Will CC's contract negotiations become a distraction for the hefty lefty and the rest of the team? Who will break camp as the fifth starter? Who will capture the seventh and final spot in the bullpen. Suddenly, it's spring, and Paulie C checks in to address all of these questions for the Indians faithful as pitchers and catchers get set to report to Winter Haven. Part II, addressing questions with the lineup, posts later this week.

Spring Training is coming!

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That's right boys and girls, spring is around the corner (no matter what the Dual Doppler Radar tells you) and pitchers and catchers are scheduled to report to Winter Haven on Thursday. With this exciting news FINALLY actually happening, it's time to take a quick look at some of the questions that the Indians are looking to resolve or that may linger throughout the spring.

While the roster is essentially set and few MAJOR questions need to be answered (remember the "3B Derby" that was eventually "won" by Casey Blake in 2003...ugh), questions still abound for the Indians, regarding contracts, how the back end of their rotation and bullpen figure to play out, and what the projected roles of certain players are for 2008 in the lineup and on the field.

With so much to delve into (and finally something concrete to talk about not related to projections), I'll divide the preview into two parts, starting with the pitchers:

Will C.C.'s Negotiations be a Distraction?

Keeping in mind that baseball players are human beings and not cyborgs simply programmed to throw, hit, and catch a ball, it would be folly to assume that the negotiations between C.C. and the Indians aren't hovering above the team. As much as the players will spout sound bytes that "we just take care of what we can control" and that they "don't really think about that kind of stuff", it's impossible to think that the team isn't anxiously waiting to see if their best players, and an unquestioned leader, on the team signs a long-term deal with the club. Do you think that the rumors, innuendo, and gossip that take place at EVERY other workplace somehow don't pass through clubhouse doors? The players are fully aware of how the roster (sans C.C.) is essentially locked in through 2010 and that an extension for C.C. would cement the players in place for an extended look at the trophy for longer than just 2008.

While some have compared the C.C. situation to that of Albert Belle, in that his departure would not exactly start a mass exodus by the core players in ensuing years (those crazy things called contracts prevent this) and that the player would potentially be leaving behind a very good team, the fundamental difference is that C.C. is well-respected and liked (unlike Joey) in the clubhouse. It is true that C.C. would not (like AB before him) be leaving a "sinking ship" if he were to leave, but the players are very aware that the team is better with C.C. taking the pill every 5th game. They're certainly not thinking (as some may have with Belle) that seeing him walk away could actually positively affect the team.

If C.C. were to sign an extension, it would undoubtedly provide a shot of enthusiasm and energy for the team as the Spring wore on, with the message that the current incarnation of the team would stay intact for the foreseeable future, that all distractions were out of the way for the chase of the AL Central flag (and more), and that the Indians were (likely) willing to step outside of their "comfort zone" to lock up their aCCe. Of course, conversely, if the negotiations drag on and on, it could certainly distract a team that would have to ponder their future (whether they would ever admit it in public or not) without the Big Fella toeing the rubber past this year.

Even if no agreement is reached, it will provide a distraction if only for the horde of reporters that will be asking the SAME question over and over again between rounds of golf and dinners at the Outback in Winter Haven.

Who Will Break Camp as the 5th Starter?

The prohibitive favorite for the 5th starter is, of course, the Indians' welterweight contender, Clifton Phifer Lee. With a tip of the cap and a quick discussion in the tunnel leading to the clubhouse, Lee's contract and the fact that the Indians used his last option last year would put Lee firmly in the drivers' seat for the spot, for better or worse. Whereas Five and (f)Lee is out of options and is guaranteed to "earn" $3.75M in 2008, the pitchers thought to be his main competitors, Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey both have options remaining and can be sent to the Buffalo rotation to provide the depth that proved so valuable in 2007.

Of course, the school of thought exists that the Indians should break camp with their best team right out of Winter Haven...guaranteed money, roster issues, and remaining options be damned. If that were the philosophy of the team, the 5th starter spot would become an open audition with all of the actors given equal shots at earning the part. This philosophy, which sounds great in theory, has its flaws though. Namely, if Laffey or Sowers beat Lee out for the 5th spot, the Indians would essentially be forced to transition Lee to the bullpen (something his agent has publicly stated is against Lee's wishes...like that should matter), cut Lee and eat his salary, or trade him at the absolute lowest value possible.

