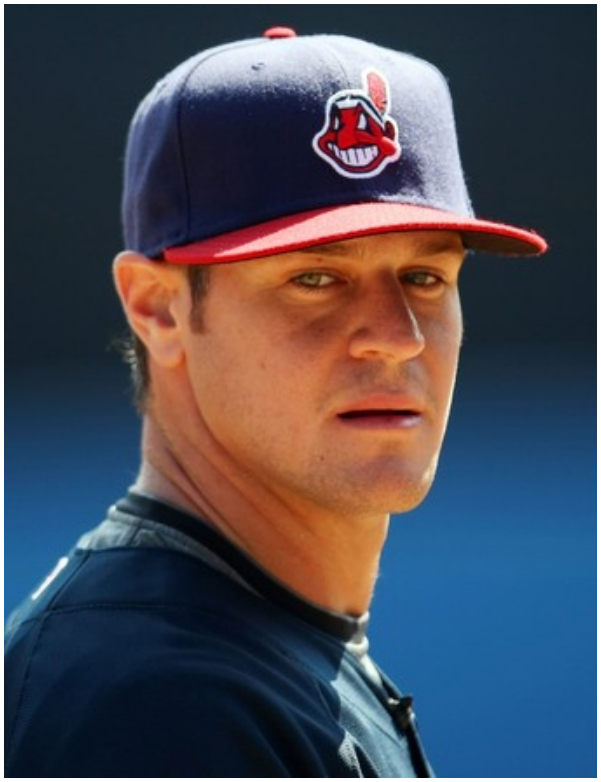
As the cold and snow keep their stubborn grip on the North Coast, how nice was it to catch some Cactus League action last week from Goodyear? And the 3 PM starts make us appreciate the wonderful inventions that are DVR and Tivo. Much to the chagrin of his lovely wife Katie, Paulie's been holed up all week like a wacky scientist, breaking down the spring training games from Arizona. And he talks about the first week of action in this week's Lazy Sunday.



As the cold and snow keep their stubborn grip on the North Coast, how nice was it to catch some Cactus League action last week from Goodyear? Granted the games started at 3 PM local time and (seeing as how most of us are working at that time), were not exactly an easy thing to catch live on a random Thursday afternoon. But, you see, there's this marvelous gift that has been bestowed upon us to remedy such problems that don't involve a VCR or anything as clumsy as that - the beloved DVR.

Spring Training games were made for the DVR, in that games are full of roster fodder that you generally don't care about and have multiple innings that really don't mean too much to even the most die-hard Indians' fan...unless you were dying to see Jesus Marchan in action. The beauty of the DVR, though, is that you can watch the game essentially in fast-forward (which is what I do) so you don't have to sit through a Greg Aquino inning or a Tony Grafannino at-bat, but can quickly pause it to catch Dave Huff throwing a couple of innings or to see Carlos Santana handle the lumber. It's a beautiful way to watch a game in about an hour, where you can avoid Jack Cassel (who Rick Manning apparently thinks is this

guy's
brother, not
this guy's
, based on his pronunciation of ca-SELL, instead of CASS-el), but can see some of the young players that we've all read so much about and have yet to see with our own eyes.

Really, that's the joy in these Spring Training games, to put a face and a swing and a wind-up with these young names. Truthfully, I find myself fast-forwarding through a Grady AB (though with "one arrow" watching on DVR, you don't miss much more than the broadcasters...which you can judge for yourself if that's a good thing or not) or having to quickly rewind to see Victor's two bombs and how the ball jumped off his bat because I'm more interested to see what Matt LaPorta looks like and how he looks in LF. The excitement comes from being able to see some of the guys that show up on the recent Baseball America Top Prospect List (that would be Santana - 26th, LaPorta - 27th, Weglarz - 58th, Miller - 82nd) in actual game action and not as numbers on the Baseball-Reference.com page.

Watching these numbers "come to life" is a great treat for many Tribe fans (with hopefully more coming this season as STO is purported to be showing a certain amount of Clippers' games) and is a reminder as to how the upper levels of the organization have been bolstered with impact position players.

To that end, seeing as how #26 and #27 on that aforementioned BA Prospect list were acquired as the Indians jettisoned their veterans last year (and transitioning seamlessly into a Lazy Sunday), how about this little nugget from Castro regardin g the player that I've found most interesting to watch thus far this Spring, one Michael Brantley:

Michael Brantley is not on that BA list, but he probably should be. Because of his build, his maturity, his skills and the fact that he's only 21 and still improving, ***som e higher-ups around here are starting to think he might be the best player the Indians acquired last summer***
.

If you're figuring that Castrovince is not coming to these conclusions simply in his own imagination (I'm fairly certain a thought process of "you know...this

Brantley kid looks great to me...I bet some people in the Front Office think he's the best guy they got last year" in his head is not what led to this revelation), somebody wearing a Chief Wahoo emblazoned polo around Goodyear thinks that Brantley (not LaPorta or Santana) is the biggest catch after the bait was set last summer and is telling AC as such.

