After a LONG winter and an even LONGER spring training, finally, it's here!!!! The start of the 2009 baseball season. Or as I like to call it, "Buff Season"! There's actual meaningful games to talk about, the B-List is back, and despite a gloomy weather forecast this week ... warmer days ahead. In Paulie's latest Lazy Sunday, as usual, he takes a whirlwind tour around the web, linking all things Indians. And looks ahead to the opener against the Rangers tomorrow afternoon.

With all of Cleveland still buzzing about Rock Hall Induction Ceremony at Public Hall, the real news is that THE SEASON STARTS TOMORROW! Sorry about the caps and the exclamation point, but after a long winter of discontent it's nearly time to finally start watching some games that matter played by the team that matters most...YOUR 2009 Cleveland Indians.

So, without further ado, let's get into the last off-season Lazy Sunday and get this thing rolling as tomorrow can't come soon enough:

Starting where we often do, Terry Pluto puts forth some predictions for the season, all of which (not surprisingly) look to be right we're I'm at (though I'm a little less optimistic on Hafner...which is to say, I'm not optimistic at all) as I put the finishing touches on the Season Preview that I'll post later tonight. If you forgot the format, here's
last year's "preview"
which will look remarkably similar to the one I post tonight, though it won't (SPOILER ALERT) include a photoshopped picture of Shapiro holding a World Series trophy at the end.

The other nugget of information in this morning's PD comes from Sarah Crump, who interviews St. Grady in a weekly piece she does called "My

Cleveland", with this one giving some insight into the best player on the Indians and affirming the fact that I have a man crush on this guy and am not afraid to admit it.

Hanging at The South Side, Sushi Rock, and Rocky River Brewing Company while signing bras (!) for fans?

Grady, you had me at hello.

Moving on, did anybody else have their spirits (flying high with the knowledge that the season is days away) dampened by the cover of the Baseball Preview edition in SI? In case you missed it, it features a certain big-boned LHP who we are all quite intimately familiar with . Actually, if you read the piece on The Hefty Lefty in the preview, you'll find out that you know very little about him in terms of his upbringing and life events, which is a crime as Sabathia was too often taken for granted while in Cleveland. Of course, it chaps me to no end that this assumption that Sabathia "burst on the national scene" in Milwaukee last year...you know, after winning a Cy Young in Cleveland in 2007, but it is what it is and we can only watch from afar as CC attempts to rein in his emotions in the bright lights of the big city.

Lest anyone forget, with CC pitching for a contract, here's how he came out of the gate for the Tribe in 2008, something that bears watching as he christens the new stadium in the Bronx...but more on that later.

Nevertheless, since it is time for Season Previews, here's the one you'll find inside the CC SI Preview issue , with the Indians predicted to finish 2nd in the AL Central with a 82-80 record. It's a fairly mundane preview (and, not surprisingly, SI predicts the Yankees to have the best record in baseball) as they're limited in space to fit each team into less than two pages, usually using some angle to present the "Season at a Glance".

For what it's worth, ESPN has the Indians 9th in their 1st Power Rankings , just ahead of the Twins...if that means anything at the beginning of April.

Rolling on with the national previews, Ken Rosenthal has the Indians in 3rd in the Central , saying *"Love the offense,*

love the bullpen, distrust the rotation. The Indians' dirty little secret is that not even Cliff Lee and Fausto Carmona are sure things."
Not that there's a lot to disagree with there in that short, succinct, "season-in-a-sentence", but Rosenthal did, if I remember correctly, have the Indians beating the Braves in the World Series last year.

For a much more complete Season Preview, here's the one from Castro at The Official Site , which very accurately lays out the possibilities and contingency plans in place for the season, as vast and wide as each are while taking an honest look at the team as a whole.

Speaking of Castro, if you've not yet checked out Vince Grzegorek's "'64 and Counting" Blog , be sure to add it to your favorites (it's on my Google Reader and let's just say that there aren't many things on my Google Reader) as he always comes through with some Cleveland-centric pieces, whether frivolous and funny or entertaining and informative, like the first part of his interview with Indians.com beat reporter Anthony Castrovince , where Castrovince attributes his following on Indians' blogs (read: here and LGT) to his "Seinfeld" references.

