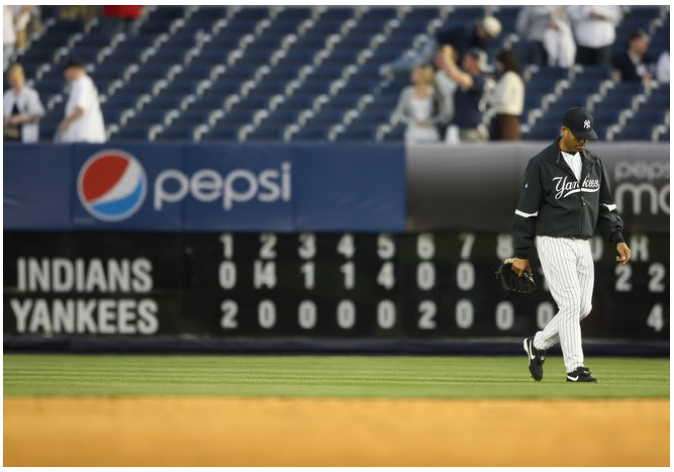
22-4. Let that sink in for a moment. 22-4! Saturday's rout of the Pinstripes in new Yankee Stadium has Paulie jazzed up on this Lazy Sunday, and he starts today's piece by looking back at that glorious win. Paul then goes on to take his usual Sunday jaunt around the web, providing links to all our favorite columnists takes on the Indians. And most of them, like most of us, are concerned about the pitching.



22-4.

Let that sink in for a moment.

22-4! When is my shirt being printed for that ? Um, scroll to the bottom of the link...

As the Yankees and the national media attempt to ignore the baseball being played in NEW Yankee Stadium (of which it seems Indians' hitters may actually have the keys), there are actually some baseball games being played there and...well, it feels pretty good to say this - the Indians are pounding the Yankees into oblivion during what was simply supposed to be akin to a royal family dedicating a new palace in the Bronx.

First the 10-2 victory in the series opener, then...well, I don't remember what happened on Friday (weird, I must have blocked that one out)...then THIS !

The only thing better than watching the Indians round the bases and make a mockery of the Yankee pitching staff on Saturday was the fact that I was (for the first time ever) able to sync up the Indians' radio broadcast to a TV feed. Thus, while the Indians bashed their way around the Bronx and the FOX cameras were focused on Monument Park, Jeter, Girardi, Carl Pavano in a Tribe uni, and the concourse, I was treated to the mellifluous tones of Tom Hamilton and Mike Hegan laughing their way through this...well, laugher.

I'm not sure why I've never been able to pull this off before (and Lord knows I've

tried), or if it was because the radio guys were on WMMS or if it was because the game was on FOX. Regardless, I was able to mute Buck and McCarver and listen instead to Hammy screaming about Cabrera's Granny and Victor's laser beam. Nobody does it better than Hamilton and when you have the moving pictures to go along with his moving descriptions, its poetry.

Does a lovely Spring afternoon get any better than that...no, seriously?

Now, of course, every game that I watch will be marred by me endlessly trying to sync up the Indians on TV with Hammy and Hegan while The DiaBride implores me to stop pausing and re-starting the game on DVR to no avail in an attempt to replicate my experience during the 22-4 game, which I'm sure will never happen to the perfection again that it did today.

It was a perfect storm...in more ways than one.

And with that, we're off on a Lazy one:

Starting off where we normally do, Terry Pluto shares some quick thoughts on C.P. Lee and the 1st strike, SS Choo and his potential, and hitting on LaPorta, Brantley, and Huff in AAA. If you were to ask me which three players had the most potential in terms of impacting the Indians this season (perhaps as early as Memorial Day), I'd list the three Clippers that Pluto mentions as they line up quite neatly with the holes that either have already been revealed (Huff to the rotation) or to upgrade a position where mediocrity can be improved upon (LaPorta or Brantley to LF).

On that re-enforcements front, Castro reports that Atom Miller has experienced a setback ...yes, another one...with his finger and as much as Miller would look like an upgrade over some (OK, most) of the relievers we've seen this year, there's a certain point where anything the Indians get from Miller in terms of innings pitched for the parent club just has to be considered a blessing.

