What's been going on in Winter Haven this week? If you haven't been following it obsessively, you're in luck, because Tony Lastoria has. And he wraps up all the transgressions of this past week neatly in this weekend's version of "Spring Happenings". Amongst the top stories? The resurgence of former 1st round picks Michael Aubrey and Jeremy Sowers, an ultra-impressive Jhonny Peralta, and Andy Marte starting to get comfortable in the outfield.

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 to post every weekend during spring training, and then look for "Minor Happenings" to return every Thursday starting on April 3rd.

The Indians last season of Grapefruit League action got underway this past Thursday. After three games, the Indians are 1-1-1 (yes, one tie), but most importantly have not had any injury setbacks in camp (knock on wood).

Aubrey On Fire

So far so good. First baseman Michael Aubrey is through his first few games and week of camp healthy, and he is putting on an impressive display of what he can do if he is healthy.

In the intrasquad game on Tuesday, Aubrey doubled and hit a three-run bomb deep into right field.

He followed that up in the spring training opener on Thursday by going 2-for-3 with an RBI and then on Friday going 2-for-2 with a double and an RBI.

He did not play in Saturday's game against the Detroit Tigers.

There is no question the man can hit. But, can he finally overcome his injury issues? From the day he signed with the Indians, he has made the Indians medical staff work overtime.

He suffered a sprained quadriceps a mere three days after signing his contract with the Indians in June 2003, which delayed the start of his professional career for a month where he eventually debuted at Lake County in late July and hit .348 with 5 HR, 19 RBI and had a .960 OPS in 38 games.

In 2004, he had a great year hitting a combined .310 with 15 HR and 82 RBI in 98 game at Kinston and Akron, but also missed five weeks with a strained hamstring in the middle of the season.

In 2005, Aubrey was sidelined again in May of that year with a stress fracture in his back and only played in 28 games.

In 2006, he only played in 14 games because he still was recovering from his back and he strained his right knee.

In 2007, Aubrey started the year on the disabled list because of a strained hamstring, and only played in a combined 65 games for Kinston and Akron.

Aubrey often played through a lot of pain the second half of the season last year, and was regularly seen after each game in the trainer's room wrapped from the waist down in ice packs.

He finished the season strong, and carried it over into the Arizona Fall League where he put up a good showing and seemed to re-establish himself somewhat as a prospect.

This coming season will take his minor league career average of .301 to Buffalo for the first time.

Jhonny Be Good

One of the keys to the Indians turnaround last year was the much improved play of shortstop Jhonny Peralta in the field and at the plate. After a breakthrough 2005 season where he hit .292 with 24 HR, 78 RBI, and an .886 OPS, Peralta fell off at the plate in 2006 by hitting .257 with 13 HR, 68 RBI, and a .78 OPS and he looked lazy in the field and lacking focus all season.

He came back strong last year and put up a solid season at the plate hitting .270 with 21 HR, 72 RBI and a .771 OPS and was much more consistent in the field.

Since that 2006 season, Peralta has often been the hot topic among fans for a position switch to third base, second base or even the outfield because of his range limitations at shortstop. Still, Peralta amazingly is still only 25 and has a lot of room for growth.

In three+ seasons, Peralta has
62 home runs, which already is the third most by a shortstop in team history and if he hits 24 or more home runs this year he will pass Woody Held (85) for the all-time team record for home runs by a shortstop.

All that at the tender age of 26 at season's end.

The biggest thing with Peralta is he looks to be growing as a hitter and his awareness at shortstop is improving. Instead of just sitting back and waiting for a ball to be hit to him in practice this spring, Peralta is now anticipating balls to come his way and reacting to the hitter's swing. Peralta even acknowledges his biggest weakness is going side to side, and it is something he is working extensively on in camp with infield coach Luis Rivera to improve his first step quickness.

Marte In The Outfield

The Indians are pulling out all the stops to make third baseman Andy Marte as versatile as possible. Even though Marte is already guaranteed a spot on the Indians bench to start the season, because he is out of options and the Indians do not want to lose him on waivers, he stands to have a hard time getting regular playing time as a one dimensional player at third base coming off the bench. As a result, in winter ball this offseason the Indians had him primarily play first base in winter ball, and now he is taking some fly balls in the outfield during practice.

While nothing is written in stone, in addition to getting some action at first base in games this spring, the Indians plan to get Marte into a game or two in the outfield to see how he handles it. If Marte can play some first base and a little outfield, it makes his bench spot a little more useful which will be important as the Indians try to find ways to get him at bats this year and not be an anchor on the bench.

