Creeping closer to Spring Training as the snow continues to fall on the North Coast (with a wonderful sheet of ice under the newest layer of white fluff), let's warm our bones by rolling right into a Lazy Sunday with Paulie C. This week, Paulie starts off the piece by talking about Fausto Carmona, who will play a key role in determing the success of the '09 Indians. Paul also talks Dellucci, Adam Miller, Michael Brantley, and Josh Barfield in this Sunday staple here on the site.

Creeping closer to Spring Training as the snow continues to fall on the North Coast (with a wonderful sheet of ice under the newest layer of white fluff), let's warm our bones by rolling right into a Lazy one:

Terry Pluto has a column that focuses on how two key players for 2009 , Fausto (and is that picture to the right still the greatest thing you've ever seen, if only for the memories) and Hafner, may be on the road to recovering their past success. He reports that the Indians have found a "small flaw in Carmona's delivery" which will hopefully improve the command that left him in 2008. Though some could spend thousands of words on the rotation (overly verbose, me?), I think it goes without saying that Carmona could be the key to the Indians' 2009 season as Lee is assumed to be a solid pillar in the rotation (even if his 2008 Cy Young-worthy campaign is not replicated) and questions abound for starters #3 to #5 as the Indians will try to recognize and utilize the pitchers that best fill those spots earlier rather than later (not that you asked, but I see Laffey, Reyes, and Huff as the three pitchers who fill out the rotation for the bulk of the season) in 2009.

But the wild card remains Carmona as an effective Carmona gives the Indians two potential aces to head the rotation and, while it's not exactly "Spahn and Sain and pray for rain" because the candidates for the back-end aren't exactly slouches, it puts less pressure on the back-end-of-the-rotation guys to perform at a level higher than perhaps what they're capable of at this point in their

careers. On the flip side, a Carmona who continues to struggle with command and spends the season correcting whatever mechanical flaw has invaded his delivery means that the serious question marks in the rotation start right behind Lee.

As for the other player of note that Pluto addresses in terms of bounce back seasons, he asserts that the Indians, when talking about Carlos Quentin as a possible trade target last off-season, said that Quentin's numbers would improve in 2008 wherever he played because of the shoulder surgery that he had after the 2007 season. Why is this relevant? Because, according to the Indians, it's similar to the shoulder surgery that Hafner went through a few months back and in case you forgot how Quentin burst onto the AL after a couple of lousy years in Arizona when he didn't have a lot of power (where have I seen that recently), he was the leader in MVP field when he decided to punch a bat.

As a quick aside here, Pluto points out later in his piece how the Browns are missing the boat by not making any of their new employees available to the media and by starving their fans, hungry for any morsel of information about the Browns. In comparison, after reading the "information" that came out of the Indians' Winter Press Tour, does anyone else think that the Indians are pretty aware that putting something (ANYTHING) out there for their fans in even the slowest of times is a way to stay front-and-center in the minds of their fans? Unfortunately for the Indians, the Browns' fans will continue to seek out anything that they can find and mindlessly flock to fill CB Stadium every Sunday while the Indians figure to struggle to meet their attendance projections despite an off-season that resulted in a team that many are calling the prohibitive favorite in the AL Central...whatever that means in January.

But I digress ...

Back to the Winter Press Tour, apparently something of value CAN come out of it and not just the canned responses to the obligatory "how do you feel" or "how do you think the team's going to do this year" questions. Leave it to Castro to muddle through the muck to summarize the items of interest from the past two weeks .

Going through the notable entries, Castrovince asserts that Dellucci's going to be on a "short leash", which shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone, though I'd be very surprised if he didn't at least break camp on the 25-man if only to let the Columbus OF sort itself out for a couple of weeks/months. Also

pertaining to players on the fringe, he sees Barfield as the likely 25th player on the roster, which again shouldn't come as too much of a surprise as Andy Marte's ticket out of the organization seems to have been stamped and Barfield represents a player earning the league minimum who possesses some speed that can sit on the bench without blocking a real prospect (Valbuena) by playing 2B at all in Columbus.

On the bullpen, AC says that Atom Miller has to be considered the leader in the clubhouse saying that "If he's healthy and throwing well in camp, it's hard to imagine the Indians using an option on him to send him to Triple-A." I don't doubt that bringing Miller north may be a course of action that they're considering, particularly because reports out of the Dominican League had him buzz-sawing through hitters with 98 MPH heat and a wicked 89 MPH splitter, but let's all hope that Miller (assuming he's that 7th bullpen arm) isn't used like the 7th relievers out of the pen in the past. That is, if Miller is going to be on the 25-man roster on Opening Day, his talent should be what determines where he pitches as opposed to simply slotting him at the bottom of the bullpen ladder because it's assumed that the progression goes Wood, Lewis, Perez, Betancourt, Smith, and Kobayashi from one to six.

Ideally, Miller's performance in the Spring should dictate where he slots in the pen and if he's dominating hitters in Goodyear like reports from the Dominican Winter League purported him to be, there's no reason that the Indians should have him leapfrog immediately over Masa in the bullpen ladder and be on par with Betancourt and Smith in terms of where he slots. If Miller's dominant in Arizona, give him a crack at that 6th inning role right away instead of putting him into that 7th reliever role that we saw Mujica and Mastny flounder in, where The Atomic Wedgie's usage patterns are erratic at best.

