Back in town after a full week in Winter Haven covering the team for us, Tony has all sorts of nuggets of goodness in this week's edition of "Spring Happenings". Tony got a chance to rub elbows with several members of the Indians organization last week, and senses that with Mark Shapiro now extended through 2012, that more contract extensions are coming. Tony also hits on a myriad of different topics from spring training in this weeks column as well. A great read.

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 31st, and then look for Minor Happenings to return every Thursday starting on April 12th.

Shapiro Extended Through 2012

Late last week, Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro agreed to a five-year contract extension that keeps him in Cleveland through the 2012 season. Shapiro's current deal was set to expire at the end of this upcoming season, and being one of the most respected young general managers in the game he would have been highly sought by any team with a general manager opening next offseason had he not signed his new pact with the Indians.

Team President Paul Dolan felt it was crucial to retain Shapirop, and hammered out a new agreement with him saying "We've gone from a non-contender to contending team the past two years. The architect of all that is Mark Shapiro. He's done a brilliant, masterful job turning the organization around." The Indians are positioned to be a good team for a long time because of the depth on their major league roster and in their farm system, which is mostly credited to Shapiro's hard work. But, now he needs to find a way to get over the playoff hump and get this team to the postseason.

So, What Extensions Are Next?

With Shapiro extended and in tow through the 2012 season, the question now is who is next? Not only is Jake Westbrook a pending free agent after this season, and C.C. Sabathia and Travis Hafner free agents after next season, but several coaches and executives in the Tribe front office have contracts expiring this year.

The obvious question, is what is going to happen with Indians manager Eric Wedge? Wedge's contract expires after this season, although the Indians have club options on him for 2008 and 2009, so they do control him through 2009. With that in mind, the Indians plan to

take a wait and see approach with Wedge this year and see how things play out before considering giving him a guaranteed contract extension for him. As they should.

It should be noted that this is a shift in the way Shapiro has handled Wedge in the past, as in the past him and Wedge have been firmly joined at the hip. So much so, when Shapiro was given an extension two years ago, Wedge also got one that coincided with Shapiro's contract that ended after 2007. Clearly, Shapiro and Wedge were to sink or swim together through 2007. But, now that Shapiro is extended, Wedge is no longer given the luxury of having Shapiro come to his aide, and it appears Shapiro has finally been able to separate him loyalties to Wedge enough to replace Wedge if needed at any time this season or after the season. Although, from this corner, I don't see Wedge going anywhere, and feel he will be extended sometime between now and the offseason.

In addition to Wedge, the Indians also have several key members of their baseball operations staff in contract limbo. Shapiro's right-hand man and confidant Assistant General Manager Chris Antonetti, Farm Director Ross Atkins, Assistant General Manager Neal Huntington and Director of Player Personnel Steve Lubratich all have contracts that expire after the 2007 season. Most of these executives will likely be retained, although Antonetti is a general manager in the making and could decide to move on to a new club if a general manager job opens up.

So, in addition to all the contract extension talk with Westbrook, Hafner and Sabathia, there will likely be some announcements made in the coming weeks regarding Shapiro's assistants. Shapiro was only the first domino of what should be several more dominos that will likely fall from now until the end of the season with players, coaches and/or executives being extended.

Lee Sidelined Longer Than Expected

Cliff Lee strained his abdominal muscle a few weeks ago, in fact he did it the second time he threw batting practice to hitters in camp. He was scratched him from his first spring training start on March 2nd because of the abdominal strain, and has been shelved since.

Lee had been scheduled to throw a bullpen session late a little over a week ago, but it never happened. The Indians ended up shutting down Lee for seven to ten days, and late this upcoming week Lee should start a four to six week rehab. Lee will not be ready to resume his starting pitching duties for the Indians until late April or early May, barring any further injury setbacks.

With Lee Out, Who Goes In?

The Indians keep saying the door is open for anyone to be the player who replaces Cliff Lee in the starting rotation. The obvious front-runner is Fausto Carmona since he was tabbed the sixth starter even before camp started. Earlier in the week Eric Wedge said that "Carmona is not locked in" and that "he needs to go out and take it", but this is mostly just lip service from Wedge to keep Carmona and other players working hard for the job opening. Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro laid it out much better by saying

"based on a wealth of information coming into camp, it was Carmona's job to lose. And he's done nothing to lose that job."

