It's been a quiet spring training for the Indians. Knock on wood, no injuries. Essentially the same team back from last season, with few position or roster spot battles. The most high profile competition has been the fight for the role as the team's fifth starting pitcher. The combatants (Lee, Laffey, Sowers) have all failed to impress, and in his latest, Paul looks at the performances and the politics surrounding this trio, annointing Clifton Phiper Lee as the frontrunner.

As spring training marches on in Winter Haven, unless you're a huge fan of Danny Sandoval or have already ordered your Beau Mills (or Beaux Moulins, to you Francophiles out there) jersey in anticipation of Mills' 2009 debut, really not much has happened. In light of other injuries that have cropped up in other camps (knocking firmly on wood), a quiet camp for a team thought to be a contender with a roster more or less set when the planes touched down in Florida is not necessarily a bad thing.

That being said, the camp is not completely devoid of "training camp battles", with the most compelling being the fight for the fifth starter spot, pitting the prohibitive favorite Cliff Lee against youngsters Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey. Now, by simple virtue of this being a contest to see who any fifth starter is, it certainly was not expected to be a "Clash of the Titans" by any stretch of the imagination. But even in the world of meaningless spring training stats, the results for the three combatants have been prior to Lee's promising outing today against the Tigers ... how can I put this nicely ... uninspiring:

## Cliff Lee

March 4th vs. CIN - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K
March 7th vs. NYM - 2/3 IP, 3 H, 2 R, 2 ER, 2 BB, 0 K
March 11th vs. DET - 3.0 IP, 2 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 3 K

**Totals** - 4 2/3 IP, 3.86 ERA, 1.71 WHIP, 3.86 BB/9, 5.78 K/9

**Jeremy Sowers**

March 1st vs. DET - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 4th vs. CIN - 1.0 IP, 4 H, 2 R, 2 ER, 1 BB, 1 K
March 9th vs. WAS - 2.0 IP, 7 H, 6 R, 6 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

**Totals** - 4.0 IP, 18.00 ERA, 3.00 WHIP, 2.25 BB/9, 4.50 K/9

**Aaron Laffey**

March 1st vs. DET - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 0 K
March 4th vs. CIN - 2/3 IP, 3 H, 5 R, 5 ER, 3 BB, 1 K
March 8th vs. WAS - 2 1/3 IP, 1 H, 3 R, 3 ER, 5 BB, 2 K

**Totals** - 4.0 IP, 18.00 ERA, 3.50 WHIP, 20.25 BB/9, 6.75 K/9

Fully realizing that the statistics are based on a ridiculously infinitesimal sample size, let's just say that if this was a horse race between these three, the only people that would be excited in the grandstand would be the executives from the glue factory. Perhaps that's harsh, but you'd like to think that one of these players would see the opportunity presented to them and would be making every attempt to take advantage of their chance to break camp with the AL Central Champs instead of moping back to Buffalo.

Sir Lee (no, he hasn't been knighted, but saying the name out loud will catch you up on his apparent disposition) finally was able to put together the first truly decent appearance Tuesday put forth by the trio as he was able to work three scoreless innings against a Tigers' lineup that included Granderson, Polanco, and Renteria. The most encouraging aspect of the outing is that Lee posted a few strikeouts, hopefully serving notice that he was able to locate his fastball, thus allowing him to throw his secondary breaking pitches. The problem that we saw last year with Lee as he unraveled was that he couldn't locate his fastball, resulting in his inability to get ahead in the count. Whether or not Lee, who has

often been painted as churlish and resistant to coaching or suggestion, truly has been able to rectify the problem will go a long way to determining his future with the franchise.

There's no question that Lee's standing with the organization has fallen quite a bit from how he was viewed after the 2005 season to today (as his comparable pitchers have drifted into the "journeyman pitcher" category with **Darren Oliver, Pete Schourek, Curt Young, and Rick Helling all making dubious appearances**
) as every one of his statistics (notably, ERA+, WHIP, and K/9) has trended in the wrong direction for three years now. I'm fairly certain that this pattern of regression is not what the organization had in mind when they came to terms on a multi-year deal with him in August of 2006, particularly in terms of how lightly he seems to be regarded by some who see his ceiling as a 5th starter.

But, how lightly is Lee regarded these days - enough for the Indians to exercise his final option coming out of spring training?
That's right, kids, Cliff Lee still (somehow) still has one option remaining, but not without some caveats as he'd have to clear revocable waivers (as he did last year to be sent to Buffalo), much like players dealt after the July 31st trading deadline every year. Of course, even if Lee did head to Buffalo from Winter Haven, the Indians would still owe him the guaranteed money on his contract ($3.75M this year) and his trade value (if eventually moving him was thought to be the "end game" with Lee) would plummet further - if that were even possible.

The second item to consider for a Lee demotion is that assuming Lee breaks camp with the team, at some point in mid-June, he will have accumulated a full five years of MLB service time, giving him the option of refusing any assignment to the minors, which he would most certainly exercise if it came to that. All told, the Lee situation is not an ideal one for the organization, who either needs to take their chances that he can straighten things out before June in MLB or swallow hard and sign hefty paychecks for a pitcher toiling (and likely unhappy) in AAA.