Finally, Castro relays that Mike Brantley is "as mature a 21-year-old as you'll ever meet", a notion that struck me as well when Tony Lastoria and I were lucky enough to welcome Brantley and his agent Josh Kusnick to the radio show some time ago. I don't know about you, but the 21-year-old version of myself was not the most impressive or mature person that you would meet and Brantley's poise at a young age, not to mention the fact that he doesn't turn 22 until May and figures to start the season in AAA, speaks to a self-confidence (not a cockiness) that the special players often exhibit.

On the topic of Brantley, Tony Lastoria mentioned on this week's show (during which we welcomed RHP Frank Herrmann) that he met Brantley at an event in Lake County and says that Brantley is about 6'2" or 6'3" and a "rock-solid" 200 lbs (which, ironically, is what Grady's measurements are purported to be), attempting to put to rest any idea that Brantley is simply a slap-hitting speed guy that sits at the top of the lineup with no power. His stature and the fact that he's still a 21-year-old growing into his body give some validity to Brantley's comments during our interview a few months ago that scouts had told him that a comp for him was Garrett Anderson...which, at the time, I scoffed at. Certainly appearances are just that, but the on-base skills have always been there for Brantley (.399 career minor-league OBP) and he walked twice as much as he struck out last year in AA Huntsville, so it will be interesting to see if his power grows as his body matures and he moves himself further up the ladder.

Obviously, Brantley's ability to hit for extra-base hits in AAA will go a long way to determining where he projects to be as a hitter, but know that Garrett Anderson had 42 extra-base hits as a 21-year-old in AAA in 1993 before becoming a fixture in the Angels' lineup for the next 13 years, so if Brantley shows an ability to drive the ball in Columbus (now that he's completely healthy and not hampered by the ankle injury that robbed him of some power in the 2nd half of 2008), it could portend good things for the PTBNL in the CC deal.

While we're talking prospects and Mike Brantley, Keith Law's Top 10 prospect list for the Indians came out this week (via the LGT, which also links that Law has the Indians possessing the 5th best farm system in MLB) and Brantley is not listed among Law's Top 10. Law puts 5 Indians' prospects in his Top 66 overall (including "why-did-the-Dodgers-trade-him-for-Lacey-Cake Carlos Santana" at #13 in all of baseball) and has some interesting comments regarding where he thinks his #27 prospect overall, Matt LaPorta, will end up (that would be in the middle of the lineup because of his "ready for the majors now" bat and at 1B because of speed, or lack thereof) going forward. Law is also high on the two young pitchers who could perhaps contribute mightily to the parent club this year, with Atom Miller (#58 overall) potentially becoming a pillar in the bullpen and with Dave Huff (#66 overall) factoring into the rotation mix for sure at some point in 2009.

These rankings (many of which are also linked at the above LGT link) always come off as a bit arbitrary and are certainly very subjective, a topic that Tony and I touched on in this past week's show as I asked him how exactly he ranks these guys. Because if you haven't noticed, Tony has been ranking the Indians' prospects from #100 (!!!) and will be working his way to #1 on his website and is in the process of publishing a book with all 100 Top Prospects along with 30 more "bonus" scouting reports...because 100 simply wasn't enough. If you're interested in the book, it's an absurdly exhaustive resource that probably takes you deeper into the Indians' organization than you ever thought you would go. Regardless, information on how to purchase the book, as well as Tony's rankings (I think he's down to about #70 or so these days) can be found at his website
.

To me, these prospect rankings are good reference points but I look at them in a little bit of a different way as I usually focus on the parent club quite a bit more than the farm. I often look at these players in terms of when they're likely to surface in Cleveland and, in turn, who among each group excites me the most in terms of how much they'll help. For instance, among the Indians' farmhands, I see Dave Huff and Atom Miller making the biggest impact, in that order, on the Indians in 2009, with the possibility that LaPorta, Valbuena, Brantley, and Gimenez may help at some point, but more likely that they'll contribute to the Indians in 2010. Everyone else below them may show up on the 25-man roster, but I'm not enthused about them the way that a guy like Huff excites me. If you're talking about a 2010 list, I'm probably optimistic that Carlos Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, and Valbuena make an impact, again in that order. The rest of the guys that figure to start in Akron or below, to me at least, are fun to imagine who they might become (like a Carlos Rivero), but there's just too much that can happen between now and...let's say 2012 for me to really get excited about them.

For now, I'll figure to worry about the 2012 lineup and rotation another day as a nap is in order, thanks to The DiaperTribe's new favorite time of the day to play with his old man...that would be a little before 5:00 AM. And after an evening that only furthers my obsession with the new Indigo Imp Brewery's products (which you need to find on the shelf of your local Heinen's and try if you're on the North Coast), I need a nap if only to dream of "the crack of the bat...the roar of the crowd...catch the fun, it's here everyone!"
It's getting closer...