With spring training now just a couple of weeks away, Paulie C checks in with the latest installment of his "Arizona Dreamin'" series, which takes a look at the '09 Indians in parts as we move closer towards the start of the season. Having looked at the rotation, Paul moves his attention to the bullpen. And as we've seen here in Cleveland over the previous five up and down seasons, when our bullpen is good, so have been the Tribe.

Being simply no longer surprised or dismayed by another significant dropping of whiteness upon us (it is Cleveland and it is January after all), it's definitely time to take another look forward to the land of cacti and sun...Arizona and Spring Training for YOUR Cleveland Indians, which is now only about two weeks away.

Having looked at the part of the team that looks to have the most question marks entering 2009 with the rotation , it's time to cast an eye towards the part of the team that has consistently contained the most question marks (at least in even-numbered years) for the Tribe - the bullpen. On the surface, though, the bullpen looks to contain infinitely fewer question marks compared to the rotation as it stands here in January. Whereas the Indians seemed to have addressed the questions in the back-end-of-the-rotation by compiling a number of arms (Reyes, Pavano, Laffey, Sowers, Huff, Lewis) and hoping that three spots can be filled in some manner by some combination of said arms, the Indians' approach to handling their bullpen needs this off-season represents a much more focused strategy, one (very frankly) that they haven't employed too often in off-seasons of the past under the Shapiro/Antonetti regime.

That is, in the past, the Indians have always employed the idea that they could resurrect an arm from the trash heap to go with their young arms with the hope that it would all blend together to forge a successful bullpen (sound familiar when you look at spots #3 to #5 in the 2009 rotation?) as the arms sorted themselves out. It became a crapshoot every year, wondering who was going to emerge as an effective reliever, who was going to fall off, and who would assert themselves squarely into the progression of arms that The Atomic Wedgie utilizes for the 6th inning on.

During the implementation of that strategy, the Indians saw relievers resurrect their careers as guys like Bob Howry, Bob Wickman, and Brodzoski v.2007 (yes, he did lead the AL in saves...look it up) rediscovered past successes or squeezed every last bit out of their arms. But, just as frequent were the players that ultimately proved that there was nothing left (Guillermo Mota, Danny Graves, Bobby Hernandez, Jorge Julio, etc.) once they got to Cleveland, assuming they even made it to Cleveland (Keith Foulke, I'm looking in your direction)...and that's just the veterans. For every Rafael Betancourt and Rafael Perez, who has logged innings with some consistency over the course of a couple of years, players like Fernando Cabrera, Jason Davis, and Tom Mastny showed flashes of effectiveness, but eventually found their way out of the organization due to inconsistency.

Coming off the 2008 season, though, something changed in the Indians' line of thinking pertaining to bullpens. Whether it was the amount of money the team was spending on pallets of the Pepto-Bismal and TUMS that were necessary to get through the 6th through 9th innings every night or whether it was the realization that the bullpen effectively deep-sixed the 2008 season (along with a few other factors, for sure), the Indians decided that they would eschew the idea that adding a couple of fair-to-middling arms to the mix of Lewis, Perez, Betancourt, and Kobayashi could result in an effective pen (remember the odd-even year thing) and take their chances and added two in-their-prime relievers to the bullpen, one very significantly having the potential to end the 9th inning woes.

When the Indians ended their 2008 season, they very specifically identified their needs as a bona-fide closer and another bullpen arm to lengthen the quality of the depth of the bullpen down to the reserves in AAA. While some rolled their eyes and prepared for a Jason Isringhausen or Brandon Lyon signing, as well as preparing themselves for the possibility that Donnelly or Rincon would inexplicably be kept around, the Indians moved quickly at the Winter Meetings by first inking

an elite closer in Kerry Wood to the back-end of the bullpen, then pulling the trigger on the Franky Gutz deal that netted them a young, reliable reliever in Joe Smith to settle into the middle tier of relievers.

