We got an admission this week that Victor's hammy has been bothering him all year, and that cortisone shots are not helping Pronk's bum shoulder. Whether or not the shoulder contributed to the lack of a menacing Pronk in the lineup remains a mystery (and don't expect a straight answer from the Tribe brass), but it raises an interesting question: Does the slow start by the Tribe offense sting any less if their #3 and #4 hitters have been less than 100% since Game 2?

Just when you thought that the Indians' season was teetering on the brink after the Royals series, news that Victor's power has (at least, according to The Atomic Wedgie) been sapped by his hamstring injury from the season opener was followed up by news that Jake Westbrook will hit the 15-day DL again, this time with right elbow inflammation ... which doesn't have a nice ring to it. All of that comes after the not-so-subtle intimation that Hafner's shoulder has bothered him since Spring Training, laying waste to his swing, and that the TWO cortisone shots that he received in said shoulder did not lessen the pain there. Whether or not the shoulder contributed to the lack of a menacing Pronk in the lineup remains a mystery (and don't expect a straight answer from the Tribe brass), but it raises an interesting question:

Does the slow start by the Tribe offense sting any less if their #3 and #4 hitters have been less than 100% since Game 2?

That is, let's say that Hafner started the season on the shelf and Vic hit the DL after the first game ... would the scuffling offense be given a longer rope with the knowledge that the Indians were playing without the muscle in the middle of their

lineup? If both have been there in name only and Hafner and Martinez have been playing hurt (and why they just wouldn't have admitted their injury and rehabbed rather than "grinding" through their injury raises question after question), hasn't that really been the case and aren't the Indians' offensive struggles at least explainable?
Would we all be sitting here saying, "well, when Vic and Travis come back, the offense will wake up"?

While the Indians pride themselves on their pitching depth (which makes Westbrook's injury at least a little more palatable, with Sowers likely coming up for Sunday's game in Detroit after tonight's bullpen game), their offense is designed to revolve around Grady, Victor, and Hafner. Grady's held up his end of the bargain (to a degree) this year, but Victor has similar numbers to Rays' 2B Akinori Iwamura thus far (with 3 fewer HR) and Travis Hafner has a lower Slugging Percentage than San Diego LF Scott Hairston...yes, Scott Hairston. It's been said many times before, but it bears repeating - the majority of the Indians' lineup is filled with role players and complementary pieces because those three are supposed to be the pillars of the offense. Furthermore, with Grady's role designed to be that of the table-setter (he's finished in the Top 10 in runs scored the past three years, scoring the most runs in the AL in 2006) - the reliance on Martinez and Hafner to drive in runs is painfully obvious.

When one of them isn't going well, usually one of the other players can pick up some of the slack (Peralta goes through a hot stretch or Casey Blake becomes Al Pujols for a night). But when two of them aren't going well, it becomes nearly impossible for the rest of the lineup to fill the void. How much do Indians lean on those two for run production?

2005

188 RBI for Martinez and Hafner
760 Team RBI (not runs scored, RBI)
24.7% of Team RBI from Martinez and Hafner

2006

210 RBI for Martinez and Hafner
839 Team RBI (not runs scored, RBI)
25.0% of Team RBI from Martinez and Hafner

2007

214 RBI for Martinez and Hafner
784 Team RBI (not runs scored, RBI)
27.3% of Team RBI from Martinez and Hafner

So for the past three years, those two have contributed approximately ¼ of the team's RBI, with the percentage growing (and the amount of RBI growing) for the past 3 years.

How about this year?

2008

40 RBI for Martinez and Hafner
230 Team RBI (not runs scored, RBI)
17.4% of Team RBI from Martinez and Hafner

Considering that the Indians have played just over 1/3 of their season, those two are on pace to COMBINE for 113 RBI...and that's with Hafner being out of the lineup for about a week of games due to the shoulder.

That catastrophic drop-off cannot simply be chalked up to regression for both players, can it?

Consider that Martinez's lowest RBI output (prior to this year) in the past three years was an 80 RBI season in 2005, with Hafner's low-water mark coming last year with 100 RBI. If Martinez and Hafner were having THOSE types of seasons...that is, equal to their worst totals in three years, their RBI total (prorated for the 57 games played thus far) would be 63 RBI instead of 40. Not that big of a difference over the course of 57 games, you say? If the Tribe was dealing with an offensive output of 253 RBI instead of 230 (that 23 RBI shortfall from the middle of their lineup), the Indians' offense would have the 5th most RBI in the AL, ahead of the Yankees, instead of 10th of 14 AL teams.

All sorts of questions can be asked about why these two players (if they have in fact been hurt all season) didn't simply get placed on the DL to heal with rest and rehabilitation as the Yankees did with A-Rod (quad) and Posada (shoulder), but what's done is done at this point and crying over spilled milk is going to get you

about as far as wondering how Joe Borowski gets people out while having zero swings and misses.

But all is not lost on this injury to the pillars front.

Hafner and his perpetually sore shoulder HAVE hit the DL and he probably won't pick up a bat until later this week and doesn't figure to rejoin the team until the last full week in June. In his absence, the Indians have the opportunity to "rest" Martinez hamstring while not removing him from the lineup. With Hafner's DH spot open, the Indians need to start cycling Martinez through the DH/1B role to allow his legs to rest in the hopes that they will get stronger (as I couldn't imagine squatting for about an hour a day with sore legs is conducive to healing, much less building strength) and return some semblance of his power.

If the Indians are "so fortunate" to have a backup C of the quality that Kelly Shoppach allegedly is (and he has looked as bad at the plate as any, some of which could be a result of him only having 67 AB at this point in the season), isn't this the time to use him? Garko has one extra base hit in his last 12 games, couldn't some sort of rotation be worked out here to have Shoppach catch full-time and let Garko and Martinez switch back and forth between 1B and DH? Since Lacey Cake's outburst in Arlington probably means that the Andy Marte Experiment is off again, it would seem that he'll be out of the 1B mix. Of course, if the Indians REALLY wanted to get The Looch in there against tough RHP, fine...throw Garko and Dellucci in there at DH depending on the starting pitcher. At this point, though, putting Martinez behind the plate every night, when other options exist to keep his bat in the lineup WHILE lessening the strain on his sore legs, is just furthering the ineffectiveness of Martinez. Which, combined with the absence of Pronk (and even the absence of that "Hafner" guy), is not something the Indians' offense can overcome.

Now, with the injuries mounting and the cavalry not only called in but leading the charge on some occasions, the Indians need to recognize that the offense cannot thrive without a healthy Martinez (at least) in the lineup and give him some rest, using their depth, to do so. Otherwise, the team will continue to spin their bad wheels offensively.