The way Paulie Cousineau sees it, the Indians have just a couple of decisions to make over this final week of the regular season as they head into the playoffs. They need to decide between Jake Westbrook and Paul Byrd as the starter of game three of the ALDS. And finalize the playoff roster. Paul says 19 of the 25 spots are in stone, and breaks down the final decisions for the Tribe, as well as tackling the Jake/Paul debate for us in his latest.

Now that the champagne and beer have been washed out of the laundry and the eyes of most Indians players figure to be decidedly less bloodshot (there's a TREMENDOUS **recap of the clincher here**), it's time to realize that, while the goal of winning the AL Central has been achieved, the journey is far from over and the "To-Do" list remains long and daunting.

Still left to do in the last week of the season, first and foremost, is to finish with the best record in baseball, ensuring home-field advantage throughout the playoffs and allowing the Indians to choose the ALDS option that permits one more off day than the other.

As most know by now, by playing in the "longer" ALDS, the Indians would have the opportunity to throw Sabathia and Carmona twice each in the 5-game series, a decided advantage that the Angels (with Lackey and Escobar) would also love to have while the Yankees and Red Sox (with the anticipation of facing either Cleveland or Anaheim's front end of the rotation) would rather avoid due to their lack of an obvious #2 (unless you really think Pettitte deserves that title).

The Tribe also still needs to flesh out their playoff roster of 25 players who will

best serve them in the short ALDS. The players with a "locked down" roster spot make up an easy list to compile just by knowing who has played in the last month...then it becomes a little cloudier.

Position Players (11)

Martinez
Shoppach
Garko
Hafner
Cabrera
Peralta
Blake
Lofton
Michaels
Sizemore
Gutierrez

Starting Pitchers (4)

Sabathia
Carmona
Westbrook
Byrd

Bullpen (4)

Borowski
Betancourt
Perez
Lewis

That brings the total to 19, leaving 6 spots to be determined. If conventional wisdom holds true, and the Tribe takes in 14 position players and 11 pitchers, it leaves 3 spots open for position players and 3 for pitchers.

On position players, one would have to think that **Chris Gomez**, whose versatility and performance have been invaluable since coming over from Baltimore, would make the cut, as would

Josh Barfield
, who would serve as a pinch runner (his baserunning gaffe last week considered) for the playoffs due to his speed and the fact that he's played that role since Asdrubal got the nod at 2B.

The final spot would come down to Nixon or Francisco and, while the Trotter has remained the prime example of what this team is NOT (older, lost a step, etc.), I don't see that there's any way that The Frisco Kid makes the roster over him and it has nothing to do with "veteran grit". It has everything to do with the fact that Nixon is LH and that Francisco and Michaels are, essentially, redundant as the same RH bat off of the bench. While I'd rather see Nixon used to make sure that the post-game celebratory spread is in order than logging actual postseason innings, **The Trotter** gets the last spot for the position players.

On the pitching side of things, it would seem that the two relievers not listed above who have been used (albeit in garbage innings, except for one instance) are **Aaron Fultz**
and
Tom Mastny
. Since it's unlikely that Juan Lara or Mike Koplove is suddenly going to thrust themselves into the postseason plans in the final week, those two are about as much of a lock as the other 4 listed above.

The final pitching spot is entirely murkier with Aaron Laffey, Cliff Lee, and Jeremy Sowers as the candidates to fill the role of long reliever in the playoffs since the Indians are not in need of a 5th starter in the playoffs. Production-wise, Laffey is the obvious choice, but do the Indians really want a 21-year-old with 17 career relief appearances (all in the minors and only one above Kinston) stepping in to relieve a mess that's been created by a starter?

Um...no.

Then Sowers, who will be getting the start on Wednesday to keep the pitching order intact, is the pick, right? The same Sowers that has ZERO relief appearances in his professional career, will be thrown to the wolves under the hot lights of the playoffs to build his suddenly-fragile confidence back up?

Again, no thanks.

No, as much as it pains me to say this given his 2007 performance (6.40 ERA, 1.55 WHIP, the scrape with Victor, the ridiculously self-centered comments to the media about "broken bat hits" and the like, the sarcastic cap tip to the fans that put the gas in his car to Buffalo), it seems that the final playoff roster is destined to fall in the lap of **Clifton Phifer Lee**. The manner in which the Indians have used Lee in the past month (3 straight relief appearances) seems to tip their hand that this was the idea all along. It's true that Lee's appearances out of the bullpen have been for 1 inning, 1 inning, and 2 innings, but the length is there in Cliff's arm for him to eat up some innings in case one of the starters falls flat on his face. Lee's last game (2 IP, 0 ER, 1 H) will hopefully be what he would bring to the table; but, truthfully, if ol' Cliffie comes sauntering out of the bullpen in the ALDS, bigger problems exist in the game than the fact that Cliff Lee is coming to the mound.