When the dust settled and the Indians' brass returned from Las Vegas, the bullpen had gone from having the look of "I hope some of these young guys can take the next step to settle the bullpen" to "If these young guys take the next step, look out for a potentially dominant bullpen". As the Indians welcomed their new arms into the fold, the top 6 names in the bullpen began to take shape, on paper at least:

Closer - Wood
Set-Up - Perez
Set-Up - Lewis
Middle-to-Late Relief - Betancourt
Middle-to-Late Relief - Smith
Middle Relief - Kobayashi

Still today, that progression looks to be how they will essentially go into Spring Training, with the idea that Wood's presence allows the rest of the bullpen to slot accordingly in front of him. Because with Wood, the Indians finally have that 9th inning pitcher that makes opponents hope that they can get a lead against the relievers in the 6th, 7th, or 8th inning because the 9th inning is no longer the place that hitters can lick their chops for the likes of Sticky Wickman or JoeBo.

Don't know what I mean?

How often, when the Indians are losing to the Twins, do you say to yourself, "well, the Tribe's going to have to get even or ahead before the 9th because when Joe Nathan comes on...it's over"?

Same thing...replace "Twins" and "Nathan" with "Red Sox" and "Papelbon" or "Royals" and "Soria" or even "Yankees" and "Rivera"...you know exactly what I'm talking about and how we've all longed for the day when the Indians could boast a similarly skilled closer, capable of missing bats, consistently going 1-2-3, and just locking it up in the 9th.
How's this sound in terms of "locking it up"?

11.40 K/9 (7th in MLB among pitchers with more than 60 IP)
4.67 K/BB (9th in MLB among pitchers with more than 60 IP)
1.09 WHIP (19th in MLB among pitchers with more than 60 IP)
2.28 Defense Independent ERA (4th in MLB among pitchers with more than 60 IP)

This could go on and on, but know that the Indians haven't had a pitcher like Wood at the back-end of their bullpen since Joe Table's heyday and (knocking firmly on wood...ba dum bum) assuming he stays healthy, his mere presence and reputation in the 9th inning go a long way to stabilizing the bullpen from the back going forward.

Figuring to be the two principal pitchers tasked with handing Wood a lead, Perez and Lewis look to build on their success over the last two seasons as Perez has compiled a career ERA of 2.89, a career WHIP of 1.09, a career ERA+ of 156, and has 163 K to 44 BB in 149 1/3 innings over his 135 appearances over the last three seasons. Perez, with that track record, has established himself as a legitimate set-up man, capable of getting swings and misses and being equally effective against hitters from both sides of the plate (LHP - .519 career OPS against, RHP - .654 career OPS against). Meanwhile, Lewis got past some initial difficulties in 2008 to show that his 2007 performance (2.15 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, 214 ERA+) wasn't a flash in the pan as he saved all 13 save opportunities presented to him, compiling a 2.49 ERA, a 1.11 WHIP and 22 K to 7 BB in the 25 1/3 innings over his last 24 appearances.

Again, going back to the Wood signing, what the domino effect of slotting Wood into the 9th inning did was allow the Indians to use Perez and Lewis in the 7th or 8th innings and allow the likes of Rocky Betancourt to work his way back into the progression of relievers and the likes of Joe Smith into the progression of relievers without asking either to take the ball in the 7th or 8th inning from Day 1. This cannot be underestimated as Betancourt is coming off a disastrous season, during which he saw his numbers drop not just a little bit from his Herculean 2007 season (312 ERA+...312!), but saw them drop to the point that he wasn't even a moderately effective or average reliever in 2008. After giving up only 4 HR and walking only 9 batters in 2007 over 79 1/3 innings, Betancourt reached those milestones in 25 IP (for 4 HR) and 27 IP (for the 9 BB). While it was thought that Rocky could be a closer-in-waiting or that he provided insurance against Borowski's imminent meltdown, he started the season by posting a 7.00 ERA, a 1.69 WHIP, and a .950 OPS against in his first 27 appearances. To put that in

perspective, the much-maligned (and rightly so) 2008 season put forth by Joe Borowski really wasn't that far off of Betancourt's numbers as Brodzoski (The Close) compiled a 7.56 ERA, a 1.92 WHIP, and a .978 OPS against in his 18 outings for the Tribe.