As for the writers looking at the Indians from somewhere other than the North Coast, the pieces are starting to come about the Indians' early-season struggles (obviously written before the 22-4 game, because what bad could happen to a team that wins 22-4 against the mighty Yankees) and why they may portend a bad season on the North Coast. Not even linking the nonsense that came out

recently about why a 1-6 start nearly guaranteed a bad season for the Indians (hey, let's pick a random record after a random amount of games out of the air and get the guys at Elias Sports Bureau to do some research to cause some consternation in Cleveland), some in the national media see a long season for the Featherheads.

In a piece about early-season concerns having to do with performance, Buster Olney lists Cliff Lee and Fausto Carmona as two players whose performances to date (it was written before either's starts in New York) have been less than stellar, citing lack of command and problems throwing strikes as things to watch for each.

Getting into the act, Ken Rosenthal weighs in on the effect that the Indians' start may have on their already thin margin for error, given the economic uncertainties of the region and of MLB. The piece is interesting as it really runs the gamut of scenarios, from the positive:

"The more likely outcome - assuming Lee and right-hander Fausto Carmona return to top-of-the-rotation form - is that the Indians will spend the entire season cycling through other starters and staying close in a division that might require only 85 wins out of its champion"

Or if you prefer the half-empty glass, Rosenthal is pouring that one too:

"Another losing cycle, coupled with dwindling attendance, would lead to other trades or departures. Lee and catcher Victor Martinez are under club control through '10, shortstop Jhonny Peralta through '11, Sizemore through '12, designated hitter Travis Hafner through '13, Carmona through '14."

Rosenthal essentially asserts that he has no idea what the Indians are going to do, but lays out the worst-case scenarios pretty vividly, a surprise when you consider that he wrote the piece (and used the word "rebuild" in the title) after the Indians had played 10 games.

And that, I think, is what's most troubling to me about all of these doom and gloom pieces from people who seem to be standing over the Indians' 2009 grave with a shovelful of dirt at the ready to toss it in after 12 games.

Yes, the first 12 games have not gone exactly as planned...

Yes, concerns are out there that need to be rectified...

This much we know and it becomes more difficult with each passing day to handle the growing knot in our collective stomachs, but Joe Sheehan of Baseball Prospectus had a tremendous piece on this very notion when relaying a story of being a guest on a morning radio show, in which the hosts were annoyed that Sheehan's answers to every "burning" question or concern was that it was simply too early to form any real or informed opinion:

You make worse decisions by overreacting to four games than you do by minimizing them...Baseball is about six months, not six days. Two starts mean nothing. Losing five out of six games is meaningless-every team in baseball will do that at some point during the season. It doesn't mean more just because you started that stretch at 0-0. I can go through a full season's worth of 35 PA stretches and find a whole bunch that look like .304/.448/.870. Saying Brandon Inge has a 1300 OPS "for the season" is factually correct, but functionally irrelevant. Getting excited about a "hot start" puts far too much credence in the idea that past performance predicts future results. A guy's career doesn't tell me what his next week will be, and his last week doesn't tell me much about his next 25.

Sheehan states the stance well and reminds us why, as difficult as it is to remove emotion or overreact to a bad stretch of baseball (particularly at the beginning of the season), that it actually does more harm than good.

Now don't take this stance as an avenue to summarily dismiss the notion that the Indians look to have some flaws or as an excuse for me to simply go back to burying my head in the sand.

No, there are numerous reasons to show concern about this team and nearly all of them are related, directly or indirectly, to the starting rotation, which has justified the pre-season concerns.

Consider that no Indians' starter has thrown a pitch in the 7th inning with 12 games now having been played...

Consider that Cliff Lee's 3rd start of the season constituted the team's 1st Quality Start (6 or more IP, 3 or less runs allowed) of the season...

Consider that Indians' starters have thrown 17 1/3 more innings than the relievers in 12 games...