On the topic of Brantley, here's an interesting piece on Brantley's approach and how his father, former MLB player Mickey Brantley, is preaching patience when it comes to his son adding power to his arsenal. It was said after Brantley joined Tony Lastoria and I for "Smoke Signals" that Brantley was about as mature a 21-year-old as you're going to find and to see him sit back on a ball in Goodyear and slap the ball around portends good things for the youngster. To me, that ability to watch Brantley sit back on a ball and slap it up the middle (as he did in the 1st game) or see Santana draw two walks in the 1st game from his Victoresque batting stance, or watch LaPorta stroke one out in the desert air is about as good as it gets for these ST games.

Speaking of LaPorta going yard in the second ST game, how about this revelation about the fashion style of one Mr. LaPorta :

I told you about the unnatural obsession with Affliction T-shirts in the Tribe clubhouse, but apparently LaPorta went a little too far. He wore a neon blue shirt to work yesterday, and his teammates abused him by hanging it up in the middle of the clubhouse with a sign that said "Prime Time."

"Prime Time", eh?

While it makes me think of Chris Berman and Deion Sanders (not a good thing, on either count), that's a nickname I could probably get behind...that is, if I didn't like "The GateKeeper" so much.

On the topic of 1B/OF/DH that figure to start 2009 in AAA, Tony and I were happy to welcome Stephen Head this week for an interview on "Smoke Signals" which turned into probably the best pure interview of a player that we've had thus far. With no disrespect to the other guys who have been on and realizing that "30 minutes with Stephen Head" doesn't quicken pulses the way that 30 minutes with Dave Huff, Mike Brantley, Nick Weglarz, or Jeff Stevens (all of whom were great interviews) do, our conversation

with Head was enlightening in that he was very frank and candid about his minor-league career to date. He wasn't shy about acknowledging his shortcomings or his bad seasons and spoke about his first MLB Spring Training in a manner that put the atmosphere of the clubhouse, the practice field, and the workout facility in very tangible terms. Head (who had hit a HR in his first ST at-bat the previous day, and had allowed a grounder to go through his legs that day in RF) figures to start the 2009 season in Columbus, fully aware of the players that look to slot ahead of him at every position, but also fully self-aware that it's on him to make his own way up to MLB.

Moving away from the youngsters (somewhat) and moving onto players assumed to be counted among the 25 when the Indians break camp, Terry Pluto comes forth with his normal "grab-bag" of Sunday thoughts, including asserting that The Looch should find his way off the roster this Spring (no arguments, as it's been laid out here how he really doesn't fit the roster in any way shape or form as a LH hitter who can't play the OF), that Victor may be in for a big year (...dropping to my knees and praying for it to be so...), that Sowers' "pitch separation" is still too small as pitchers can feast on both his fastball and change-up as they essentially look like the same pitch (to which I direct Sowers to this bit of information and am sorry that the whole article is for subscribers to BPro only, but you get the idea), and that Anthony Reyes is healthy (something that would go a long way to stabilizing that rotation that still looks vulnerable to me).

Other than that, we've had our usual bios and "feel good" stories from Goodyear coming out this week with injuries taking up most of our greater consciousnesses. First Kerry Wood's back flares up (only to find out later that this is an annual Rite of Spring and that he's fine), then Grady pulls out of the WBC because of a "g-g-g-g-g-groin in-jur-y" (which, to me, is a blessing in disguise as it keeps Grady in Goodyear), and with the news that Atom Miller's finger injury is flaring up. While each if these is troubling in some sense, the Miller one is most concerning simply because of his injury history and because of the fact that this finger injury is what robbed him of his 2008 season.

But looking at these injuries as a whole, and realizing that it's March 1st, the scope of these are not too troubling (unlike this news for Mets' fans) as Opening Day is still a long way away and (with the possible exception of

Miller...which bears watching only because of the wild success he had in the DR this winter when healthy) there's plenty of time for everyone to get healthy. With this Spring Training, where not much looks to be truly decided outside of what you could call the 23rd to 25th spots on the roster, maintaining health is the most important aspect of camp in Goodyear.

As if I'm telling secrets, health is the key this Spring for the Indians...well, that, and me being able to watch more of Brantley, LaPorta, and Huff on my DVR.

Finally, I should not that my IA2K9 arrived this week and if you were on the fence about buying this publication, even my hopes for the quality and content were blown out of the water as the scouting reports, statistics, interviews (with Antonetti, Hafner, and Shoppach), prospect lists (with both a phenomenal top prospect list complete with a variety of statistics and metrics AND an in-depth look at how the Indians spent their money to add new talent to the organization in 2008, both via the draft and internationally), a look around the AL Central, and a look at the new Columbus affiliate are pieces that I've devoured and can't wait to read the rest.

36 days until the Home Opener!