Closing Options Aplenty

Throughout last season, Indians fans took a lot of Maalox and pounded the Pepto every time closer Joe Borowski took the mound in a save situation in the 9th inning. Like his predecessor Bob Wickman, he often walked on the edge because he does not have outstanding stuff and relies more on pitching with guts and guile.

So, what happens if Borowski's string of luck runs out or if he is hurt, who takes over as closer?

Clearly, the closer in waiting on this team is Rafael Betancourt. Betancourt has the stuff, and last year seemed to develop the mentality to handle the role to where he is just waiting in the wings now until he is presented with the opportunity to close games this year.

He certainly seems to be the leading candidate to be the closer in 2009 and beyond, especially when you consider he will make roughly $9 million combined in 2009 and 2010.

He struggled in the closer role in 2004, but he was also still very green as a pitcher and not ready for it; however, last year he pitched a few times in the 9th inning and was dominant.

With Betancourt, the Indians have a Plan B at closer that few teams have.

And, on top of that, the Indians also have Japanese free agent signee Masahide Kobayashi who saved 200+ games in his Japanese career who could enter the closing mix at some point, and also Jensen Lewis could be a closer one day.

Three Kids To Watch

Here are a couple of names in big league camp who will open the season in Buffalo, but who could make an impact at at the major league level at some point this season:

Outfielder Trevor Crowe could put his stamp on the left field position at some point this season if given a chance this year, and he could be someone who helps impact the club late in the year. He has outstanding plate discipline and excellent bat to ball ability, which is a need in the Indians lineup which is loaded with hackers up and down the lineup.

Many in the Indians organization and even outside the organization believe Crowe is poised for a great year and is on the cusp of making his major league debut.

Crowe struggled the first half of last season and hit under .200, but bounced back with a great second half where he hit well over .300 and carried that into the Arizona Fall League where he played very well.

He reportedly has shaken the mental issues that plagued him at the plate early last season, and looks primed for a big year.

Right-hander Jeff Stevens is a reliever on the rise in the system, and he had a breakthrough season last year going a combined 6-3 with a 2.81 ERA and striking out 102 batters in 83.1 innings last year Kinston and Akron. Stevens also impressed this offseason in the Arizona Fall League and World Cup throwing a combined six scoreless innings.

The Indians believe that his fastball is a big weapon, and that if he can become a little more consistent with his command of it he is ready to attack major league hitters.

Left-hander Reid Santos went 8-3 with a 2.72 ERA in 39 appearances at Akron last season where he split time in the starting rotation and bullpen. What the Indians love about Santos is that he is never bothered by any situation he is put in, and is not intimidated by the competition he faces. He has good makeup and his ability to pitch in virtually any role in the bullpen could be an asset this season and down the road.

Counting On Pronk

Indians designated hitter Travis Hafner set some lofty expectations on himself with an average season of a .300+ batting average, 34 HR, and 112 RBI from 2004-2006. No one saw the slide he had last year coming when he slipped to a .266 batting average, 24 HR and 100 RBI.

For most players, those would be very good numbers, but Hafner had established himself as an elite hitter and run producer so the final numbers were a disappointment.

There has been much debate on why Hafner struggled last season. Some think he put too much pressure on himself living up to the five year $65 million contract extension he signed in the middle of the season, or that the contract negotiations distracted him.

Others think last year he was never completely healed from the hand injury that sidelined him the last month of the 2006 season.

But, according to Hafner himself, he says he just never got into a rhythm last year or felt comfortable at the plate.

He made some adjustments over the winter on his mechanics and approach and supposedly feels good and ready to go.

Hafner is being counted on to have a good rebound season and be much closer to the hitter he was from 2004-2006, and if he does that, an already good Indians offense will be much improved.

Sowers Looking Sweet

Left-hander Jeremy Sowers is in a three-way fight to win the fifth starter's job and open the season in the Indians starting rotation. After Sowers had an impressive debut in 2006 when he went 7-4 with a 3.57 ERA in 14 starts for the Indians, he came to camp last year assured of a spot in the rotation but did not live up to expectations.

The main reason Sowers struggled so much was because it was the first time he had ever encountered failure and adversity as a baseball player since he dominated in college and breezed through the Indians minor league system in 2005 and 2006. One of the byproducts of this was as things began to snowball on him last year, Sowers lost his confidence and began to doubt himself as he went from attacking and going right after hitters to being more defensive.

Also, the Indians noticed his velocity was down a few ticks.

