Heading into the final month of the season, taking a look at the evolution of the current construction of the Indians' roster is nothing short of unprecedented. Over 50% of the tribe's opening day roster is either gone or glued to the bench. Yet the Indians find themselves 21 games over .500, and with one of the best records in baseball. Unlike previous seasons, the Indians have promoted from within, and it has paid off handsomely.

Heading into the final month of the season, taking a look at the evolution of the current construction of the Indians' roster is nothing short of unprecedented.

Consider for a moment how this team looked coming out of Winter Haven for Opening Day:

Sabathia
Westbrook
Byrd
Lee
Sowers
Davis
Cabrera
Hernandez
Mastny
Fultz
Betancourt
Borowski
Martinez
Shoppach

Garko
Barfield
Peralta
Marte
Rouse
Blake
Nixon
Sizemore
Michaels
Dellucci
Hafner

The players not on the active roster are in bold and if you're counting at home, that's 8 players from the Opening Day roster not on the team (yes, I know Dellucci is hurt and is allegedly returning soon – but for all intents and purposes, he has not been contributing for some time); so that means that nearly 1/3 of the 25-man roster is different today than it was on Opening Day.

When turnover like this on a roster takes place it usually means that either the injury bug has hit the team hard (thankfully, not true) or the team is out of contention and has moved the veterans to play youngsters to see what they have (like the Tribe did late in 2006). Since neither of those things have taken place (the team is healthy and firmly in contention), the turnover in roster is amazing. Even more amazing than that is the fact that Dellucci has been the only player lost to a significant injury (everybody knock on wood…now…and hard), as both Lee and Westbrook returned from oblique strains and Pronk's lingering "issues" (there has to be some) have not been catastrophic for this team.

Now, look at the list above again. The Indians are also no longer getting significant contributions from Mastny (although I know he's still on the team because I keep seeing him warm up during Borowski's tightrope walks), Fultz, Barfield, Nixon (pies notwithstanding), or Michaels.

Adding those 5 to the 8 in bold above and the number of players not playing a vital role on the current team from Opening Day is a staggering 13! That's over 50% of the Opening Day roster that finds themselves either elsewhere (like Buffalo), on the DL, glued to the bench, or remain in the dark on how to work the lock on the bullpen door.

Yet, this team has firmly established itself as the leader in the AL Central and is (arguably) playing their best baseball as the calendar flips to September.

Additionally, seeing as how the only players that the Indians currently use that were outside of the organization at the dawn of the 2007 are Kenny Lofton and Chris Gomez, these facts speak volumes about the depth and quality of the Indians organization and talent evaluation of young players.

Essentially, the lion's share of replacements that are fueling the current team's run didn't come via trade or from other organizations. They came from nurturing the crops down on the farm. The list of players called up and contributing is long and illustrious with Carmona, Laffey, Perez, Lewis, Gutierrez, and Cabrera playing enormous roles in the club's current surge.

But four players have distinguished themselves this season, some with a nice career progression, and others out of nowhere to put the team where it is today – sitting atop the AL Central with (as of today, **courtesy of Baseball Prospectus**) an 86% likelihood of making the playoffs:

The Faustastic One

Going into the season, Carmona was thought to be the all-important 6th starter with the hope that the train wreck that was his 2006 season wouldn't ruin his confidence (remember the stuff was ALWAYS there as he was a ridiculously good set-up man before imploding as a closer) and that he could rebound into a fill-in if an injury happened.

Now if those are the expectations (to simply be able to rebound and become a serviceable MLB starter), Fausto just sunk your Battleship because he's blown everything you thought you knew about baseball out of the water en route to a Cy Young-caliber season, in effect saving the rotation as Westbrook, then Lee, suffered through injuries and ineffectiveness and somebody exposed Jeremy Sowers to Kryptonite.

What Carmona has done is nothing short of extraordinary, acting as the 2nd ace of the staff, propelling the team to victory after victory. Carmona, too, is doing it with a pitching arsenal that has been described as "filthy", "nasty", "not fair", and "makes you feel like you're hung-over", as he has complemented his sinking fastball with a slider and a change-up. Carmona's learning curve has been so

quick that he's already arrived as a PITCHER, and not just a thrower. How long did we wait for Bartolo Colon or C.C. to make that transition?

Interestingly, the pitcher that I keep hearing as the comparison for Carmona is Kevin Brown – another sinkerballer who complemented his nearly-unhittable sinking fastball with secondary stuff that generated some phenomenal years. Brown was nothing short of dominant for those years with the Marlins, Padres, and Dodgers as his average year from 1996-1999 looked like this:

17-6, 2.50 ERA, 1.06 WHIP

Um..yeah. I'll take that production over the course of a few years.

