On a bird down to Winter Haven as we speak, Tony Lastoria checks in with his weekly update on what's going on in Spring Training. Tony reports that Luis Rivas is winning the battle for the utility infielder job, and that Adam Miller could find his way to Cleveland THIS YEAR. Also, he provides updates on Cliff Lee's injury, the battle for bullpen spots, and the prospects that are surprising in camp. Tony will be checking in all next week with updates galore from Winterhaven ... so don't forget to check back in.

Spring Happenings is a recap of the news and developments from the various media sources covering the Tribe and minor league affiliates this spring. Spring Happenings will continue each Saturday this month until the final edition on March 31 st, and then look for Minor Happenings to return every Thursday starting on April 12th.

Utility Billing

The Indians are not very happy with Hector Luna's physical condition, and as a result the door has opened for the other utility candidates to win the utility job opening. Luna went into camp as the favorite to win the job, but so far he has shown limited range in the field and has been an error machine (four errors in six games).

His stock has definitely dropped, especially after the Indians sat down with him at the end of last season and explained to him what they expected of him going into 2007 and what he could do to improve his game. The Indians wanted him to get in better shape and work on his lateral quickness, but to date he appears to have gotten worse in both those areas. While the Indians are publicly saying otherwise, Luna's defensive play early in camp may end up getting him ticketed to Buffalo or even traded/released.

Ultimately, the winner of the utility gig will come down to who plays shortstop the best since the Indians have placed such a premium on it. Joe Inglett has not been able to take advantage of the opportunity as he has been battling a sore hamstring for a few days, but Mike Rouse and Luis Rivas have jumped all over the chance they have been given as both turned in an impressive first week of game action.

Rouse has been solid in the field, and a the plate he has shown good pop. Rouse is 6 for 19 (.314 avg) with a double, triple, home run and 3 RBIs. Rivas has been even more impressive as he has done everything Wedge is looking for in a utility player. Not only has he done well in the

field, he has hit well going 5 for 17 (.294 avg) with 3 doubles and 4 RBIs. Also, he laid down a perfect bunt base hit and made the defensive play of spring training to date with a sensational play in the infield earlier in the week.

It was definitely a banner week for Rivas and Rouse, and may have pushed them to the front of the utility line. Rivas and Rouse clearly look more hungry to win the job, and it might be the difference and the deciding factor between them and the unmotivated Luna. Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro has said that he will wait until the third week of March to make a decision on whether the utility infield job can be filled with one of the players in camp or it he will need to go out and make a trade to get the help he needs at the position.

Lee To Miss More Time

Well, apparently Cliff Lee's abdominal injury is a lot more serious that originally thought. So much so, that he may end up starting the season on the disabled list. Lee was unable to throw a scheduled bullpen session on Thursday because of continuing pain in his strained abdominal muscle, and the Indians will have Lee attempt to throw one more bullpen session this Sunday before taking more drastic measures.

If Lee is unable to throw his bullpen session on Sunday, he very well could start the season on the disabled list. The reason being, the Indians would shut Lee down for about two weeks, which would not leave Lee enough time to get his arm in shape to start the season. The Indians are being overly cautious with Lee's injury, but they do realize the clock is ticking on opening day which is only a little over three weeks away. If Lee starts the season on the disabled list, Fausto Carmona is the heavy favorite to replace him, although there is the very small possibility someone else may creep into the 6 th starter mix (more on that below).

Bullpen Watch

Right now, it is almost a certainty that the final three spots in the Indians bullpen will go to Fernando Cabrera, Jason Davis and Matt Miller. Barring a trade or injury, Davis and Cabrera have to make the team since both are out of options. If they do not make the team, they would have to be exposed to waivers before being sent to the minors, of which a team would most definitely claim them. Davis and Cabrera are potential late-inning relievers down the road, but for now should be the sixth and seventh options in the bullpen and be used primarily in the 5 th, 6th and 7th innings and also in long relief.

The final bullpen spot would appear to be the only question mark, although Matt Miller has a pretty firm hold on that spot as well. Miller does have an option remaining, but if he is healthy there would seem to be no way he could not make the team. Miller is an outstanding matchup righty, and could be a valuable pitcher out of the bullpen to use in one batter situations in games similar to how a lefty specialist (LOOGY) is used.

The Indians are publicly saying there is an open competition for the final spots in the bullpen, but when doing the math it seems pretty obvious it is a foregone conclusion that Miller, Cabrera and Davis will get the final three spots. If one does get injured or traded, it could open the door

for a Tom Mastny, Juan Lara or Eddie Mujica to make the team.