If that's what he wants to think (though he's wrong), we'll go with it...and seeing as how he admits to being a regular visitor ("*I do check out The DiaTribe and Let's Go Tribe, though not as frequently as I'd like or, perhaps, should. Those guys do really nice work* ."), I have a feeling this may get back to him someplace in Texas.

As a quick aside, Vince also reveals the patch that the Indians are using to commemorate Herb Score , which looks very similar to the one put forth by reader Tim Harrison a few months back . Personally, I think that Tim's design is a little classier, but at least it's nice to see the Indians acknowledge both Herb's playing career and broadcast career as Tim so wonderfully did.

In the second part of the interview , Castro hits on all of the principals for the season, like what to expect from Hafner (he, like everyone else has no idea) and how he thinks that the performances of Cliff Lee and Fausto Carmona are the two

most important things for the 2009 Indians...and rightfully so.

Not sure if a third one is coming (though I hope it is), but it's a great read from two very good writers.

Rolling on with the interview section of the show, LGT continues Jay Levin's interview with Antonetti , this time the topic being the Hafner contract, due diligence on medical history and exams, and whether the Indians would do anything differently on the Hafner extension today. It's another fascinating read as Levin really stays on top of Antonetti for about as clear of an answer and an explanation that you could ever imagine.

Keeping on the topic of Q and A's with the Tribe brass, for an interesting look at how the Indians approach the MLB draft, here is an interview that Mark Shapiro did with Real Baseball Intelligence on the upcoming MLB Draft . The answers are fairly obvious and doesn't get too in-depth on anything, but it does represent the thoughts of Shapiro directly, insightful or not.

In terms of how the youth is becoming a valuable commodity in MLB and how it pertains to the Indians, Sweet Pete Gammons brings the topic to the Indians' situation saying that :

In Cleveland, in an economically depressed area whose state has lost hundreds of thousands of jobs in this century, the Indians have averaged 87 wins a year the past four seasons, tying Boston for the league lead in wins in 2007.

"We have to focus on our young players," said Indians GM Mark Shapiro. "We know what our budget restrictions are. We have to scout and develop and make good decisions."

Thus, the Indians have their self-developed players like Jhonny Peralta, Victor Martinez, Fausto Carmona, et al. They have made extraordinary trades for talent out of other organizations, like Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee, Shin-Soo Choo, Kelly Shoppach and Asdrubal Cabrera. With all their young players and a relatively lower payroll, they were able to add two modest but significant additions in the offseason: Kerry Wood and Mark DeRosa.

Perhaps no teams showcased more young talent this spring than the Indians and Marlins. By the end of this season, it's conceivable that the Indians can bring in catcher Carlos Santana, outfielders Michael Brantley, Matt LaPorta and Trevor Crowe and third baseman Wes Hodges as contributors.

We all know that Gammons thinks very highly of the Indians' organization, but it's always nice to see him wax poetic on how he feels the Indians' Front Office is doing things the right way.

Gammons also comes through with some tasty nuggets on some of the players that are likely to fill out what should be some stacked AA and AAA rosters for the Tribe (and those teams in Akron and Columbus are going to be STACKED with high-caliber talent like they haven't been in a long time), pointing out that a few were among the most impressive youngsters this Spring:

4. Carlos Santana, Indians catcher. Acquired from the Dodgers last season in lieu of L.A. having to pay Casey Blake's salary, Cleveland grabbed a future star (one club still loves him as a third baseman). He has a great arm, live bat from both sides and put up an OPS of more than 1.000 last season. This next generation of Indians players is extremely impressive.

20. Michael Brantley, Indians outfielder/first baseman. The player to be named later along with Matt LaPorta in the CC Sabathia deal last season had a great spring. As the season wears on, Brantley, Trevor Crowe, Carlos Santana, Matt LaPorta, third baseman Wes Hodges and second baseman Luis Valbuena could all contribute. Now if they can get two out of the pitching group of Aaron Laffey, David Huff, Jeremy Sowers and Hector Rondon into the picture, this could be a prolonged time in the high life for the Tribe.