When Sowers was optioned out to Buffalo last June, the Indians sent him there to refine his delivery and to find his confidence again. Near the end of the season, Sowers appeared to find his confidence and command again, and he has carried that into spring training this year as he has come back this season with renewed confidence.

Also, his velocity has returned back to normal, which is so important for him as his ability to effectively change speeds helps set up his other pitches.

Westbrook Concerns?

Right-hander Jake Westbrook was scratched from his scheduled start in the Indians Grapefruit

League opener on Thursday, complaining of some discomfort and soreness in his right elbow area. On Friday, Westbrook threw a 45-pitch bullpen session and reportedly was fine and on Saturday reacted well to the workout, so he will make his first spring start today (Sunday).

The Indians and Westbrook are playing it off right now, but behind closed doors there probably is more concern than is being let on. It has been reported that supposedly Westbrook always goes through some type of soreness like this at some point in the spring, but in listening to Westbrook's comments on Friday you can tell there is some concern it may be worse than we are being told. Keep an eye on this situation throughout the rest of camp to see if this issue lingers and turns into something much more serious.

Dellucci Ready To Contribute

Indians part-time left-fielder David Dellucci is reportedly completely healthy and ready to make good on the 3 year $11.5 million deal he signed with the Indians last year. In his first year with the organization he came in with the pressure of having to own up to that contract and had his worst season as a professional as he played in only 56 games and hit .230 with 4 HR 20 RBI and a .678 OPS. N
eedless to say, he was a huge disappointment last year.

Not only did he miss the last half of the season with a torn hamstring, but before the injury he was a mess at the plate and was not the left-handed hitting part of the left field platoon the Indians thought they were getting when they signed him.

Dellucci is back in action and healthy this season, and hopes to be much more productive in the lineup. Thankfully, even if Dellucci falters again the Indians appear to have several alternatives they can turn to as they have a farm system bursting at the seems with outfielders about ready to contribute. Ben Francisco will likely be the first reserve the Indians turn to if Dellucci or another outfielder is hurt or has production issues, and when Shin-Soo Choo likely is cleared to play at the end of May he will be an option as well. Also, at some point this year, the one player from the farm system who could impact the left field position the most may be Trevor Crowe.

Last Of The Mujica?

Right-hander reliever Eddie Mujica was pitcher who logged a lot of miles driving back and forth between Cleveland and Buffalo last season. On five separate occasions he was called up to Cleveland from May 7-22, June 20-24, June 27-July 8, July 27-August 25 and September 4 through the end of the season. Mujica had a great 2006 campaign where he combined to go 4-2 with 13 saves and a 1.92 ERA in 44 combined games at Akron, Buffalo and Cleveland, and had a string of 46.1 consecutive innings without giving up a run.
But last year, Mujica never had trouble locating his pitches well and seemed to struggle with the constant back and forth from Buffalo to Cleveland and back to Buffalo.

He went 2-1 with 14 saves and a 5.02 ERA in 34 appearances at Buffalo, and in the few

chances he pitched in Cleveland he was 0-0 with an 8.31 ERA in 10 appearances.

Mujica is in the mix to win the final spot in the Indians bullpen, but is a longshot with the more proven Tom Mastny and Jorge Julio likely to duke it out all camp for the spot. Mujica is all but certain to start the year in Buffalo again and he will probably will be on the Buffalo Shuttle to and from Cleveland a lot this year as a need comes up in the bullpen for a fresh arm or injury replacement. Mujica certainly has the stuff, as he has a good four pitch mix where he throws a fastball, slider, split-finger, and a changeup he just recently dusted off and started throwing again.

Mujica did not help matters in his spring debut on Friday, as he blew a save in the ninth inning and took the loss in giving up three hits and two runs to the five batters he faced.

Slocum Works His Way Back

Right-hander Brian Slocum is working his way back into the Indians plans as a depth alternative in the starting rotation or bullpen. Slocum is coming off a forgettable 2007 campaign where an elbow injury and hamstring strain saw him go on the Buffalo disabled list in May and never return. He also had surgery to repair a deviated nasal septum in September because he was getting bad sinus headaches that were the result of some small fractures in his nose.

The injury plagued 2007 season killed the momentum Slocum had built from a breakthrough 2006 season where he went 6-3 with a 3.35 ERA in 27 appearances at Buffalo and made a few late season impressive starts for the Indians. Slocum is in camp and in great shape, but has been limited some by back spasms. He is slated to make his Grapefruit League debut today (Sunday), and is expected to open the season in the Buffalo bullpen.