High Praise

Put Detroit Tigers manager Jim Leyland down as one who believes the Indians are in for a rebound year. After getting shellacked by the Indians last
Saturday afternoon, Leyland commented on the Indians in The Detroit News and said:

"I'm worried to death about them to be honest with you. …They're really good. They remind me of my Pittsburgh situation when we were starting to get good, had a good year (1988), made a little cosmetic run, but the following year things just didn't go right for us. …The year after that, though, we took off and won three straight (NL East titles). I don't want to speak of other clubs, except for the fact that they're really good. They'll be right back in the thick of things, in my opinion."

That's a pretty big compliment from a manager in your own division, and Leyland is a straight-shooter and not one to stroke other teams by talking them up.

Miller Buzz Increasing

The Indians organization as a whole has been very impressed with Adam Miller's performance in camp. Even players are taking notice of Miller, as C.C. Sabathia made sure to stick around and take in a Miller appearance which left Sabathia "very impressed."

The Indians believe Miller is ready to start in the big leagues right now, although do acknowledge that for him to reach maximum ability he needs to be "finished off" in Buffalo. At Buffalo this year, the Indians plan to work on his fielding and controlling the running game, as well as learn to attack a lineup by using video and statistics. Miller's injury in 2005 may prove to be a blessing in disguise. While 2005 ended up being a lost year of development for him, the injury has made him become a better pitcher.

Carmona Rebounds

Fausto Carmona seems to have rebounded well from his one week nightmare as the Indians closer last year. For most young pitchers, what he endured might have ruined him for years as he struggled to regain his confidence. But, Carmona bounced back late in the year with a couple nice starts, and when pitching winter ball he regained his confidence and was able to trust his stuff again. Carmona went 1-1 with a 3.48 ERA for Aguilas, and his 38 strikeouts in 31 innings ranked second in the league.

Carmona has admitted that while he thinks he did not pitch that bad in the closers role last year, he is most ashamed with the way he handled the situation. Many times he lowered his head in a "disgraceful manner" because he was having problems adjusting to the role, and it is something he hopes makes him tougher down the road.

Carmona vs. Miller?

While Carmona has been tabbed the Indians 6th starter and likely would replace Cliff Lee in the rotation if he has to start the season on the disabled list, don't count Miller out. The Indians already appear to be backtracking somewhat after they tabbed Carmona the 6 th starter earlier in camp saying "he would obviously be the favorite, but no job is given to him."

If Cliff Lee starts the season on the disabled list, could Miller trump Carmona as the 6th starter and be the starter the Indians go with instead? It is not likely, especially when you consider how fragile Carmona probably already is, and also how the Indians want to keep Miller in the minors to finish him off. That said, I have a funny feeling about this one. If Miller continues to dominate like he has so far in camp (5 IP, 0 runs, 2 hits, 0 BBs and 2 Ks), he could make it a tough decision for the Tribe brass.

Blake Works On Infield Only

So far in camp, everything Casey Blake has done has been at first base and third base, and he has not worked out in the outfield at all. A lot of this is due to the Indians wanting to give Blake as much work as possible at first base, which is the position he will play at most of the time this season. Blake also needs more work there, since in his four years with the Indians he has played sparingly at first base.

Also, he is getting consistent work at third base, which is a position he needs to get reacquainted with since he has not played there in over two years. Even though he is not getting work in the outfield, Blake will play there when the Indians face a left-handed starter as he will replace Trot Nixon in right field and Ryan Garko most likely will start at first base.

No Golf For You!

Apparently, Sabathia has put his golf game on hold in order to help prevent another right oblique strain. In each of the last two seasons Sabathia has missed time and been on the disabled listed with an oblique strain, and this is his way of doing what he can to avoid the injury from reoccurring. This decision was made entirely by Sabathia as the Indians did not pressure him (or others) to put their golf games on hold. Sabathia's rationale behind this? Golfing and pitching have the same movement and body rotation. If this keeps Sabathia pitching every fifth day fo the Indians all season, it works for me.

The Ben Francisco Treat

Outfield prospect Ben Francisco has opened a lot of eyes this spring with his performance to date, and the Indians love his ability to play all three outfield positions, his speed on the base paths and the pop he has in his bat. So far, in just 16 at bats this spring, Francisco is hitting .438 with 2 home runs and 4 RBIs.

