Last night's loss notwithstanding, by virtue of the Indians taking two of three from the Tigers in Motown, they are back in the driver's seat of the AL Central. In Paulie C's latest, he takes a look at the way things break down the rest of the way, noting that CC, Fausto, and Jake will start 20 of the team's final 35 games. Paul also notes that help could be coming when rosters expand, and takes a look at who the Tribe may go to on September 1st.

After taking 2 of 3 in Detroit (and despite the events of Friday night), the Indians again find themselves firmly in charge of their own destiny and hope to have turned that corner that seemed so elusive for the past month and a half. Truthfully, though, for all of the crying about how the Indians have missed the opportunity to run away with the AL Central due to lack of offense with the ridiculously dominant starting pitching that we've had, the Indians now have a record of 18-21 since the All-Star Break. In fact, in their first 16, they were 8-8. In their first 27 since the break, they were 13-14.

Is it a great model of consistency to play at or around .500?

Certainly not and surely it would have been nice to run and hide with the division while the Tigers really struggled. But it's not like this team has been losing 2 of every 3 games since the Break…it just feels like it.

Regardless, 1 ½ games up in the AL Central feels like a pretty good perch today.

But what can be expected going forward?

As has been discussed before, the team's success for the playoff push is going to hinge on the continued ability of the rotation to keep the team in every game, regardless of offensive output. And, seriously, with Carmona, Sabathia, and Westbrook going like they are, I'll take my chances going forward and (not to throw the jinx out there) in a playoff series.

Consider these numbers:

In August, the aCCe, the Faustastic One, and Jake have combined for a 2.11 ERA, a 0.95 WHIP, and nearly 3 times as many K as BB over their 14 starts in August.

What was that, Eck?

Oh, I agree completely - WOW!

For the balance of the season, the breakdown of anticipated starts for the rotation for remainder of the season, including Laffey's start tonight look like this:

Sabathia – 6
Carmona – 7
Westbrook – 7
Byrd – 7
Laffey – 7
Spot Starter for one game of September 26th doubleheader – 1

Regarding Laffey and Lee, the announcement came earlier in the week that Aaron Laffey will get the start on tonight as the 5th starter over Clifton Phifer Lee, and it's hard to argue with it if the Indians are adopting the idea of putting the best players on the field, regardless of age, experience, or contracts (please tell me

that they are).

Laffey went 2-0 with a 1.93 ERA and a 1.14 WHIP in two starts since being sent down, while Lee has been less impressive, going 0-1 with a 4.72 ERA and a 1.65 WHIP over his last 3 starts for the Herd. Laffey's pitching with more confidence and with more of a sense of purpose than Lee, so it's right for the Tribe to hand the ball to the hot pitcher and ride it out.

If The Taffyman struggles, Lee's there to take his place and probably with a bigger chip on his shoulder than before. But, if Laffey continues at the rate he's going, unaware that he's pitching in MLB (Jair Jurrjens, anyone?), the Indians just found their 5th starter for the stretch run.

With the rotation seemingly locked in, the lack of a viable 4th reliever continues to be troublesome as nobody has stepped forward to take that 6th inning role (which really hasn't been needed recently); but is there help on the way?

Maybe.

Amazingly, September 1st is rapidly approaching and rosters can be expanded to help the parent club. MLB rules dictate that, for a player to be promoted for September, the player must be on the 40-man roster. So, who's on the 40-man roster, but not on the current 25-man active roster?

Pitchers

RHP Mike Koplove
LHP John Koronka

LHP Juan Lara
LHP Cliff Lee
RHP J.D. Martin
RHP Matt Miller
RHP Brian Slocum
LHP Jeremy Sowers

PLUS whoever gets sent down when Laffey is called up for Friday's start (likely RHP Edward Mujica).

Not much to look at here, though Matt Miller could help eat some innings and serve as a match-up RHP while Cliff Lee could serve as the long man/spot starter (particularly for one of the games of the September 26th doubleheader) for the team.

Of course, it’s possible that Lee could be kept in Buffalo so Victor can keep his sparring gear in his locker, but the Indians are going to be faced, at some point, of needing some potential length out of the bullpen and will surely need someone to start a game on September 26th, so Lee would probably return.

It’s likely that Sowers would stay in Buffalo to continue getting consistent starts and stay on pace for his inning-count progression. The rest of these guys are just roster filler, although Koplove and Koronka do have MLB experience, albeit with not very distinguishing results.

Position Players

1B Michael Aubrey
MI Joe Inglett
3B Andy Marte
OF Shin Soo-Choo
OF Ben Francisco

OF Brad Snyder

Position player-wise, with Dellucci's return being pushed back (as he's not even able to make a rehab appearance), it's extremely likely that Big League Choo (the BLC) will make a return trip to Cleveland to add a LH bat off of the bench, some defense, and speed. Francisco would do much of the same from the right side of the dish, existing primarily as a late-inning defensive replacement or pinch runner.

Inglett could get promoted, I guess, though his role is already being filled by Chris Gomez. Perhaps Inglett can come up only if he promises not to shave his newly-grown mustache (of which a picture can be seen in the article detailing Lastoria's visit to Buffalo) to provide some comic relief. Marte, Aubrey, and Snyder (of whom Marte is really the only one who could still be called a promising prospect, and that's pushing it) will likely stay in Buffalo to maximize plate appearances.

Beyond that list are players not yet on the 40-man roster that will have to be added to it in the off-season to avoid being eligible for the Rule 5 Draft. With these players, it's possible to add them to the 40-man now and get rid of some of the excess baggage (Koronka, Lara, etc), then add them to the Tribe.

The players who will be Rule 5 eligible after this year:

Pitchers

RHP Adam Miller
RHP Sean Smith
LHP Mariano Gomez
LHP Scott Lewis
RHP Randy Newsom
LHP Shawn Nottingham
LHP Reid Santos

RHP Jim Ed Warden

Position Players

C Wyatt Toregas
C Chris Gimenez
1B Ryan Mulhern
MI Rodney Choy Foo
MI Argenis Reyes
OF Brian Barton
OF Jon Van Every

Again, not much jumps out here, particularly if the Indians want to keep Atom Miller on a regimented schedule in low-risk pitching situations. Ryan Mulhern might get a look as a RH power hitter, as might Barton – but both would fall pretty far down the list of options. They could always add another catcher to the mix (whether it be Toregas or Gimenez or just call up some AAA defensive specialist like David Wallace, just to serve as an emergency 3rd catcher) to give the added insurance of carrying a 3rd catcher.

These discussions and arguments regarding the minutia of the final spots on the bench and bullpen can be considered for quite some time (hopefully as we sit on some insurmountable leads in Kaufmann Stadium).

For today, let's enjoy the view from the top.