While the 25-man roster looks to be ostensibly set in mid-January with the signing of Carl Pavano and the assumption that (if healthy) he'll be in the Indians' rotation, the Indians big league roster is quickly coming into focus. The Tribe has improved their organizational depth, and the quality of their minor league system, and the net result of that is a glut of intriguing depth at AAA Columbus. Paulie breaks it down for us in his latest.

While the 25-man roster looks to be ostensibly set in mid-January with the signing of Carl Pavano and the assumption that (if healthy) he'll be in the Indians' rotation, there are still a few minor questions that look to be answered in Spring Training (who is the 5th starter, who gets the 7th bullpen position, who is the 13th position player) - but you're talking about the back end of the roster with those positions as the bulk of the Indians' 25-man roster is in focus. Beyond the mere 25 players that figure to make up the roster coming out of Goodyear, though, the flexibility of said players figures to make 2009 a little more interesting in terms of figuring out who fits where and how everyone fits. Beyond that, then the Indians have depth in Columbus at AAA that could serve as the cavalry to fill holes created by ineffectiveness or injury not unlike the 2007 reinforcements that helped the team to the ALCS.

On the parent club, the Indians have a couple of players who have a multiple positions where they can eventually fit (like Victor at C or 1B) and have a few players who are fighting to become fixtures in the Indians' plans going forward and not just placeholders until something better arrives (Garko, Francisco) from AAA. To put it in tangible terms, it looks like the Indians are set at CF, RF, DH (God and Dr. James Andrews willing), 2B, SS, and 3B in their lineup with the assumption being that those positions will be filled by everyday players that have a body of work that justifies their inclusion in nearly every lineup card that The Atomic

Wedgie fills out. The other 3 positions, however, are in a bit of a state of flux as Garko's 2008 (does everyone know that before his torrid 14-game stretch to end the season, he had posted a line of .252 BA / .327 OBP / .360 SLG / .687 OPS over 502 plate appearances, which is impossibly bad...particularly for a 1B with limited defensive range) figures to have him on a pretty short leash, which affects both C and 1B and the final 80 games that Ben Francisco played in for 2008 saw him posting a .246 BA / .325 OBP / .416 SLG / .741 OPS over 331 plate appearances, which means that the Indians could very easily move around some pieces and parts in the outfield if he comes out of the gate in 2009 struggling the way he did to end 2008.

First and foremost, C and 1B figure to be affected by the performance of Garko out of the gate as the Indians (very obviously) need to find AB for Kelly Shoppach and their oft-stated stance that "Victor is our Catcher" could go by the wayside pretty quickly if Garko is struggling while Kelly is searching for plate appearances. The short term strategy could be that the Indians will start the season with some sort of plan for Kelly to play maybe 2 or 3 out of every 5 games (perhaps matching up with Cliff Lee's starts as Chris Kreitzer of Tribe Times Online asserts from his experience at the Town Hall meeting on Tuesday), allowing Victor to move up to 1B and moving Garko to the bench. If, however, Garko is unable to re-capture the success (moderate at that) of his 2006 and 2007 campaigns (or at least raised his OBP to respectable levels), the Indians should not hesitate to make a much more permanent switch of giving Victor more time at 1B and Kelly more time behind the dish. It's not outside of the realm of possibility that Garko could even be sent to Columbus, as he does still retain an option, but he would be joining a pretty crowded 1B situation there (more on that in a bit) and would likely stay topside to provide some insurance (albeit minimum coverage) against Hafner's injury or give Hafner a day off now and then.

As for other options in LF, this is where it gets a little interesting as it's HIGHLY unlikely that the player that the Indians figure to carry as the "4th OF" out of Goodyear (The Looch) is going to figure into the Indians' 2009 plans too seriously. If, then, Francisco struggles out of the gate to provide even league-average offense and his defensive circus act continues in LF, what do the Indians do?

