Scott Lewis, Jeremy Sowers, David Huff, and Aaron Laffey. The Indians are sitting (somewhat suddenly) on four young left handed starters who all figure to be in the mix for the back end of the rotation next season. Which means that the Indians have some decisions to make this off-season in terms of those arms. Paulie C writes about the matter in his latest effort for us.

After sitting in the Mezz on Monday night watching Scott Lewis run his scoreless inning total to 14 in his first two starts, the options for the 2009 rotation ran through my head. Once I got past the notion that somewhere in Winter Haven there sits a tree that grows soft-tossing LHP, I got stuck on the idea that the Indians are sitting (somewhat suddenly) on four young LHP who all figure to be in the mix for the back end of the rotation, which means that the Indians have some decisions to make this off-season in terms of those arms. Notably, the Indians need to determine whether the depth that has been deemed to be so important outweighs what looks to be a surplus of similar pitchers that all look to be MLB-ready or somewhere near MLB-ready.

Between Aaron Laffey, Jeremy Sowers, Lewis, and Dave Huff, the Indians have middle-to-back-end of the rotation options that figure (at this point, at least) to slot into Cleveland and Columbus next year. But it raises a fundamental question that has emerged - which is whether the depth that they've been forced to rely on for the past two years needs to go as deep as 9 to 10 pitchers into the organization or, if it comes to throwing their 9th or 10th pitcher, the assumption that the season is likely lost makes some of those arms expendable via trade to fill other needs that figure to exist on the roster.

Before going any further, let's take a quick look at what the Indians' rotation

figures to look like without any moves being made this off-season, and exactly how deep the arms look to go. As you view the list, realize that the names after #2 are not listed in order of preference, but that Anthony Reyes and Zach Jackson are both out of options and figure to break camp with the team as long as they are deemed to be somewhat valuable to the team and Jake Westbrook's name is listed where it is with the assumption that he will be healthy and available at some point after the All-Star Break in 2009.

#1 - Lee
#2 - Carmona
#3 - Laffey
#4 - Reyes
#5 - Huff
#6 - Jackson
#7 - Sowers
#8 - Lewis
#9 - Westbrook

That list does not take into account the variables of a healthy Atom Miller (who looks destined for the bullpen) and the mystery that is Chuck Lofgren or the organizational soldiers like Frank Herrmann, Kevin Dixon, and Ryan Edell, nor the high-ceiling pitchers like Kelvin De La Cruz and Hector Rondon who may be a few years away from contributing at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

So the question becomes, is it necessary to truly go THAT deep in starting pitching depth or is the idea that once you get to #9 or #10 (hello, Matt Ginter and Bryan Bullington), the season is more than likely a lost cause and to reasonably expect pitchers that far down in the depth chart to be able to contribute at the MLB level is tantamount to plopping money on the roulette table and hoping that you hit it big one of these times. Certainly a case can be made fairly easily that having at least two arms stashed at AAA to dip into if a need arises on the big league club is fairly important, given the nature of injuries and ineffectiveness when it comes to starters. But if Westbrook truly is thought to be returning after the All-Star Break next year, he would obviously slot into the middle-of-the-rotation and it's not inconceivable to think that the Indians may be looking to add another starter (one more established than the likes of Laffey, Sowers, Huff, etc.) to the mix, pushing all of those names down another peg.

Which brings it all back to where this started, as Scott Lewis has suddenly thrust

himself into the mix on the basis of two starts, causing some to come to the premature conclusion that Lewis "has to be in the rotation...somewhere" for 2009. It's a premature notion as for years Indians fans have fumed over and over again that "some soft-tossing LHP just up from the minors just baffled the Indians' hitters" whenever some unknown kid from AAA is promoted to face the Indians and completely shuts them down.

Other foot, meet Scott Lewis.

This is by no means meant to discount what Lewis has accomplished in his first two starts as an Indian, but rather as a caution that unreasonable expectations based on two starts (even if they are a pitcher's two debut starts) sets a dangerous precedent of what can really be expected. While Lewis has looked VERY good in his two starts, let's temper that enthusiasm with what we've seen happen between **2006** and **2008** for Jeremy Sowers and even what a few of the other starters in the mix for 2009 have pulled off this year:

Scott Lewis - 2008 (with Cleveland)

2-0, 0.00 ERA, 0.57 WHIP with 8 K, 2 BB in 14 IP over 2 starts

Aaron Laffey - 2008 (from May 4th to May 27th)

3-2, 0.79 ERA, 1.03 WHIP with 19 K, 7 BB in 34 IP over 5 starts

Anthony Reyes - 2008 (with Cleveland)

2-1, 1.83 ERA, 1.25 WHIP with 15 K, 12 BB in 34 1/3 IP over 6 starts

What does all of that mean?