Given that Betancourt fell off the cliff like he did, then, to simply put him back into the mix as a viable 7th inning option for 2009 looked to be tantamount to playing Russian roulette as an organization because at this point, nobody knows what Betancourt figures to contribute. Certainly it won't be his brilliant 2007 (or could it?) or his forgettable 2008 (again, or could it?)...maybe it's somewhere around his three seasons previous to 2007, when the Indians could mark him down for 55 to 70 innings, an ERA between 3.00 and 4.00, a WHIP between 1.20 and 1.40 - essentially a solid reliever that can help the bullpen in some capacity. Maybe more will come from him, maybe the Indians expect more from him...at this point, I don't. Regardless of whether he ever recaptures his 2007 stuff, I'll take the reliever that Betancourt was from 2004 to 2006 in the 6th inning of a rock-solid bullpen any day.

As for the other middle-to-late inning alternative allowed to slide down the ladder because of the Wood signing (which was done before he was even an Indian, I know), Joe Smith is afforded the luxury of adapting to a new league, a new team, and a new set of hitters without the pressure of doing so as a primary or secondary set-up man (which he really was in New York, entering the game in the 7th inning or later in 68 of his 82 appearances) because of the quality present in the Indians' 2009 bullpen. His 2008 numbers, in only his second season in MLB, portend good things for Smith as he posted a 3.55 ERA, a 1.30 WHIP, and a 118 ERA+ in 63 1/3 IP in those 82 appearances. To put that in perspective in terms of the 2008 Tribe bullpen, only Rafael Perez posted a better ERA+ as a regular Indian reliever last year, besting Smith's 118 ERA+ with a 126 ERA+.

Smith comes to the Indians as somewhat of a ROOGY (the right-handed cousin of the Left-handed One Out GuY), allowing RH hitters to compile only a .589 OPS against him in 210 plate appearances, while struggling against LH hitters in the 61 times the Mets allowed him to face them, as LH hitters posted a .903 OPS against Smith in 2008. It will be interesting to see how Wedge and Willis use Smith as his body of work to this point seems to indicate that he's best suited to face RH hitters almost exclusively, so they may try to either work him into a comfort zone by facing batters from both sides of the plate earlier in a game to see if he projects as more than a straight ROOGY or they can simply use him as he was used

effectively in New York, shutting down opposing RH batters at any point in the game. Realistically, he doesn't figure to be much more than a one-to-two batter pitcher, but on a team that looks to be strong in the bullpen, it's a luxury that the Indians can afford.

Concerning the last pitcher thought to be guaranteed a spot in the bullpen out of Goodyear, Masa Kobayashi showed in 2008 that he can be effective out of the bullpen...until something happens. From the Season Opener to the first week in June, Kobayashi posted a 2.61 ERA, a 1.06 WHIP, and 22 K to 5 BB while limiting opposing hitters to a .591 OPS against in 31 IP over 28 appearances.

Looks good, right?

Well...then...something...happened. Something inexplicably bad, something that took Kobayashi from a potential closer to a player not guaranteed much more than a short leash this season. From his 29th appearance to his last (a total of...29 games), Kobayashi compiled a 6.93 ERA, a 1.86 WHIP, and only 13 K to 9 BB while allowing hitters to tee off on him to the tune of a .936 OPS against in 24 2/3 IP. Maybe it had something to do with workload, maybe there was an unreported injury, maybe it had something to do with age - whatever it was, the Indians should either REALLY limit his workload or ride him hard and fast while he's effective, then cut ties with him sometime around (just throwing this number out there) the 32nd inning he pitches. I don't doubt that Kobayashi will break camp with the team, if only because most of the candidates for the 7th bullpen spot retain options, but I don't expect him to finish the season on the team, given what we saw last year. Even if the Indians limit his inning count, if he appears for an inning twice a week for 15 weeks from the time the season starts (a pretty light workload), he's at 30 IP in the first week in July. That's before the All-Star Break and, if the second half of 2008 is any indication, I'm not sure I expect Kobayashi to last even that long, particularly if "protecting" his workload could result in the Indians essentially going with a 6-man bullpen.

If we're assuming that those six pitchers are locked into the bullpen out of Goodyear (with the obvious caveat that injury and ineffectiveness is sure to have the players that take up those top six spots fluctuate a bit), let's get into the only real question facing the Indians this Spring pertaining to their bullpen - who comes out of Arizona as the 7th member of the bullpen?