With those decisions put to bed (in my mind at least) the other task facing the Tribe in the final week is to set up their rotation for the playoffs and, more importantly, determining who would pitch Game 3 of any playoff series.

The candidates are, obviously, Jake Westbrook and Paul Byrd and by simply looking at their season stats, the decision looks obvious:

Westbrook
6-9, 4.32 ERA

Byrd
15-7, 4.55 ERA

Byrd gets the start, right?

Oh, how misleading simple wins and losses are.

Don't believe me? Just look at the fact that Cliff Lee received more Cy Young votes in 2005 because of 18 wins instead of the more-deserving ERA Leader Kevin Millwood, who finished with 9 wins and realize that more factors (outside of simple W-L) need to be considered.

Take first the records of the two pitchers, career-wise and in 2007, against the both of the possible opponents for the ALDS:

Westbrook

Vs. Boston (career)
6 GS, 3-2, 4.81 ERA, 1.93 WHIP, 12:19 K/BB ratio

Vs. Boston (2007)
1 GS, 0-1, 7.50 ERA, 2.23 WHIP, 6 IP, 1 K, 4 BB

Westbrook

Vs. NYY (career)
7 GS, 2-4, 5.29 ERA, 1.59 WHIP, 27:22 K/BB ratio

Vs. NYY (2007)
2 GS, 0-2, 12.46 ERA, 2.42 WHIP, 8 2/3 IP, 3 K, 4 BB

Byrd

Vs. Boston (career)
7 GS, 4-2, 4.12 ERA, 1.30 WHIP, 3:1 K/BB ratio

Vs. Boston (2007)
1 GS, 1-0, 1.50 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, 6 IP, 1 K, 0 BB

Byrd

Vs. NYY (career)
8 GS, 1-4, 4.44 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, 1.93:1 K/BB ratio

Vs. NYY (2007)
1 GS, 0-1, 31.50 ERA, 4.00 WHIP, 2 IP, 1 K, 1 BB

Yikes.

OK, are we all completely freaking out now and REALLY looking to get that longer series?

While Byrd has had overall success against Boston, the Yankees have had their way with him (particularly in his one outing against them this year) and Westbrook

has historically struggled against both teams, though one of his starts against the Yankees came on April 17th, when his health was far from a certainty.

Perhaps just as (and probably more) important as how these pitchers have fared against the potential competition is to consider how each has pitched recently, which is to say how each is trending in their past 10 or so starts.

The last two months for each starter, starting with their more recent appearances:

Westbrook

9-23 vs. OAK (W) - 7 IP, 2 ER, 4 H, 2 BB, 9 K
9-18 vs. DET (W) - 5 IP, 3 ER, 12 H, 2 BB, 4 K
9-12 vs. CWS (L) - 6 IP, 4 ER, 7 H, 1 BB, 5 K
9-7 vs. LAA (L) - 7 2/3 IP, 2 ER, 5 H, 5 BB, 2 K
9-2 vs. CWS (L) - 5 IP, 3 ER, 11 H, 3 BB, 6 K
8-28 vs. MIN (W) - 6 2/3 IP, 3 ER, 10 H, 2 BB, 4 K
8-23 vs. DET (W) - 8 IP, 0 ER, 5 H, 2 BB, 3 K
8-18 vs. TB (W) - 7 IP, 1 ER, 2 H, 2 BB, 4 K
8-12 vs. NYY (L) - 7 IP, 4 ER, 9 H, 2 BB, 2 K
8-7 vs. CWS (W) - 8 IP, 1 ER, 2 H, 0 BB, 5 K
8-2 vs. TEX (W) - 6 IP, 0 ER, 5 H, 1 BB, 5 K

Jake's numbers over the last two months has the team going 7-4 in his 11 starts (though that's not his W-L record) with an ERA of 3.07, a WHIP of 1.28, and 49 K to 22 BB.

He's also gone at least 5 innings in all 11 starts, with only 2 of those starts totaling less than a full 6 innings, so our workhorse Jake (the one who we all expected out of Spring Training) is back and is hitting his stride at the right time. The encouraging sign is that Jake, despite his predilection for giving up hits (and lots of them in some games) has yet to give up more than 4 ER in any of his last 11 starts, and has let up 4 only twice.

