Less than two weeks away from the Opener against the Rangers and the Indians' roster looks to be essentially set, with the final position "battle" of any consequence involving the race for the 5th starter spot. While the 13th position player spot and the 7th reliever in the bullpen spot are allegedly still up in the air, all indications are that Josh Barfield and Zach Jackson will fill those last two spots. In his latest, Paul talks about the final roster spots and Scott Lewis as the 5th starter.

Less than two weeks away from the Opener against the Rangers and the Indians' roster looks to be essentially set, with the final position "battle" of any consequence involving the race for the 5th starter spot, which looks to have been decided this morning with Scott Lewis being named the 5th starter . While the 13th position player spot and the 7th reliever in the bullpen spot are allegedly still up in the air, all indications are that Josh Barfield and Zach Jackson will fill those last two spots on the roster because of the skills that they bring to the table in terms of Barfield's speed and ability to pinch-run without taking AB away from Luis Valbuena in AAA and Jackson's ability to pitch multiple innings and the fact that he'd be the second LHP in the bullpen.

If there was much doubt that those two had the spots, The Atomic Wedgie basically listed Barfield's attributes in a piece addressing the final position battles :

"We've got four or five guys who we could potentially pinch run for," said Wedge. "So he's going to have to be versatile. ... It comes down to what's the best fit for the players we already have on the club and the skill set that

goes along with that; be it offense, defense or speed."

So, they need a guy who can pinch run and...um, well not do much else other than be able to play a couple of positions.

Anyone else hear about this movement to make Barfield a "super-utility guy"?

The other options for that 13th position player spot (Trevor Crowe and Tony Grafannino) don't make nearly as much sense as Barfield, who would basically be asked to be a pinch-runner late in the games without having to worry about getting him AB, like they might with Crowe to further his development. There's not much of an argument for Grafannino to be on the roster, as he's a similar player to DeRosa and Carroll and doesn't add the speed to the roster that Barfield does.

When you consider that Crowe would essentially be the 6th player on the team able to play the OF, behind Sizemore, Choo, Francisco, DeRosa, and Dellucci (keep your thoughts on The Looch's "ability" to play the OF to yourself), it doesn't make a lot of sense for the Indians to staple Crowe to the bench in Cleveland instead of getting regular AB in Columbus until he is needed later in the season to take Dellucci's spot on the roster when the Indians cut bait with The Looch...which will happen.

Essentially, because the requirements for the 13th spot include speed and no pressing need for steady AB, Barfield locking up 13th spot just makes the most sense to prevent him from taking AB away from the new "2B of the Future", Luis Valbuena, and to simply fill a role (that of a pinch-runner) on the bench at a low cost.

As for the other position "battle" (that would be in the bullpen), that one doesn't look like too much of a battle at all if you're looking at Wedge's recent comments about Jackson, which shouldn't come as a surprise if you've been following along this Spring:

Regarding the last spot in the pen, Wedge said Jackson has a lot of things going for him. He's left-handed, he's stretched out so he can pitch four or five innings if a starter gets knocked out early and he's pitched well this spring. "All that works for him," said Wedge. "We brought him in here as a starter or bullpen guy. We aren't sure what his best role is, but there are definitely some

advantages on his side. He's been very consistent. For a good bullpen guy that's half the battle. You have to know what you're going to get."

When asked if would rather have Jackson starting at Class AAA Columbus should he not make the Tribe's rotation, Wedge said, "I think we'll have enough depth in starters down there if Jackson is indeed the guy."

If you're looking for a translation on that, when asked if Zachson's best role is as a starter or as a bullpen guy, Wedge said that they "aren't sure", then said that he's not going to be going a starter in Columbus because they "have enough depth in starters down there" even without The Zach Attack. Long story short, Jackson is "indeed the guy" while guys like Vinnie Chulk and Matt Herges head down to Columbus to wait for the Masa Kobayashi Era to end.

It's true that the Indians could still go out and look for more help in the bullpen, or even keep Eddie Mujica around, but the role they seem to be looking to fill from that 7th spot would be that of a long man who doesn't need steady work, but can fill in the cracks that may develop out of the gate, be it in the rotation or the bullpen.

Who does that sound like to you...and isn't he already on the 40-man with one more option to burn?