The names out there are familiar to Tribe fans because their names have become

verbs ("we got Mujica'd last night"), because we've heard about them for what feels like 10 years now as "can't miss" (Atom Miller, blazing his way back into the mix), because 2009 represents a chance for them to put themselves back on the bullpen map after an ill-advised decision to attempt to start again (Mayday Meloan, the stud RHP from LA), or because they offer what the bullpen seems to be short on (LOOGY Rich Rundles). Regardless of how they're familiar to you, each represents a different avenue that the Indians can take with that 7th spot as each brings a different skill-set and a different story to the table.

If you're talking strictly from a roster management standpoint, the obvious choice for the 7th spot is Mujica, out of options and at risk of being plucked up by another organization if he doesn't make the team out of Goodyear. If you would have asked me when 2008 ended if Mujica would be in the 2009 bullpen in some capacity, I would have unequivocally said that he would. But after watching the Indians allow Nasty Boy Tom Mastny to head to the Far East and watching them load up on arms, while making the full-time commitment to Miller in the bullpen, I'm not so sure that his days aren't numbered. He famously thrust himself into the Indians' plans with a 2006 season, during which he dominated AA and AAA (1.56 ERA, 1.08 WHIP, 46 K to 14 BB in 52 IP as a 22-year-old) and experienced success for the Indians that same year when given the opportunity, posting a 2.95 ERA and a 1.36 WHIP with 12 K and 0 BB in 18 1/3 IP for the parent club. But since then, Mujica has been inconsistent at best both in AAA and for the Indians as his forgettable 2007 (5.12 ERA, 1.17 WHIP in Buffalo, 8.31 ERA, 1.61 WHIP for Cleveland) gave way to his 2008 season which can best be described as a roller coaster...which is to say, up and down. Lest anyone forget, for a 10-game stretch in 2008, Mujica put up 12 straight scoreless innings, allowing only 6 base runners, none of whom reached on an extra-base hit.

Unfortunately for Eddie Moo, though, sandwiched around that brilliant stretch was a period of time that saw him pitch 12 innings in 9 games, giving up 9 runs, 5 2B, and 3 HR and another period over 17 games (17 2/3 innings) giving up 20 runs and 11 extra-base hits. With all of that said, maybe the Indians give him the first crack out of Spring Training of eating some innings or allowing the youngsters (namely Miller and Meloan) to sort themselves out in Columbus, but the talk about young Miller forcing his way into the plans right out of Goodyear could leave Mujica as the odd man out, options or no options.

As for young Atom Miller, his talent has never been questioned and his

performance in the Dominican Winter League (where his fastball was allegedly touching 96 MPH to 98 MPH) was described by one scout thusly, "I mean, he was carving these guys up...a nasty slider, too. Attacked hitters. Threw strikes. If he stays healthy, he's going to be something to reckon with down the road."
There's that Atomic caveat - "if he stays healthy" - one that we've grown all too familiar with since his breakout season in 2006 in Akron that put his ascent on hold...apparently until now. Miller's move full-time to the bullpen looks to be a way to get the talented 24-year-old onto the Indians, not giving up on the idea that he can perhaps move back to the rotation at some point down the road if he can prove that he can stay healthy (think Adam Wainwright). But for now, the bullpen looks to be where he fits for 2009 and early returns have been more than encouraging to the point that many "in the know" have pegged Miller as the odds-on favorite to break camp with the Tribe as that 7th reliever in the bullpen. I know it's been said before (fairly recently), but it bears repeating that if he does make the 25-man out of Goodyear that his talent should be what determines where he pitches as opposed to simply slotting him at the bottom of the bullpen ladder. That is, if Miller's dominant in Arizona, the Indians should give him a crack at that 6th inning role right away along with Betancourt and Smith, ahead of Masa. If Miller thrives, the Indians shouldn't hesitate to utilize his talent (that is, that fastball and slider) as high up the bullpen ladder as his performance merits.

At this point, the kid gloves should be off of Miller to some extent to see what the young fireballer can do and the results, not the fear of what could happen, should dictate where he ends up. If it's in the mix with Lewis and Perez as set-up guys, or even above them setting up another hard-throwing Texan who has seen his share of injury concerns, so be it.

