"The fickle finger of fate" has a new meaning on the North Coast today as news that the Indians' perennial uber-prospect Adam Miller has lost the ability to bend the tip of his perpetually troublesome right middle finger. Miller's career is potentially in jeopardy, and the Tribe likely has lost a guy who looked great in winter ball, and a guy they figured would help the team out of the bullpen this season. Paul talks about Adam Miller in his latest.

"The fickle finger of fate" has a new meaning on the North Coast today as news that the Indians' perennial uber-prospect Adam Miller has lost the ability to bend the tip of his perpetually troublesome right middle finger. The medical explanation is something that you can read in Castro's piece from The Official Site (complete with the "Miller's Career Could Be in Jeopardy" headline that had a net effect of ruining a lot of peoples' days), but with the preface that I have no medical background it looks to me like the inability to bend in the top of Miller's right middle finger has affected his ability to command and of his pitches (for obvious reasons) and that if he is unable to suddenly discover how to command his pitches without the ability to bend the tip of that final finger that has contact with the ball in the next 7 to 10 days, he's going to have this reconstructive surgery.

If you were to ask me how likely surgery is, my guess would be that the surgery at this point is a foregone conclusion due to where the injury is and how crucial that part of his body is for commanding his pitches. The idea that Miller will somehow figure out a way to direct his pitches to a spot that he aims without that full use of that finger (in a week's time, no less) sounds like quite a longshot to me and I have yet to see anything that indicates that the Indians think that the ability to bend will return to the tip of that finger with any kind of treatment short of surgery.

With the caveat again that I'm no doctor, to put it in terms that we may all be able to relate to, assume that you (quite suddenly) lose the ability to bend the tip forefinger (that's your "pointer finger", kids) on the hand you write with. Now imagine trying to write with a pen, with that disabled forefinger which has previously been the "guide" for the pen, leading the way.
It wouldn't be the easiest thing to "re-learn", would it?

After doing something that is almost second nature for your whole life, you need to develop a new way of doing it, achieving the same result as the old way.

Oh, and you have about a week to prove that you can do it effectively.

See where I'm going with this?

The surgery is likely to happen and when it does, it ends Miller's 2009 season, seeing as how the recovery time is 9 to 12 months, and here's the zinger in the whole thing - there is no guarantee that this ability to bend will ever return to Miller's forefinger after the surgery is performed as the procedure is without precedent for MLB pitchers.

Thus, while "career-threatening" may be a little harsh, seeing as how Miller is still only 24 and, again, there's no precedent for this, there's little question that this dims Miller's star to the point that it's barely flickering. The idea that Miller will suddenly go Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown on anybody or that he will serve merely as the poster child for this surgery (a la Thomas Edward John, Jr. and the ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction surgery that bears his name) are really just attempts to lighten the enormity of this news and the impact it has on one of the most talented players the Indians have in their organization.

It's another sad chapter in the injury history for Miller, who was seen as such a "sure thing" prospect after his 2006 season in AA as a 21-year-old, that Sports Illustrated included him in their "Dream Rotation" (at least in terms of pitchers who had yet to throw a pitch in MLB) prior to the 2007.

What did the whole "Dream Rotation" look like?

Tim Lincecum
Cole Hamels

Daisuke Matsuzaka
Phil Hughes
Adam Miller

If you're keeping track at home two years later, that's the reigning NL Cy Young Award winner in Lincecum, the reigning World Series MVP in Hamels, a pitcher with a two year record of 33-15 in Matsuzaka (who, admittedly, was on this list with a completely different set of circumstances than the youngsters on the list), a still-22-year-old pitcher who has struggled to this point to make the transition to MLB (5-7 record in 106 2/3 IP for the Yankees) in Hughes, and a pitcher who has pitched less than 100 innings above AA ball (three-year total of 99 IP in AAA) whose future as a legitimate MLB player has been placed in serious question in Miller.

That's the rub for sure, inasmuch as many liked to peg Miller as that "sure thing", his latest injury only confirms the TINSTAAPP Principle (that would be that "There Is No Such Thing As A Pitching Prospect") as there is SO much that can go wrong with a young player's arm, shoulder, finger, etc. Unfortunately, it reminds us that these names and statistics are still human beings, with the frailties and limitations that all of our bodies have...sometimes which go against even our (or certainly Miller's) most ardent wishes.

In terms of where this news leaves the Indians and Miller, it moves the Indians well past the point of considering that Miller will contribute to the parent club at all this year and puts them in a position of wondering if the potential that Miller showed in the Minors will ever be fulfilled in MLB. They've already moved on to other candidates in terms of relievers to fill out the bullpen in 2009 and will make plans going forward with the idea that anything that Adam Miller contributes is gravy. As for Miller, you can't help but feel for this kid, whose talent is unquestioned, but whose body has prevented him from displaying that talent at the upper levels and ultimately fulfilling his dream of playing in MLB, which at one time felt so implied that it makes the situation all the more tragic from the human element.

The book on Adam Miller hasn't closed just yet, but it's hanging by a fingernail...or at least a finger.