Infirmary Report

Right-hander Adam Miller came out of his bullpen session last Sunday cleared and ready to resume throwing activities; however, the blister on his middle finger re-opened and as a result he was shutdown for about a week to allow the blister sufficient time to heal. Since Miller is not a candidate for a big league job, this is not much of a setback and the Indians can afford to be overly cautious.
As long as the blister heals and he can get back into action sometime this week, he should still be ready to go for the start of Buffalo's season the first week of April.

At worst, he may be limited in his first start or two to a 75 pitch count as he is ramped up to a normal 95-100 pitch count.

First baseman Jordan Brown has been given the green light to resume full activities. Brown has been slowed in camp from offseason arthroscopic knee surgery that he experienced some tendonitis in at the outset of camp.

Remaining Radio/TV Spring Schedule

RADIO (WTAM/IRN)
March 2 vs. DET 1:05PM (Live-WMMS)
March 7 vs. NYM 1:05PM (Delayed, 8:00PM)
March 8 vs. PHL 1:05PM (Live-WMMS)
March 9 vs. WAS 1:05PM (Live)
March 11 vs. DET 1:05PM (Delayed, 7:00PM)
March 13 vs. TOR 1:05PM (Live)
March 14 vs. WAS 7:05PM (Live)
March 15 vs. HOU 1:05PM (Live)
March 16 @NYY1:05PM (Live)
March 20 vs. TB 1:05PM (Delayed, 8:00PM)
March 21 @ATL1:05PM (Live)
March 22 vs. NYM 1:05PM (Live)
March 23 @DET1:05PM (Live)
March 24 vs. ATL 1:05PM (Delayed, 7:00PM)
March 25 vs. NYY 1:05PM (Live)
March 27 vs. TB 1:05PM (Delayed, 7:00PM)
March 28 @ATL7:05PM (Live)
March 29 @ATL1:05PM (Live)

TV (STO/ESPN)
March 5 vs. ATL 1:05PM-STO
March 7 vs. NYM1:05PM-ESPN
March 8 vs. PHL 1:05PM-STO
March 11 vs. DET 1:05PM-STO
March 20 vs. TB 1:05PM-STO
March 22 vs. NYM1:05PM-STO
March 24 vs. ATL 1:05PM-STO
March 25 vs. NYY 1:05PM-STO
March 27 vs. TB 1:05PM-STO

Parting Shots

Because the Indians have seven starters in camp with a shot to start the season in the opening day rotation, to ensure they get sufficient work in and stretched out properly the Indians have several "B" games planned on the back fields of the Chain of Lakes complex. The Indians will make up games as needed, and when minor league games start in mid-March established guys like C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona will pitch in those games so that Cliff Lee, Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey can face better competition in major league spring games while they battle for the fifth starter's spot.

The Indians medical staff headed by Lonnie Soloff was honored this offseason as the top athletic training team in 2007. You can't argue with that as the Indians only lost players for 324 days to injury last year which was the second fewest in the big leagues.

In 2006, they lost players for 274 days to injury, which was the least in baseball. ... Reliever Masahide Kobayashi pitched himself out of a big jam on Friday.

He loaded the bases with no outs on two infield singles and an error, but escaped the inning by working out of the jam without giving up a run and striking the last batter out. ... Ryan Garko and Ben Francisco are former high school teammates and graduated in the same class at Servite High School in Anaheim, CA in 1999. ... Jeremy Sowers is using a bike as his main method of transportation to and from the Chain Of Lakes complex.

He lives three miles away.

Indians 2007 first round draft pick Beau Mills made his spring debut playing first base on Friday with the Indians, and reportedly will play exclusively at first base the entire spring. He was expected to mostly play third base this year, so no word on why this has changed unless the Indians want to use camp to get him more acclimated to the position so he can play both there and at third base this coming season to keep him more versatile. ... Outfielder Brad Snyder knows this is a big year for him in the Indians organization.

He is out of options after this year, and he needs to stay healthy and show improved plate discipline (595 strikeouts in 1934 career at bats).

His main focus this year is hitting the ball to all fields and not being so pull conscious, and also to put up better at bats and work on making more consistent contact so he puts the ball in play more. ... Outfielder Nick Weglarz is in Australia playing for Team Canada and starting in left field and hitting in the middle of their lineup.

He reportedly is up to 250 pounds, but in great shape looking like an NFL linebacker. ... Baseball America recently released their Top 100 prospect list, and three Indians made the listing:

right-hander Adam Miller (29th), left-hander Chuck Lofgren (71st), and third baseman Beau Mills (87th).