Unless Carmona is injured, or the Indians pull off a huge surprise, Carmona will be on the Indians opening day roster as Cliff Lee's replacement in the starting rotation. As impressive as Adam Miller has been, the Indians need to start him off in Buffalo this year to continue his work on developing into a pitcher. The situation would be different if the Indians did not have another good option, but with Carmona ready to assume starting pitching duties in Cleveland it is the right choice to go with Carmona over Miller at the outset.

That said, Miller is not far from making his major league debut. To date, he has thrown nine shutout innings in camp and has done so without his best stuff. Bottom line, Miller is the prize of the organization and the Indians do not want to rush him since development is their top priority with Miller. Indians fans will see Miller in the starting rotation sometime this year.

Final Bullpen Spot Update

For all intents and purposes, the Indians seven man bullpen when the season opens will be Joe Borowski, Roberto Hernandez, Aaron Fultz, Rafael Betancourt, Jason Davis, Fernando Cabrera and Matt Miller. Since Davis and Cabrera are out of options, the only real question mark going into camp was who would win the final bullpen spot.

Going in, Matt Miller had the edge and if he stays healthy he will win the job. Miller's main competition, Tom Mastny, is expected to go to Buffalo and will be the first bullpen option the Indians will turn to when a need presents itself. Still, you have to wonder, as the Indians in the offseason felt it necessary to invest $5 million in Keith Foulke which would have pushed one of Miller, Davis or Cabrera off the team had Foulke not retired. But, now appear to not be actively looking for a Foulke replacement and seem to be fine with those players they were unsure about in the offseason.

In any case, there is likely to be a lot of turnover with the final bullpen spot all season, as no team goes through an entire season with the same opening day bullpen. Indians fans will see the likes of Mastny, Eddie Mujica, Rafael Perez, Juan Lara and others sometime this year.

Peralta Praise

The buzz around camp so far this spring may be Jhonny Peralta. Gone is the nonchalant attitude, and in is a renewed enthusiasm and spring in his step on the field. Whatever it was that Peralta did to re-dedicate himself in the offseason, it apparently has worked thus far. Of course, everyone looks good in spring training, so it remains to be seen how much of a rebound year Peralta is in store for until the games start to really count. Nonetheless, this is still a good sign that Peralta seems much more focused this year, which will be a huge boost to this team in 2007. Peralta is hitting .300 (9 for 30) with 0 home runs and 5 RBIs this spring.

Jake's New Curve

Westbrook is a sinkerball pitcher who usually pitches to contact and induces hitters to pound the ball into the dirt. But, Westbrook has been working on improving his curve ball, which he has rarely used in the past and is his fourth best pitch. Westbrook's thinking is that with a curve ball in his arsenal it will help put away more hitters with two strikes and give them something else to think about.

First and Second Cuts

Early last week, the Indians announced their first cuts of the spring. They optioned outfielder Brad Snyder to Triple-A Buffalo, reassigned catcher Javi Herrera to minor league camp, and also reassigned left-handed pitchers Scott Lewis, Chuck Lofgren and Aaron Laffey to minor league camp.

Late in the week, the second round of cuts came in. Right-handed pitcher Eddie Mujica and left-handed pitcher Rafael Perez were optioned to Buffalo, first baseman Michael Aubrey and right-handed pitcher J.D. Martin were optioned to Double-A Akron, and shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera, catcher Max Ramirez, and left-handed pitcher Jason Stanford were reassigned to minor league camp.

None of these moves were particularly surprising, although Mujica and Perez will likely be seen again in the bullpen at some point this season in Cleveland. Most of the other players are ones to keep an eye on in the minors this year as they will very much figure into the Indians future plans starting as soon as 2008.

The 3rd Catcher

Meet your Cleveland Indians third catcher: Mike Rose.

While the Indians have a plethora of catching talent in the minors in Wyatt Toregas, Max Ramirez, Matt McBride and others, in the event Victor Martinez or Kelly Shoppach go down due with an injury, the Indians will callup Rose to fill the backup catcher need. Rose is expected to be the everyday catcher at Buffalo to start the season. Rose has impressed the Indians with his offense this spring, most importantly his hard-nosed style of play. Rose, 30, is a career minor league journeyman who has played in 1025 minor league games and only 27 major league games (54 at bats). In his minor league career he has a .263 batting average with 85 home runes and 418 RBIs.

Martin Stronger Than Ever

Young pitching prospect J.D. Martin is still recovering from Tommy John surgery in 2005 that saw him miss the entire second half of 2005 and the first half of 2006. Since the surgery, he has not suffered any major setbacks. Like a lot of pitchers, though, Tommy John surgery has increased his confidence and his fastball velocity has increased from the high 80s prior to surgery to where it now sits in the low 90s after the surgery.