Francisco is doing a lot to prove the Indians made the right choice in protecting him from the Rule 5 Draft this past December. The Indians decided to protect Francisco over the power bat of Ryan Goleski because they valued his speed and defense much more. Goleski ended up

being the first pick in the Rule 5 Draft (Oakland), so it remains to be seen if the Indians are able to get Goleski back. However, one thing is for certain, and that is Francisco is playing himself into the Indians good graces. If Francisco proves he can handle a 4 th outfield role, it may make Franklin Gutierrez available to use in a trade.

Aubrey Sighting

While first base prospect Michael Aubrey has no restrictions physically, the Indians are being extremely careful in working him back into action this spring. Aubrey has battled numerous injuries over the last three seasons, which have left him with essentially a season's worth of games in three years of play. Aubrey battled back and knee problems last year that resulted in him getting into just 14 games.

In his limited time in the minors, Aubrey has a career .311 batting average and is slick with the glove. The Indians are doing everything they can to get Aubrey through camp healthy and back on the field playing. Aubrey has played sparingly in five games and is 3 for 7 (.429 avg) with a double and RBI this spring. Had he not suffered so many injury setbacks, he very well might have been the Indians starting first baseman going into this season. He likely will start the season at Akron.

The Buffalo Rotation

We already know the Indians starting rotation will be C.C. Sabathia, Jake Westbrook, Cliff Lee, Jeremy Sowers, and Paul Byrd. So, who are the next five? Well, the Buffalo rotation will consist of Fausto Carmona, top prospect Adam Miller and Brian Slocum. The other two spots in the rotation will come down to two of the following three players getting the job: Rafael Perez, Jason

Stanford, and Jeff Harris. Stanford has already been considered a starting option by Eric Wedge, so he likely is the 4th starter, and the decision will come down the prospect (Perez) or veteran (Harris) for the 5 th starter spot. Both would likely get a spot in the rotation if Carmona or Miller start the season in Cleveland if Cliff Lee is put on the disabled list.

Whitney On the Move

Indians prospect Matt Whitney has been moved from third base to first base. Whitney is a one time top prospect who many scouts thought would zoom through the Indians system and provide the Indians with a potent right-handed bat for years at third base. But, a broken leg in 2003 sidetracked his career, and ever since he has struggled to regain the mobility to effectively play third base. The move to first base was long overdue as he has DHed a lot the past three seasons, and the move may help him concentrate more on his hitting at the much less demanding position of first base.

Welcome To the Big Leagues Kid

It was a tough debut in big league camp for heralded young left-handed pitcher Chuck Lofgren. In his first taste of big league action, Lofgren was torched to the tune of six runs (five earned) in

only a third of an innings work. He did bounce back in his second appearance and threw a scoreless inning. Lofgren is pegged to go to Akron and anchor a fine Aeros starting pitching staff.

Infirmary Report

Right fielder Trot Nixon is set to make hs Indians debut today in right field. Nixon had been absent from Grapefruit League activity because he was still working back from offseason surgery to repair a bulging disk in his lower back.

Joe Inglett is day to day with a left hamstring strain, and might be out for a little while. This is the third muscle strain or pull that Inglett has suffered in camp as he earlier strained his left and right quadriceps muscles, which has Inglett concerned. The reason for the concern is because Inglett has a history of leg problems since he has torn both quads and both hamstrings before and missed considerable time in 2001, 2002 and 2003. With the injury, it pretty much removes Inglett from any consideration for the utility infield job or making the opening day roster.

Right-hander Brian Slocum also has a strained left hamstring which has kept him out of game action to date. He threw a 40-pitch bullpen session on Thursday and is scheduled to pitch his first game today (Saturday).

Victor Martinez was sent home early on Friday with a non-baseball medical condition. Apparently, the ailment is not considered to be one that will keep him out of action long.

Random Happenings

The Indians appear deadset on getting Travis Hafner more time at first base this year. The plan is to use him at first base as to give manager Eric Wedge more options at DH and first base. … The secret to Sowers success? Getting out hitters early in the count. He says, "It's that much less information you're giving the hitter for his second or third plate appearance." … The Indians feel top outfield prospect Trevor Crowe is having a tremendous camp, and that he could be the player that eventually pushes Sizemore out of the leadoff spot. … This past week, the city of Goodyear, AZ approved the final agreement that will move the Indians spring training operations there starting in 2009. Goodyear will design and construct a 10,000-seat ballpark and training complex for the Indians. … All the Indians minor league players are now in camp. The first workout for the pitchers and catchers was on Tuesday, and the position players first workout was on Thursday. The first minor league spring training game is March 16th.