But Brown didn't post these gaudy numbers until he was 31, so it could be argued that it took him the 7 previous seasons in a starting rotation to perfect his arsenal. By comparison, the maturation for the 23-year-old Carmona (yes, 23) has taken about 4 months.

American League hitters, be afraid…be very afraid.

The Scarecrow

For some quick perspective, the list of relievers (not on the 25-man Opening Day roster) thought to be ahead of Rafael
Perez in the organization breaking Spring Training:

Matt Miller
Mike Koplove
Edward Mujica

You might even put a guy like Tony Sipp ahead of Perez in the organizational depth chart (though not likely) to show how Perez certainly wasn't widely thought to be a viable candidate to become a regular contributor in Cleveland this year, much less one of the most important players on the team.

By the way, don't even ask where Jensen Lewis started the season on the organizational depth chart in April. It's not on the first page, maybe not the second.

But back to the skinny LHP with the wicked slider, who really solidified the back end of the bullpen as much as the success of Borowski and Betancourt did. What Perez's emergence did was shorten the game to 6 innings as he grabbed that 7th inning role and ran with it.

At the beginning of the season, that 7th inning role was seen as up for grabs and we sat and watched Hernandez age before our very eyes, Aaron Fultz proved to be effective only when starting an inning and a disaster with men on base, and Tom Mastny proved to be…well, Tom Mastny.

Perez worked his way up the bullpen ladder from garbage innings-eater to match-up lefty to dominant reliever. Not limited to only facing LH, Perez has proven to be effective against all comers (note the 3 swinging K's in the 8th inning of Thursday's game against LH Jose Guillen, LH Raul Ibanez, and RH Adrian Beltre) and has been nothing short of a lockdown reliever in tight spots with runners on base.

His development as a pitcher, and possibly as a future option as a closer, will be an interesting storyline to watch as most of the other relievers developed and nurtured by the Tribe have flamed out (CaBBrera, Jason Dangerously) at some point, forcing the Indians to rely on retreads and reclamation projects to fill the bullpen. Perez could be the trailblazer for a line of solid relievers to emerge from the Tribe's farm system and could turn out to be the one that they all eventually hand the ball to when the 9th inning rolls around.

Frank the Tank

Entering 2007, Gutz was a bit of an enigma to the organization, with his talent and tools not yet translating to Big League success and stagnating in Buffalo. Coming out of Spring Training, the depth chart for OF in the organization broke down like this:

Sizemore
Michaels
Dellucci
Blake
Nixon
Choo
Francisco

Gutierrez

That would be Frankie, #8 on a list that mans 3 positions.

But something happened to the Tribe's well-intentioned plans coming out of Winter Haven. Andy Marte struggled at 3B, then got hurt, moving Blake out of the OF mix. Choo was called up, then Francisco was in early May, but both were sent down days later as Frank got the call on May 6th. A mere 13 days later, he was sent back to Buffalo when Marte was ready to return. As Marte continued to struggle, Andy was sent packing and Gutierrez returned on May 31st.

Following all of these roster moves?

This time Gutz was in Cleveland to stay…just not necessarily to play. He kept himself busy splitting time with Trot Nixon in RF, logging 54 AB in June and 49 AB in July. Through his success in limited time (.882 OPS in June, .891 OPS in July) and some success against RHP (his HR against Beckett in the 1-0 win particularly stood out), Gutierrez did what every organization wants their young players to do – force their way into the everyday lineup with solid and consistent play.

When finally inserted into the everyday lineup, Gutz drastically improved outfield defense with his speed and arm while providing more power, speed, and athleticism to bottom of lineup than the Trotter could bring to the ballpark every day.

Gutierrez has continued his excellent play, particularly in the field and with his speed on the basepaths, and has claimed a legitimate stake on the RF job every day for 2008 and beyond. While the Indians certainly must have HOPED that this would have been the step that Gutz would have taken in 2007, his presence and consistency has laid the Oliver Stone OF (Platoon…get it?) to waste and has contributed to a stable lineup and a huge upgrade in speed, athleticism, and defense – something sorely needed for the playoff push.

AstroCab

If the players above constitute "pleasant surprises" and "talent realized at an opportune time", Cabrera would fall under the category of, "who's?…doing what?…".

Realizing fully that you're completely tired of seeing depth charts from 5 months ago, consider the ladder that Drooby Drooby Droo climbed in regards to Middle IF:

Peralta
Barfield
Rouse
Rivas
Inglett
Luna
Cabrera

You could even throw Keith Ginter in there above Cabrera if you're just talking about possible Utility IF.