Now, with the mere formalities out of the way, let's turn our attention to the only real "battle" that was happening in Goodyear - the race to be the 5th starter. From Day 1 in Spring Training, the job has been purported to be Laffey's "to lose" and all reports indicated that Laffey simply had to perform well enough to justify him breaking camp with the team. It seemed as if the likes of Dave Huff, Jeremy Sowers, Scott Lewis, the aforementioned Zach Jackson, and the non-roster invitees were essentially slotting themselves for the first crack to fill the inevitable hole that will present itself in the rotation at some point due to injury or ineffectiveness. From the beginning, from quotes from Shapiro, Wedge, and Laffey himself, it sounded like these other guys were just fighting for second place.

Well, things have changed as it's Scotty Lewis, who forced himself into what looked like a one-horse race and now looks to build on his performance this Spring and extend the success that he experienced at the end of last year.

Despite being largely ignored at the outset of Spring Training as a viable option (in the interest of full disclosure, by me) or as much more than earning a cursory mention, Lewis has now won the first crack at holding a spot in what is sure to be a constantly-evolving rotation.

The question emerges, then, why has Lewis been so chronically overlooked?

Obviously, the assumption that Laffey, with his MLB track record of a 4.34 ERA and 1.40 WHIP over 25 starts before his 24th birthday
, had the inside edge on the spot and Laffey's 2008 season has been examined and praised for that
five game stretch in May
, but why was everyone so anxious to forget about Lewis' four starts at the end of 2008?

In case you forgot (or blacked out the 2008 season once things went irreparably wrong), here's Slewis' line for those four starts:

4-0, 2.63 ERA, 1.08 WHIP, 15 K, 6 BB, .671 OPS against in 24 IP

Painfully small sample size to be sure, but really that term "small sample size" actually gets to the heart of why Lewis is often such an overlooked commodity as he's thrown "only" 372 innings over the past three years. While that number doesn't look that small, it breaks down to 124 innings a year, and is dwarfed by the 489 innings that Laffey's thrown over the same three year timeframe.

While Lewis has always seemed to be an injury risk, or at least treated with kid gloves, even more so than other young pitchers, the results have always been there, if the health has not. Over his MiLB career, Lewis has posted a line that certainly projected MLB success as he compiled an impressive body of work in the minors:

2.70 ERA, 1.08 WHIP, 8.81 K/9, 2.01 BB/9, 4.38 K/BB in 366 2/3 IP

Throw in the fact that he's allowed only 22 HR in his 366 2/3 career MiLB innings and netted a MiLB ERA "title" in 2006, when he posted a 1.47 ERA in Kinston, and Lewis' track record is actually one of the more impressive in the organization. While everyone is rightfully excited about Dave Huff after the line he

put forward last year dominating in Akron and Buffalo, compare what Huff and Lewis did cumulatively in 2008 in various levels:

Huff (AA & AAA) - Age 23

2.53 ERA, 0.96 WHIP, .580 OPS against, 8.79 K/9, 4.93 K/BB in 146 1/3 IP

Lewis (AA, AAA, & MLB) - Age 24

2.45 ERA, 0.99 WHIP, .590 OPS against, 7.20 K/9, 5.11 K/BB in 121 1/3 IP

Fairly identical, and made more impressive for Lewis when you consider that 24 of those 121 1/3 IP came against big league competition. The pedigree seems to be there, if not the name recognition or the hype that accompanied the other players he started the Spring on equal footing with for the 5th spot.

Because he falls under that category of "soft-tossing LHP", clocking in the low-90's with good secondary pitches and good command, Lewis is often pegged as "nothing more than a 5th starter"...but, um...isn't that what we're looking for out of the gate? If he impresses as the season rolls on and stays healthy, Lewis could take a firm hold on a spot in the rotation, moving up in the rotation when the inevitable injuries (and perhaps ineffectiveness) surface.

Regardless, Lewis has earned this first look and Laffey in Columbus offers the luxury of depth a phone call away in Columbus. Truthfully, that's the reason that this "battle" hasn't really been all that compelling as we know that we're going to see both the winner AND the loser likely seeing a start in Cleveland by the end of April or at least mid-May, particularly if you've been following how Carl Pavano has looked...and if I read another quote about Pavano "leveraging the ball" or "pitching downhill" again when he hasn't pitched well since 2004, I'm lifting my self-imposed ban on mentioning Jason Johnson's name.

All told, Scott Lewis, Josh Barfield, and Zach Jackson should start exploring housing options on the North Coast, putting the Indians' roster nearly into full focus right now. That, however, doesn't mean that changes won't come to the roster as the likes of Laffey, Trevor Crowe, Chris Gimenez, Vinnie Chulk, and others figure to possibly in line for a promotion (perhaps even by the end of April or so) to the parent club depending upon what happens in Cleveland and

Columbus once the season gets underway.