Any time the words "High Life" and "Tribe" appear in the same sentence, color me satisfied.

For more on the aforementioned LaPorta, here's a bit from Baseball Prospectus on The GateKeeper :

Indians outfielder Matt LaPorta had a tough second half of the 2008 season after being the primary talent acquired in the CC Sabathia deal. Based on what scouts saw this spring, the bat is back, and the numbers agree as he hit .361/.439/.611 in 36 at-bats before being reassigned to Triple-A. "He looked good enough to be in the big leagues to me," said one scout. "If they need a corner outfielder, I wouldn't feel uncomfortable at all starting him in the big leagues-he should be one of their first call-ups unless they decide to work his service clock."

Not sure why service clock issues would be at play, given that LaPorta's already 24; but the fact that he's never played an inning above AA might have something to do with the Indians easing him into the 2009 season. I don't think that there's any question that LaPorta represents Plan B in case the Indians find themselves lacking in LF, at 1B, or at DH as LaPorta could easily come up (relatively early in the season...assuming he's hitting in AAA) to fill the first hole that reveals itself at any one of those three positions.

From one of my other "Google Reader" entries, Joe Posnanski has a piece that is supposed to be about the new book on Roger Clemens and quickly (and thankfully) evolves into a dissection of the Indians' lineup in 1984. It mentions Pat Tabler, so obviously it's worth the read.

Speaking of those mid-to-late-1980's teams (the ones that hooked me on baseball), there was a phenomenal show on STO this week that was called the "Alumni Roundtable". The show featured Tabler, Brook Jacoby, Scotty Bailes, and Cory Snyder reminiscing with Bob DiBiasio about their time in Cleveland. The show was full of classic stories, like Scott Bailes getting bailed out of jail by Pat Corrales in Oakland, Bailes allowing his arbitration case to be decided by the outcome of an NCAA Tournament game, and a great re-telling of the Pat Corrales-Dave Stewart "karate kick" incident.

It's on again tomorrow at noon, so set your DVR for it...in addition to the game, which starts at 2 PM obviously.

Since I'm so sick of reading about and watching EVERYTHING about this new stadium in the Bronx, here's a piece from the Chicago Tribune dissecting why the Cubs are playing the Yankees this weekend in some exhibition games . The piece is wildly uninteresting...that is, until you get to the bottom and read this

beauty about some of the sightlines at the Yankees' new stadium:

Incredibly, despite following small details to ensure it looks as much like the old Yankee Stadium as possible, architects drew up the bleachers without anyone noticing some fans in right-center field will have their view of left field obstructed by a mammoth sports bar. They won't be able to see a home run clear the fence, and some won't be able to see third base. A team spokesman told the New York Times that "people can get up and watch the entire game from (the Bleachers Café), plus there will be TVs."

So, if I have this right, if you've selected your seats at the new stadium (and probably paid through the nose for them) and they just happened to be in right-center field, the Yankees are OFFICIALLY telling you to "get up and watch the entire game from (the sports bar that's blocking your view), plus there will be TV's."

Of course, that's only if you want to see 3rd base...though, it begs whether you can even imagine how difficult it would be to watch game action without being able to see 3rd base?

How is that different from just going to a bar to watch a game and how furious would you be if those were your season tickets that you've likely laid out a large amount of cash to net?

Nevertheless, the season starts tomorrow and in a surprise move of sorts, The Atomic Wedgie shed his cloak and dagger approach to the media and revealed his Opening Day lineup
:

CF Grady Sizemore
3B Mark DeRosa
1B Victor Martinez
DH Travis Hafner
SS Jhonny Peralta
RF Shin-Soo Choo

C Kelly Shoppach
LF Ben Francisco
2B Asdrubal Cabrera

How long that particular version of the lineup lasts or how frequently the lineup looks just like that (if you ask me, not long and not often) is going to be one of the compelling things to watch this season as the lineup, the rotation, and the roles in the bullpen are sure to evolve from April to October as they always do.

Season Preview at some point tonight because the season starts tomorrow, kids...it's been too long coming.