Now, since Lee has essentially voiced his aversion to becoming a reliever, that the Indians (like pretty much any other team in MLB) would be adverse to eating the $10.5M left on his contract ($3.75M this year, $5.75M next year, and a $1M buyout to decline his 2010 option), and the fact that the Tribe was (allegedly) dangling Lee all winter with no takers, the best option would be to simply allow him to start the season as the 5th starter and hope that the effects of the oblique strain that Lee was never able to overcome in 2007 can finally be overcome and he can, at the very least, contribute what a 5th starter is expected to do for 2008.

That all being said, the trade option could actually be intriguing, especially if Lee proves himself to be healthy in Winter Haven; but the more relevant factor in moving Lee before the start of the season could be something completely unrelated to Lee. The Indians have developed a preference for being "7 deep" in their rotation, a strategy that bore fruit last year with Carmona, and later Laffey. If either Laffey or Sowers is thought to be more deserving of the 5th spot than Lee, the decision to move him may come down to the performances of the players that would then be the 7th, or even 8th, starters in the Tribe depth chart - namely players like Atom Miller, Brian Slocum, Sean Smith, and even Chuck Lofgren would have to give the Tribe brass enough confidence that they

are ready to contribute in 2008 before even entertaining the thought of moving Lee. Simply leapfrogging Laffey or Sowers past Lee, without a viable replacement for them in that "depth" would be a calculated risk, particularly with the amount of innings that Tribe starters pitched last year, subjecting them to possible injuries or regressions. I'm not sure what Lee would fetch in a trade, but I would think that a number of pieces would need to fall into place for Lee not to start the season as the 5th starter for the Tribe.

Who Will Capture the Last Bullpen Spot?

One of the pleasant surprises of 2007 was the emergence of relievers early enough in the season to carve out roles in the bullpen. Despite some early hiccups and stomach-acid-inducing outings, Joe Borowski held onto the closer role from the word "go". That spot being spoken for allowed the Senor Slo-Mo (Betancourt) to take control of the set-up role (admittedly after more than a few relievers imploded), which allowed the Indians to essentially experiment with a number of different relievers pitching the middle innings (when needed) to allow a progression of arms to emerge. Eventually, Rafael Perez emerged out of the mix to combine with Betancourt to form the Fist of Iron (Raffy Left) and Fist of Steel (Raffy Right) that locked down the back end of the bullpen, theatrics of The Big Borowski excluded.

Once the Indians had their final three innings under control, they allowed their young arms to flourish in place of the older arms that had been jettisoned. Nasty Boy Tom Mastny and Jensen Lewis took the place of Aaron Fultz and the flotsam and jetsam that had already been thrown overboard in meaningful games, extending into the playoffs.

The luxury that these emergences has afforded the Indians is that, for once, the Tribe has not been forced to go out on the volatile Free Agent market of relievers and try to catch lightning in a bottle. They youngsters stepping up to take meaningful roles in the bullpen allowed the Indians to add only one bullpen arm (Masa Kobayashi) and take some fliers on other relievers available, like inviting Jorge Julio to camp or signing an injured Brendan Donnelly in the hopes that he can rehabilitate himself into the mix at some point in 2008.

All of that being said, the Indians' bullpen looks pretty settled heading into the Spring, with the only competition assumed to be for the last spot:

Borowski
Betancourt
Perez
Kobayashi
Lewis
Fultz
7th reliever

Prior to the invite to Julio, I would have essentially figured that Mastny staked a claim to that final spot; particularly with his playoff performance (if anything can truly be gleaned from 4 2/3 IP of scoreless baseball...on a pretty big stage). However, Julio's invite and the fact that Mastny is still sitting on three options makes things a little more interesting. Not even taking into account the younger players that could help the parent club at some point this year (Jeff Stevens, Reid Santos, Randy Newsom, etc.); the Indians have an interesting decision to make if Julio comes to camp with any semblance of a repertoire.

That is, with Mastny and the other young players holding options, the Indians could give Julio a roster spot and give him an opportunity to grow into a role for the Tribe while relievers like Mastny, Edward Mujica, and the like can get steady work at the back end of the Buffalo bullpen. On the other hand, the Indians could continue to promote their own and keep Mastny as the 7th reliever with the hope that his maturation as a pitcher continues by facing MLB hitters in MLB games. The frequency of work may be more erratic than what he would see in Buffalo, but the difference of facing Timo Perez or Miguel Cabrera cannot be underestimated.

Up next, the questions facing the Indians not related to their pitching staff.

Spring Training is close...so close you can almost taste it.