What the Indians like most about Martin is he attacks hitters, and has one of the best pitchers' makeups in the organization. The key will be health for Martin, and if he can come back strong in 2007 he could immediately shoot into the Indians starting pitching plans sometime in 2008 and at worst be a depth starter.

Martin is expected to start the season in Akron as part of an impressive starting rotation that will also include top pitching prospects Chuck Lofgren, Scott Lewis and others. The Indians are slowly ramping Martin up for regular action without any limitations, and will continue to closely monitor Martin's pitch count in games and will have him on a stricter pitch count than other pitchers in the organization.

Buffalo 5th Starter?

With Indians starter Cliff Lee going on the disabled list to start the season, projected Buffalo Bison's #1 starter Fausto Carmona likely will start the season in Cleveland. Prior to Lee's injury, the Buffalo rotation was expected to be Carmona, Adam Miller, Brian Slocum, Jason Stanford, and one of Jeff Francis, Rafael Perez or even Aaron Laffey.

With the Indians wanting to stretch out Perez, the Indians may opt for a platoon for the 5th spot by rotating Perez and Francis in the scheduled 5th starter spot with the other serving as the long man in the bullpen. Or, it is possible a door may have been opened for right-hander Sean Smith to get a crack at the Buffalo rotation.

Rule 5 Update

Just a quick peek to see how Rule 5 Draft selections outfielder Ryan Goleski and right-handed reliever Jim Ed Warden are doing in camp with their new teams: Goleski is hitting .156 (5 for 32) with 0 home runs and 2 RBIs in 13 games with Oakland this spring. Warden has struggled with the Phillies as well, going 0-1 with an 8.31 ERA in five games and 4.1 innings pitched.

This is good news for Indians fans, as their struggles could end up having them sent back to the Indians since the Athletics and Phillies may not want to waste a roster spot on them if they feel they are not ready to help them. Both of these teams are contending teams, so they can ill afford to stash a player on their 25-man roster who cannot help them at the outset of the season. There is also the possibility of a trade being completed between the Indians and the Athletics/Phillies to give them full rights to Goleski and Warden. This should all shake itself out within the next two weeks.

Infirmary Report

Indians outfielder Trot Nixon debuted in the outfield last Saturday, making his first appearance in a game as a Cleveland Indian. Since then, the Indians have been careful with Nixon and have limited his playing time so his body can get back into baseball shape after off-season back surgery to repair a bulging disc. For now, the Indians plan on playing Nixon

only a few innings every other day.

Utility infield candidate Mike Rouse had to leave Thursday's game after being hit in the right foot by a pitch from Tampa Bay's Seth McClung. Rouse was removed from the game as a precaution, and his foot was bruised, but he did not require X-rays. Rouse is not expected to miss any time.

Another utility infield candidate, Joe Inglett, is close to returning to action. Inglett has been out of action since March 5th because of a left hamstring strain, and is supposed to be ready to get back into game action early this coming week. Unfortunately for Inglett, the injury was enough to remove him from consideration for the utility infield job. Needless to say, he will be with the Indians at some point this season.

First baseman Michael Aubrey is injured again. Aubrey has been a walking MASH unit since being drafted by the Indians in 2003, and has missed considerable time in each of the last three seasons with leg and back injuries. Aubrey has a mild hamstring strain from running to first base, and is listed as day-to-day.

Random Happenings

Catcher Victor Martinez returned to the Indians last Saturday after being sent home the previous day with a non-baseball medical condition. … Right-hander Brian Slocum made his spring debut last Saturday, working a scoreless inning. Slocum had been slowed by a sore left hamstring. … Casey Blake has yet to play any outfield in practice or in games this spring, but he is still expected to play there during the season, especially against left-handed pitchers when he replaces Trot Nixon in right field. The Indians have told Blake he will make a few starts in the outfield near the end of camp. … Paul Byrd continues to try out his new split-finger pitch, and the results have been positive so far. … Yesterday, left-hander Jeremy Sowers pitched five innings in Triple-A Buffalo's matchup with Toledo and gave up no runs, four hits, one walk and three strikeouts. Indians backup catcher Kelly Shoppach also started for the Bisons and caught Sowers. … Wedge says a decision has not been made on whether Ryan Garko will make the opening day roster, and that it may be another seven to ten days before a decision is made.