The answer is likely to come out of one of the 3 OF that figure to start 2009 patrolling the Columbus outfield - Matt LaPorta, Trevor Crowe, and Michael Brantley. Though Crowe is the only one of the three on the 40-man roster, if

Francisco struggles and one of these three (more notably LaPorta and Crowe given their age and advancement, though they'd have to be added to the 40-man) starts the year on a tear in Columbus, the Indians shouldn't be afraid to cut ties with Dellucci and promote whomever merits the promotion, move Francisco into the 4th OF role and strengthen the lineup in terms of quality and depth (particularly if LaPorta's the guy) by jettisoning Dellucci and adding a bat ready to ascend to MLB, slotting Francisco into a role that may suit him better than that of an everyday OF.

The beauty of the AAA OF situation is that any of the three Clippers' OF could make a move into the Indians' 2009 plans, but looking further at (what is admittedly an educated guess) the Columbus position players, check out how many of these names you recognize and how the dreadful 2008 AAA non-prospect roster (where 9 of the 11 players who had 200 or more AB were 26 or older) was in comparison to this:

C - Wyatt Torregas
1B - Jordan Brown
2B - Luis Valbuena
SS - Andy Cannizaro
3B - Wes Hodges
OF - Matt LaPorta
OF - Michael Brantley
OF - Trevor Crowe

Utility - Chris Gimenez
1B/DH - Michael Aubrey
2B - Josh Barfield
OF - Warm Body

With the exception of Cannizaro (who was signed to be the Bisons' SS last year), Aubrey (who cleared waivers and may or may not be on this team), and the Warm Body, most of these guys still project as prospects and potential MLB players in some capacity.

Even Barfield, still just 26 and with some measure of success in MLB, is a better option than some of the roster fodder that was seen in Buffalo last year. And, really with Barfield, he may end up on the parent club as the 13th spot among position players looked to perhaps come down to Barfield and Marte with Shapiro

pretty much throwing Marte out the window with this comment , *"at this point, in all honesty, it's tough road for Andy. Barring an injury, it's hard to see him as a fit on our club."*

Not unlike 2007, when the Indians used their farm system to fortify the team for the stretch run and use it for depth effectively, the AAA team figures to be full of players fighting for position to get the attention of the Indians and slot themselves into a pecking order for promotion in 2009 or 2010.

By the same token, the pitching staff in Columbus figures to be absolutely loaded with talented arms, and could look like this depending on who breaks camp with the Tribe (for my guess, I'm putting Laffey in the 5th starter role behind Reyes and Pavano and have Mujica getting the 7th bullpen spot), which again is full of talented youngsters, nearly all of whom are still considered prospects:

Rotation

Dave Huff
Scott Lewis
Jeremy Sowers
Zach Jackson
Tomo Ohka

Bullpen

Atom Miller
John Meloan
Tony Sipp
Rich Rundles
Randy Newsom
Greg Aquino
Kirk Saarloos

Quite a change from the John Halama, Jeff Harris, Jeff Weaver, Matt Ginter, Brian Slocum starters in AAA last year with Rick Bauer closing, no?

Depending upon what happens in Spring Training and what decisions are made, there are 4 of those starters that I wouldn't have too much of a problem filling the #5 spot in the rotation at some point in 2009 (sorry, Tomo) and think that the top 3

names in the Columbus bullpen (health willing) are probably legitimate back-end of the bullpen options going forward in Cleveland with Rundles and Newsom projecting as bullpen specialists (LOOGY and ROOGY, respectively) that can find a role on the team as early as 2009 depending upon the health and effectiveness of the players ahead of them.

What this all means is that the days of Matt Ginter starting with Juan Rincon and Brendan Donnelly coming in to relieve him are hopefully over as the names that figure into the mix as depth options for 2009 are legitimately considered part of this team's future and how they perform in Columbus should determine how they arrive to Cleveland to fill the holes that are sure to present themselves as the season progresses.

Luckily, the Columbus players will sort themselves out a couple of hours away on I-71 with the promise that STO will be airing games this season so fans can see for themselves what a Dave Huff start looks like or what Atom Miller looks like as a reliever or how the three OF who could find their way up I-71 at some point this season look at the plate and on the field before they make it to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

The road between Progressive Field and Huntington Park figures to traveled regularly by more than just Indians' fans this year, with the players available in Columbus this year will hopefully serve as the depth that the Indians may need as 2009 wears on.