In one of the other "corners", Sowers came into camp, allegedly with a few extra MPH on his fastball and the lessons of taking some lumps in 2007 fresh in his head. Sowers has never been (and will never be) a dominant pitcher, but he has looked eminently hittable again this spring, giving up hits in bunches. On the positive side, he seems to be taking the Indians' organizational philosophy of

"throwing strikes" to heart (32 pitches thrown, 27 strikes), walking only one batter in four innings. But if "throwing strikes" equates to putting a ball on a tee for the batter (four hits allowed in one inning vs. Cincinnati, seven hits allowed in two innings vs. Washington), then the best that Sowers can hope for is that the struck ball is going to find a fielder's glove more frequently than an open space of grass. Beyond that, he's just putting the ball out there to put it in play without the benefit of being a sinkerballer like Carmona or Westbrook, whose "pitch to contact" approach at least is designed to generate ground ball outs.

For whatever reason (perhaps I'll chalk it up to the overplayed "cerebral" card), Sowers seems to be a pitcher who relies on momentum and confidence as much as anything in his repertoire. In 2006, he found himself on an incredible roll, going five or more innings in 13 of his 14 starts and had the chutzpah to post a 3.57 ERA and a 1.18 WHIP despite an underwhelming K rate (3.56 K/9). But given the ball every five days to start the 2007 season, Sowers went into freefall after his two initial starts. From his third start (2 2/3 IP, 9 H, 6 ER, 1 BB, 1 K vs. NYY) through his next nine, Sowers gave up less than three earned runs on only two occassions. Once the train got off the tracks for Sowers, it didn't seem that anything could stop it as he gave up four or more runs in five of his seven starts from the beginning of May until his eventual demotion in Buffalo.

If, in fact, Sowers is reliant on pitching with brimming confidence, I wouldn't expect his spring training performances to catapult him into a stretch reminiscent of the second half of the 2006 season. It remains more than likely that the Indians will send Sowers to Buffalo to start the season in an attempt to get him rolling along and "pitching with confidence" (whatever that means). And perhaps that's the best approach with Sowers and his apparently fragile psyche - to allow him to build up some confidence and momentum in Buffalo in the hopes that he can parlay that success to MLB innings. At this point, though, starting Sowers in Cleveland (with the likelihood that he would get knocked around a few times to start the season) may actually hinder his development.

As 2007 ended and Aaron Laffey surveyed the scene before him, he must have felt pretty good about his chances of starting 2008 in the Tribe rotation. The still 22-year-old contributed nine starts to a contending team coming down the stretch posting a respectable 4.56 ERA and a 1.34 WHIP while striking out twice the number of batters than he walked in his brief stint with the team. He established

himself as another sinkerballer on the team, inducing three times as many ground ball outs as fly ball outs and allowing only two HR in nearly 50 IP.

His performance didn't cause any phones in Cooperstown to ring, but it was a more than respectable debut for a player that started the season in the Akron rotation. And, perhaps most importantly, the numbers that he had accumulated in the minors in 2007 (low HR rate, low BB rate, favorable K/BB ratio) continued into his stretch in Cleveland.

Truthfully, if you were to ask me what I thought was going to happen this spring, my answer would have been that Laffey would have continued his success, making him impossible to ignore. But Laffey's spring has started like he's a completely different pitcher than the one that we saw last year in Cleveland. He has struggled with his command, walking nine batters in four innings, and is averaging over 14 pitches an inning, a unusually high amount of pitches for someone who generally induces contact and ground balls.

It could be that Laffey heard the talk over the off-season that his modest K rate was the drawback to an otherwise impressive resume, particularly for a player his age. Maybe he read the press clippings and is trying to be too fine with his pitches, resulting in too many walks as he's actually given up more walks than hits. What is most intriguing about this early performance is that many people feel that Laffey, because of his reputation as a strike-thrower and his ability to keep the ball in the ballpark, would eventually slot into a relief role. Early returns from this spring would contradict that line of that, as well as the line of thought that Laffey will start the season anywhere but Buffalo.

All told, it looks pretty obvious that Lee will break camp as the fifth starter (unless some unforeseen trade suddenly materializes) and Sowers and Laffey will start the season in the Buffalo rotation. However, don't be surprised when starts for Sowers and Laffey in Buffalo coincide (or fall right around) days that Lee pitches for the Tribe. The Indians are likely to let it play out this way - break camp with Lee with the understanding that he's on a pretty tight leash that he'll have to sort things out before his MLB service time hits five full years (which, again, would allow him to refuse a demotion). Meanwhile, Sowers and Laffey will pitch for the Herd on the same day as Lee is pitching for the Tribe (or one to two days removed) so they'd be ready (and on proper days' rest) to step in for Lee, if necessary.

While all of this is based on EXTREMELY small sample sizes, it is unfortunately

all we have to go on in this alleged "open competition". And with limited time remaining in spring training plus the necessary rest between appearances eating up a good portion of these players' time, how many more appearances are truly expected from each player? Not too many, with only 17 more days full of games, which means that Lee will probably get three more outings and Sowers and Laffey will likely get four more apiece.

The horses are still technically out on the track, but the smart money's on Clifton Phifer Lee.