If Miller is trying to recapture some of the momentum he had from 2006, Mayday Meloan figures to go into camp trying to rediscover the unbridled success he had as a reliever in the Dodgers' organization before he was inexplicably moved to the AAA Las Vegas rotation in 2008, prior to coming to Cleveland as part of the Casey Blake deal. While the Indians hope that Miller's talent translates to the bullpen, they simply hope that Meloan's obvious talent can translate BACK to the bullpen as the numbers that he put up in the Dodgers' organization speak to a high level of performance out of the bullpen:

2006 - Age 21 at A & AA

1.90 ERA, 0.83 WHIP with 91 K and 16 BB in 52 IP

2007 - Age 22 at AA & AAA
2.03 ERA, 0.95 WHIP with 91 K and 27 BB in 66 2/3 IP

Now, after the Dodgers' ill-fated attempt to make him a starter (for whatever reason), Mayday is back in the bullpen, where he will attempt to get back into the rhythm and the routine of a reliever. Meloan's overall body of work as a reliever are probably just as impressive as Miller's numbers, but working himself back into the role of a reliever may mean that the Indians start Meloan in AAA to get steady work out of the bullpen with the idea that he factors very heavily into the 2009 bullpen (perhaps just as much as Atom Miller, without the current fanfare)...just not out of Goodyear.

While Mujica, Miller, and Meloan represent RH options for a bullpen that looks largely RH, if the Indians decide to keep another LHP out of Goodyear not named Raffy Perez, Rich Rundles almost certainly becomes that 7th reliever. While Perez cannot be considered a LOOGY (due to his success against both LH and RH hitters), Rundles' numbers project him as a LHP who thrives against LH hitter (.165 Batting Average Against, 1.01 WHIP, 11.44 K/9 against LH hitters in AAA last year) while seeing his overall numbers drop, though not precipitously against RH hitters (.260 Batting Average Against, 1.50 WHIP, 7.66 K/9 against RH hitters in AAA in 2008). Obviously the Indians aren't afraid to carry pitchers who specialize in facing one type of batter (see Smith, Joe), so Rundles could certainly find a place on this bullpen if the Indians feel that they're too RH-heavy. At this point, though, Rundles looks to be a depth option for Columbus with the idea that the Indians will continue to develop him as a potential LOOGY down the road - probably wearing a Tribe uniform at some point in 2009, just not out of the gate.

Those four look to be the main competition for the 7th spot with the rest of the bullpen depth either looking to simply stay healthy to get back into the serious discussions as an option for the Tribe (like the unquestionably talented Tony Sipp, who threw only 33 2/3 innings last year after missing all of 2007) or someone still trying to work into the mix as an option even if a similarly skilled player was just acquired for the parent club (like Randy Newsom, a potential ROOGY suddenly "blocked" by Joe Smith) or basically being roster fodder for the Spring Training camp (Matt Herges, Greg Aquino, Kirk Saarloos, Vinnie Chulk, and Jack Cassel) with the idea that if the Indians have these veteran arms if they need them while not counting on any to contribute significantly.

The other direction they could go would be to keep Zach Jackson around as a long man/spot starter, but with Jackson now having another option, the Indians can send him to Columbus to be ready to do just that without having to worry about losing him to waivers out of Goodyear to do so. Jackson, as I said in the rotation piece, probably factors into the 2009 pitching staff as a fill-in type of arm as not much can really be expected of him in terms of long-term performance based on his track record, but his availability and versatility mean that he'll log some innings for the Tribe, either out of the bullpen to eat innings or for a spot start to preserve rest for the rotation.

All told, the Indians' approach to their bullpen, which in years past could be best described as "throw it against the wall and see what sticks" took a turn this off-season as the Indians added legitimate relievers (Wood and Smith) in their prime to their in-house mix of Lewis, Perez, Betancourt, and (to a lesser extent Kobayashi) while FINALLY having some young, high-ceiling power arms (namely Miller and Meloan) that figure to augment the veteran mix as the season moves on. The bullpen figures to be a constantly evolving entity (as it is every year) with players moving up and down the ladder of progression that Wedge employs to fit his relievers into set "roles".

The bullpen as it figures to break camp from Goodyear to the bullpen as it likely looks in the middle of the season to the way that it will be constituted for what is hopefully a stretch run for the playoffs should have a lot of moving parts that will flow in and out of it. The addition of Wood, though, and the prospect of young relievers either entering their prime (Perez and Lewis) or thrusting themselves into the mix (Miller and Meloan) gives the Indians what looks to be a deep and somewhat settled pen that should only grow more talented and deeper as 2009 rolls on.