It's that time again Tribe fans, as the Winter Meetings get underway in Las Vegas, Nevada this week. Mark Shapiro and the Indians brass head west with some clearly established needs. A closer, a middle of the rotation starter, and a starting infielder. Will anything happen this week? Is there any chance Rafael Furcal or Tim Hudson become Indians? Paul talks Winter Meetings and peruses the web for all the best relevant links on the matter in his latest column for us.

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Perhaps we'll have more to discuss than what Tomo Ohka means to the Indians in 2009 (nothing, by the way, he's an non roster invite ... think Elarton or Bullington in that neither were even thought of until the season was over) soon as the Hot Stove should be kicking off some heat here soon.

And with that excitement duly generated, here's a recap of the latest linkage out there in cyberspace:

Lets lead where we often do with Terry Pluto, who comes through with a plethora of information (and I'm not just saying that because he specifically mentions this blog this morning...though he does) about what direction the Indians are looking to take on a number of fronts.

Among the revelations (from someone who knows what the Indians are doing and talking about and not just rumor-mongering) is that the Twins have offered Casey Blake a 2-year, $12M guaranteed deal, and that the Indians have been pleased with what they've heard about Jhonny's performance as a 3B in the Dominican. Jhonny's performance at 3B would seem to open that door to moving him there for 2009, though Pluto has been told that the Indians don't feel that Freddy Sanchez

is much of an upgrade and that the Orioles are being their usual obstinate selves in the Brian Roberts talks.

Pluto also hits on some of the lesser-lights in terms of relievers, slyly intimating (after discussing the Howry-to-the-Giants news) that Hoffman is the player in the crosshairs, and finishes with a bit about Andy Marte and Josh Barfield, specifically referencing Tuesday's article here in the process as a piece to "check out" . Pluto bangs the drum for the Indians not to give up on Barfield, who will have one more season in AAA to assert himself back onto the Indians' radar while Marte, conversely, finds himself stuck in the no-man's land of almost being removed from the 40-man roster but being out of options.

For an even more in-depth look at what may have gone wrong in the Odyssey of Andy, check out APV's piece over at the LGT , where he breaks down how Marte devolved from a "can't-miss-prospect" to the player that Pluto reports was on the cusp of being removed from the 40-man roster a mere 3 years later for Jordan Brown...who is less than two months YOUNGER than Marte.

Elsewere on the Hot Stove burner, it looks like the A's are out of the Rafael Furcal Party , as are the Giants with their signing of Edgar Renteria and the Cardinals, who added Khalil Greene. News that those teams are out of the mix comes with Rosenthal's intimations that Furcal is not opposed to playing 2B and that he is not necessarily locked into looking for a 4-year deal, and to quote DiaTribe regular A.G.B here, " *my head is racing with thoughts of Rafael Furcal playing 2B and batting leadoff at Progressive Field* " .

Before we get too far ahead of ourselves, Furcal would absolutely be the type of player (like Hudson) that would represent a significant upgrade over the current infield situation and add a top-of-the-lineup hitter to the club. The back injury that forced him to miss all but 36 games last year is concerning and his full 2007 left a little to be desired - but Furcal is the type of player that represents the upgrade the Indians need in the infield that isn't just akin to spinning their wheels (as a guy like Mark Grudz or even Casey Blake would be) without blocking any significant prospects in the process. His ability to get on base would be a huge addition to the top of the lineup and his (alleged) willingness to play 2B could give the Indians even more flexibility in their ever-evolving infield alignment.

Furcal's going to cost a lot (the A's offer he turned down was 4 years and $35M to $40M), but the Indians have the dollars to commit and, to me, what the Indians could get for $10M to $12M a year for an infielder on a three-year deal is vastly superior to what that type of contract nets you in the Free Agent market for the veteran Starting Pitcher that is (allegedly) on the Tribe wish list.

Even though it was two years ago, Vicente Padilla anyone ?

For other Hot Stove rumblings, Anthony Castrovince identifies the Marlins, Reds, and Astros as three teams that might be looking for an inexpensive option at catcher this off-season, which should have Indians' fans familiarizing themselves with the likes of Ricky Nolasco , Josh Johnson , and Wandy Rodriguez (or maybe even a, gulp, Aaron Harang) if the Indians use their biggest chip to net the biggest return - a young, established, under-club-control starter.

I know that other scenarios have been floated out there with some of these teams, with players like Dan Uggla, Ty Wigginton, Jose Valverde, and Edwin Encarnacion filling holes in the infield or the bullpen as an exchange for Shoppach. However, if I'm trading Mr. Show Pack (and the three years remaining before he hits Free Agency), I'm shooting a little higher than the aforementioned infielders and relievers - I'm looking for a pitcher that has the ability to sit in the #3 hole in the rotation who remains under club control (at a reasonable price, ideally) for the same amount of time that Shoppach would for his receiving team.

Moving on, AC also has a nice summation of what the Indians have on their "To-Do List" heading into the Meeting in Vegas and promises to dispense news (by his own admission, real or fabricated) via his blog, CastroTurf .

For a national (or at least Boston) perspective on what each team may be looking

to do in Vegas, Nick Cafardo of The Boston Globe has an exhaustive trip around the horn with a few nuggets that could play into the Indians' plans
, even if he intimates that the Indians have little money to spend, without full knowledge of what Castrovince correctly summarizes (in his piece linked above) as a payroll that has "
about $57 million tied up in guaranteed contracts for 11 players for next season. The rest of their contracts, plus any free-agent or trade acquisitions, will probably have the payroll somewhere in the $80-million range, which is where it was last season
."

Cafardo asserts that Seattle may be willing to move JJ Putz and Adrian Beltre (though the prospects the M's would demand for one-year of Beltre goes against everything we've ever seen executed by the current Tribe brass), that Toronto may also be looking for catching help, perhaps dangling BJ Ryan on the market, and that the Astros may be looking to move the aforementioned Wigginton and Valverde (who will probably command $9M in his final year of arbitration before becoming a FA after 2009).

Entirely unrelated to anything simmering on the Hot Stove but completely related to excellent writing, one of my favorite Clevelanders, Joe Posnanski, offers more brilliance in his piece on King George and how growing up in Cleveland may have shaped the way that The Big Stein evolved through the years as the owner of the Bombers.