The bottom line on Jake is that, while it may not be pretty if the groundballs are finding the holes, he'll keep the Indians in the game and grind out innings to get the ball to the reliable portion of the bullpen, often with a lead.

Byrd

9-22 vs. OAK (L) - 4 1/3 IP, 6 ER, 9 H, 2 BB, 3 K
9-17 vs. DET (W) - 7 1/3 IP, 4 ER, 10 H, 1 BB, 0 K
9-11 vs. CWS (W) - 6 1/3 IP, 3 ER, 6 H, 1 BB, 1 K
9-6 vs. LAA (L) - 4 2/3 IP, 5 ER, 8 H, 1 BB, 5 K
9-1 vs. CWS (W) - 9 IP, 0 ER, 4 H, 2 BB, 3 K
8-27 vs. MIN (W) - 6 IP, 3 ER, 6 H, 1 BB, 0 K
8-22 vs. DET (W) - 5 1/3 IP, 3 ER, 6 H, 2 BB, 4 K
8-17 vs. TB (W) - 6 IP, 1 ER, 8 H, 1 BB, 5 K
8-11 vs. NYY (L) - 2 IP, 7 ER, 7 H, 1 BB, 1 K
8-6 vs. MIN (W) - 9 IP, 0 ER, 4 H, 1 BB, 1 K
8-1 vs. TEX (L) - 5 1/3 IP, 3 ER, 10 H, 2 BB, 3 K

Again, in Byrd's last 10 starts (though it is not his W-L record) the Tribe has gone 7-3 while Byrd has compiled a 4.82 ERA and a 1.42 WHIP.

Suddenly, it's a nice problem to have, choosing between these two to start Game 3, isn't it?

But examining the numbers a little more closely brings up an issue.

Byrd's complete game shutouts against the White Sox and the Twins tend to skew his numbers. Take out those two starts and his ERA jumps to 6.65 and his WHIP jumps to 1.73, during which he threw some real clunkers - going 2 innings, 4 1/3 innings, and 4 2/3 innings in 3 of his last 10 starts. Throw in the fact that he hasn't lasted at least 5 innings in 2 of his last 4 starts, and the alarms start sounding.

Thus, looking analytically at the recent performance of the two options, Westbrook is really the no-brainer starter for Game 3 as Byrd becomes probably the first 15-game winner (or maybe a 16-game winner, depending on his start this week) that gets passed over for a playoff start and maybe a start in a whole playoff series. Certainly this is no condemnation of Byrd, whose steady contributions throughout the season cannot be underestimated. Very simply, a better option for Game 3 exists and the fact that the Indians have the luxury of throwing a 15-game winner in Game 4 (if needed) speaks to the depth and quality of the Tribe rotation.

The other factor to consider (if the Tribe gets locked up in the longer ALDS) is that Byrd's "change of pace" may be better served as a long man in case a long reliever is needed in the series and his rubber arm seems more well-suited to possibly pitching out of the bullpen than a "rhythm pitcher" like Westbrook.

An argument can be made that Carmona and Westbrook are both RH sinkerballers and shouldn't be thrown back-to-back in Games 2 and 3 to mix up the type of pitchers that the opposition sees. That logic would dictate that either C.C. will have to concede to Fausto in Game 1 (you want to give our aCCe that news?) or, again, Byrd gets the nod over Westbrook.

The inherent problem with the argument, however, is that saying that Carmona and Westbrook are similar pitchers because they're both RH and throw sinkers is like saying that Morton's and Ponderosa are both similar because they serve steak. Not to discount Jake as a pitcher, and devalue him as some sort of an all-you-can-eat buffet of steak, but with Westbrook (like Ponderosa) you know you're getting a dependable start (or meal) that will satisfy. It may not knock your socks off, but the desired result is achieved and everyone goes home fat and (hopefully) happy.

Carmona is that special night, the start that you have butterflies before because the chance of him pitching a no-hitter is always out there. Seeing him warm up, knowing that Torii Hunter is somewhere thinking of too many Crown Royals from the previous night, the anticipation of what's coming is like when that guy at Morton's wheels the angioplasty cart over to your table and you do your best not to fill up on bread as you breathlessly wait for the masterpiece that awaits you.

One hurdle has been cleared, but more (before the playoffs even start) remain as the Indians need to find a way to continue the momentous ride they find themselves on this week while keeping players fresh and rested, yet sharp and focused, as the Tribe sets themselves up for their ALDS opponent, both in terms of roster settlement and rotation order.