Mainly that two starts should not guarantee any kind of spot in the 2009 rotation, but that it certainly puts Lewis in the mix...just not much more than the other pitchers.

With that being said, then, it points to two enormous questions going forward for this organization:

As stated above, does the depth that the Indians have been forced to rely on for

the past two years need to go as deep as 9 to 10 pitchers into the organization or does the assumption that the season is likely lost once that 9th or 10th organizational starter is on the 25-man make some of those arms expendable via trade to fill other needs that figure to exist on the roster?

As a corollary then, if some of those arms are deemed to be expendable, how heavily should internal scouting reports be weighed against what can be reasonably expected in return for a trade? That is to say, if the Indians' internal scouting reports say that Scott Lewis' ceiling is a 5th starter in the Majors and he closes out 2008 in the way he has started it on the parent club, do the Indians throw their scouting reports aside and work off of the assumption that Lewis may project higher in the rotation or do they sell high (relatively speaking) on him as part of a package deal?

Of course, the notion the idea of trading one (or more) of these young arms goes against the idea that a team can never have enough starting pitching because of the unknowns that present themselves throughout the course of a season. To put it another way, what if the Indians trade a pitcher like Sowers or Lewis as part of a package, then find themselves in need of a starter at some point in the season? To that I would say that (assuming that Reyes, Laffey, and even Westbrook figure to be some sort of healthy for 2009) enough arms exist to allow one of these players to be moved...but which one?

Obviously, the cautionary tale of Jair Jurrjens who (though as a 21-year-old was much younger than any of the aforementioned Tribe arms) burst on the scene with the Tigers last year after being promoted from AA and was moved for an "established player" from Atlanta. Now, less than a year later, the Tigers are looking for a SS not named Edgar Renteria for their 2009 team and Jurrjens has turned into the Braves' ace...as a 22-year-old. It's an extreme case for sure as most people were surprised when Jurrjens was moved for an aging Renteria, but it underscores the point. When he was traded, Jurrjens had thrown all of 30 2/3 innings above AA and had posted a respectable 4.70 ERA with 13 K to 11 BB for the 2007 Tigers. Impressive for a 21-year-old to say the least, but apparently not impressive enough for the Tigers to deem him as "untouchable", a move that now looks foolhardy given Detroit's advancing age and dearth of upper level arms.

I suppose that scenario is what the Indians have to avoid and hope (or is it pray) that their scouting reports are correct on these players if one is deemed to be

expendable due to the depth on hand. I'm not going to pretend to know what those scouting reports say, but my guess is that they see Sowers as a 5th starter, Laffey as a 4th starter, Huff as a 3rd starter, and Lewis as the great unknown given his limited inning count. Would another team value one of those players in greater terms than the Indians do? And if they do, what would they be willing to part with to acquire one?

All told going into 2009, after Lee and Carmona, I could see Reyes (assuming the Indians aren't checking Orbitz to make travel plans for him to visit Dr. James Andrews in Birmingham any time soon) in the rotation out of Spring Training as he is out of options and has been successful in his brief time on the Tribe. Along the same lines as Reyes, I could see the Indians carrying Zach Jackson out of Spring Training as the long man/emergency starter as he is also out of options and could provide the mop-up duty role on the parent club while not exposing him to waivers. Before you ask me if I've seen Jackson pitch this year, realize that the rationale for him breaking the team out of Goodyear is that the other candidates to be the long man/emergency starter on the Indians all retain options and can be slotted into the rotation in AAA to get them into a rhythm of pitching every five days rather than logging duty in the uncertain role of a long man.

Beyond that, it's a crapshoot as Laffey, Sowers, Lewis, and Huff (who isn't even on the 40-man yet) have options remaining and the pitchers who don't break camp with the Tribe can fill the Columbus rotation with LHP. That is, of course, unless the Indians decide to pluck one of the shiny pieces of fruit off of their Lefty Tree and take it to town this winter as barter.