up until about a month ago Atkins was in constant contact with Farrell when he had questions that surfaced. This spring, Atkins plans to sit down with each of the 180 or so minor leaguers in the Indians system to get to know them more personally.

Contract Extension Update

The Indians have been in constant contact with the agents for Jake Westbrook, C.C. Sabathia and Travis Hafner throughout camp. The Indians intend to keep the lines of communication open up until the end of camp, but if a deal cannot be completed when the regular season starts talks will be delayed until the end of the season. The only exception to this would be if they are close to a deal, and in that case the two sides will continue to hammer out the details of a contract the first month of the season. We saw this in 2005 when Sabathia, Hafner and Victor Martinez all signed contract extensions in April that year.

Speaking of Contract Extensions...

Shapiro has stated he will not discuss a contract extension with Eric Wedge until after the 2007 season. With Shapiro about ready to sign a contract extension, this news from Shapiro may represent a shift in the Shapiro/Wedge relationship where in prior years both were considered attached at the hip. Two years ago, when Shapiro's contract was extended, the Indians also extended Wedge to coincide with Shapiro's deal that runs through 2007. While Wedge is signed through this year, the Indians do hold club options on him in 2008 and 2009. Waiting until after the season may be a sign that the Indians want to see how this season plays out, and that maybe some of Shapiro's loyalty to Wedge has waned.

New Pitch For Byrd

Paul Byrd is a pitch-to-contact type of pitcher, but he has been hammered by left-handed

batters in the past - lefties hit .369 with a .972 OPS against him last year. To aide in his attempt to neutralize the effectiveness lefties have against him, Byrd has added a split-finger fastball to his repertoire this year to use almost exclusively against left-handers. Byrd recently had success against lefties when he used a changeup, but he feels the split-finger will help him more. Byrd will spring training as a means to test the new pitch out and get become more comfortable using it.

Grady's Day Off

Grady Sizemore played all 162 games last year (159 starts), and currently has a streak of 196 consecutive games played which is fourth longest among active players, but Eric Wedge plans to break that streak at some point this season and rest Sizemore. It should be noted that Wedge did try to give Sizemore two days off last year, but in both instances he was used in the game as a pinch-hitter and stayed in the game. While Sizemore is a relentless competitor and never seems to tire, the Indians want to keep him strong all season. In the event that Sizemore gets a day off, the Indians plan to use Jason Michaels in center field.

Last Chance For Aubrey

First base prospect Michael Aubrey continues to be on the mend. Aubrey has never had a problem hitting, it is just staying in the lineup and avoiding injury that has been the problem. Aubrey is healthy, but this is a make or break year for Aubrey to prove to the organization that he can stay healthy. With so many players in need of roster protection next winter and so little spots available on the 40-man roster, if Aubrey continues to battle injuries in 2007 and can't stay on the field he could be waived.

Starting Rotation Set

This past week, Indians manager Eric Wedge laid out the way the starting rotation will shape up to start the season. Barring injury setbacks, C.C. Sabathia will start opening day on April 2nd in Chicago, Jake Westbrook April 4th versus the White Sox, Cliff Lee April 5th versus the White Sox, Jeremy Sowers on April 6th in the home opener against Seattle, and Paul Byrd April 7th versus the Mariners. Fausto Carmona will be the 6th starter, and will go back to Buffalo to continue to work on consistently repeating his delivery, refine his mechanics, and keeping his emotions in check.

Early Game Highlights

The Indians have only played two spring training games, but there have been some noteworthy highlights. Victor Martinez led a potent first game going 3-for-3 with a 2B, HR and 3 RBIs. Also, Paul Byrd pitched two innings giving up no runs and one hit, Jake Westbrook only threw 26 pitches in his two innings of work, Ryan Garko was 2-for-3 with an RBI in game one,

and in their second game Casey Blake, Kelly Shoppach and Ben Francisco all homered.

The talk of camp after the first two games is the impressive double play that Jhonny Peralta and Josh Barfield turned in the first game. Peralta went far to his right deep in the whole at shortstop and made a quick throw to Barfield who followed it up with a nifty turn to first base in a play most thought was not possible to double up the runner at first. Indians officials have been beaming with Peralta's inspired play in camp.

Infirmary Report

Cliff Lee suffered a right abdominal strain last Saturday. The injury is not considered serious at this point, and for now the plan is to shut him down for a few days and re-evaluate him at that time. Since it is early in camp and it is only spring training, the Indians will obviously be overly cautious with the injury.

Trot Nixon did not participate in any of the intra-squad or spring training games this week, and probably will not play for at least another week. Nixon is still recovering from offseason surgery on a herniated disk in his lower back.

Relief pitcher Roberto Hernandez is coming off knee surgery this offseason and has had limited action in camp so far. He has thrown in the bullpen, and is expected to pitch in today's game.

While Trevor Crowe has participated in on-field workouts, he still is not 100% healthy. About two weeks before camp opened, Crowe battled an upper respiratory ailment and he is just trying to get his legs back.

Random Happenings

Indians manager Eric Wedge plans to get Travis Hafner more playing time at first base this season ... All players on the Indians 40-man roster are signed ... A Seattle Mariners fan site has started a campaign to hire Indians Assistant General Manager Chris Antonetti as their next general manager in 2008 ... Atkins has been particularly impressed with pitching prospects Adam Miller and Chuch Lofgren early in camp and how they have stayed within themselves by not trying to do something different to impress club officials ... The Indians soured on Shin-Soo Choo as a platoon option mostly because they envision him as an eventual everyday player and would rather him start the year in Buffalo playing everyday and facing left-handed pitching on a regular basis ... Non-roster invite Luis Rivas has a March 28th out clause in his contract, and Keith Ginter can request his release on June 1st ... While some of the Indians top prospects are already in camp, the rest of the minor league pitchers and catchers report March 4th and the position players report and March 6th.