Consider now that the Indians went outside of the organization to add Chris Gomez (and that there are all of two positions for Middle IF to play) and Cabrera's ascent into the #2 hole in the lineup and a crucial role on this contending team's stretch run is worth a double take.

When Cabrera was acquired for Eduardo Perez (who said the other night, tongue firmly in cheek, on Baseball Tonight that the Tribe got the best of the deal to nab Cabrera from Seattle), he was thought to be a great glove, no hit player who had been rushed through the Mariners' organization as he had just turned 20 and was playing at AAA Tacoma. The Indians assigned him to Buffalo, where he played like you would expect a 20-year-old in AAA to play – inconsistently.

Going into 2007, the Tribe decided to start him in Akron to let him get his feet wet and earn his way to Buffalo (which, remember, was the halfway house for retread MI Rivas, Inglett, and Luna). Seeing as he was still 20 (turned 21 on August 8th of this year, by the by), it was a decision that couldn't really be argued.

But, all AstroCab (this supposed reincarnation of Felix Fermin – smooth glove, spotty bat) did was hit. He posted a .310/.383/.454 line in 96 games in Akron with 23 doubles, 8 HR, and 54 RBI. With the Mighty Rouse struggling to put bat on ball (and put glove on ball, truthfully), the Tribe decided to see how he would handle Buffalo this time around. Showing remarkable consistency, Asdrubal posted a .316/.350/.395 in his 9 games as a member of the Herd.

With the Indians no longer able to handle Rouse's inconsistency on the roster (and the Buffalo Blowhards not doing anything to impress), the Tribe called up Cabrera, mainly to spell a struggling Barfield and for the ability to have a dependable late-inning defensive replacement. Of course, soon after Asdrubal arrived, the Indians decided to bench Barfield and give Gomez and Cabrera a shot.

In effect, the situation could not have been better for Asdrubal. If Murphy's Law is "Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong," maybe Asdrubal's Law is the opposite as everything fell neatly into place for him to get his chance. And he has certainly seized it, providing a spark to a (at the time) listless offense and providing steady glove work in the field. He shows no signs of being overwhelmed by adjustments or of being intimidated by his new surroundings (the HR against Santana being the clincher), so he's acting and playing like he belongs and that he has no plans of making the return trip East on I-90 to Buffalo. Watching him play, it's hard to argue that he should even consider it.

But, as exciting as AstroCab's performance on the field has been, the incredible thing about Cabrera's success (albeit in a very small sample size) is his age. Again, he just turned 21 three weeks ago, and looking at recent Middle IF who made their first real contributions in MLB at either age 20 or 21, it is a pretty impressive list with players like Alan Trammell, Roberto Alomar, Lou Whitaker, Willie Randolph, and Ozzie Guillen offering a range of players with varying degrees of success.

Expand it to age 22 and the list doesn't have much of a drop-off, with the likes of Barry Larkin, Omar Vizquel (yes, Omar), and Ryne Sandberg dotting the high end.

Of course, you'll also run into the likes of Mark Lewis, Jerry Browne, Miguel Cairo, Luis Rivas, and D'Angelo Jimenez as young infielders that debuted at a young age but never progressed much past being a Utility IF (or worse).

With only the early returns in, it looks like Asdrubal is the Real McCoy, exhibiting a nice approach at the plate (though that BB number could be higher) and a smoothness and fluidity in the field not seen here since (gulp…should I say it…dare I throw these expectations on this youngster) Omar.

Regardless of where he ends up playing (2B or SS) or what we say about him 10

years from now, Asdrubal (by the way, I'm getting a lot of flak for AstroCab and a movement is gaining ground that he could be the next first-name-only-player – like Omar, Manny, Grady, Victor, C.C., Fausto, etc. before him), his inclusion on this team and his accomplishments to date are above and beyond what even the most optimistic prognosticator would predict.

Had anyone predicted in April that these four players (plus Lewis and Laffey) would be playing a vital role in the season, you likely would have scoffed in disgust that all that would mean is that the Indians were experiencing a lost season.

Had that same person predicted that these players would be playing crucial roles in a playoff race, playing for a team sitting on top of the division by 4 ½ games as August draws to a close, you would have laughed at their blind optimism.

Yet, here we find ourselves, getting contributions from players we certainly didn't see coming (for the most part) as the Indians find themselves relying on a bumper crop of youngsters produced by the farm system, and perhaps more talented than players available via Free Agency to make their push for the postseason.

Baseball's a funny game that way, the unexpected (regardless of how unexpected) is often the norm and the smartest baseball people are right as often as the guy calling the sports-talk radio show (best example I can think of for the dumbest people in the world).

The future is now for the Indians, the Minor Leagues are producing quality players that are arriving at fortuitous times, and youth is being served on the North Coast.