The result of those struggles in the rotation, then, have exacerbated the issues that suddenly have been revealed in the bullpen as the relievers are being asked to absorb an inordinate amount of innings and that important determination of "roles" in the bullpen (who pitches the 6th, who pitches the 7th, etc.) are still wildly up in the air as the relievers have been as inconsistent as the starters. The net effect of that uncertainty, then, has been a scramble to get the ball to Kerry Wood with a lead in the 9th as the two pitchers (Lewis and Perez) thought at the beginning of the season to be in the mix for the set-up roles have all experienced variant degrees of failure.

Rafael Perez has been unable to throw strikes, as his career strike percentage has been 67% of his pitches thrown going for strikes...until this year, when he's thrown more balls than strikes, and as a result, his walk rate has jumped from 2.23 BB/9 in 2007 and a 2.72 BB/9 in 2008 to an astronomical 11.57 BB/9 in 2009.

Jensen Lewis has allowed earned runs in 3 of his 5 outings, usually victimized by the long ball (3 HR allowed in 6 1/3 IP) or by the fact that he's one of the only relievers that the Indians even have a marginal amount of confidence in right now, leaving him vulnerable to overuse or to being left in for a batter too long because...well, there's nobody else out there that generates the confidence that Stomp does, even if he's not nearly as effective as he was in late 2008.

What happens, then, when your bullpen is overworked and no reliable middle-to-late-inning relievers emerge in front of Wood is a scenario that played out in Friday's loss as the following reliever progression was utilized from the 6th inning on, with the Indians entering the 6th with a 5-3 lead:

6th (leading 5-3) - Zachson
6th (leading 5-4) - Joe Smith (to clean up The Zach Attack's mess and get Jeter via the K)
7th (leading 5-4) - The Regrettable Chulk
8th (tied 5-5) - Stomp Lewis

So, up two runs against the Yankees, with 9 outs to record before Wood can come on, the Indians throw Zach Jackson and Vinnie Chulk to start innings in the

Bronx?

That...THAT...is how unsure the Indians are in terms of what they're going to get from their bullpen, in that Zach Jackson barely made this team out of Spring Training and Vinnie Chulk didn't. Yet, less than two weeks into the season, the bullpen has been so overly taxed by the poor starting pitching and unable to sort itself out in terms of roles that the Indians felt their best available options to throw start the 6th and 7th innings against the Yankees were Zach Jackson and Vinnie Chulk.

You want a reason to be concerned?

There it is, and unfortunately it's an issue that dominoes from the starters' inability to pitch deep into games or hand the bullpen a lead, forcing the bullpen to evolve on the fly - which is never a good thing.

Because of the struggles of the pitching staff, which need to be rectified as evaluations become more valid with the passage of time and with the accumulation of a larger body of work for some of these players, the Indians' offense may have to carry the team until the right mix of players can be found in the rotation and the bullpen as the offense is showing signs of boasting a strong and deep lineup, capable of keeping the Indians in most games (and hopefully in the AL Central race) until the pitching can sort itself out.

The offense, however, may be just strong and balanced enough to allow the pitching staff to sort itself out through trial and error...and no, I'm not just saying that because the Indians scored 22 runs yesterday (not sure how many more times I can mention that...but I'll keep trying). The Indians' offense has shown signs of being capable of sustained innings and of putting up quick runs on the board. Among those that have logged serious time, check out these numbers (and, yes, they're colored by a 22-run outburst - but if you're going to justifiably rip the pitching staff for the total body or work...it goes both ways) and totals through 12 games:

Sizemore - .991 OPS, 4 HR
DeRosa - .792 OPS, 3 HR
Martinez - 1.159 OPS, 4 HR
Hafner - 1.111 OPS, 4 HR
Peralta - .857 OPS, 0 HR

Choo - .887 OPS, 2 HR
Shoppach - .872 OPS, 1 HR
Garko - .786 OPS, 0 HR
Francisco - .654 OPS, 1 HR
Crowe - .619 OPS, 0 HR
Cabrera - .968 OPS, 1 HR

What, am I playing Baseball Simulator 1.000 ?

I know that the Joe Sheehan bit that I used to deflect criticism of the pitching and the slow start applies to the offense as well as, again, not much can really be gleaned from two weeks' worth of games, but the offense looks to be as full of potential as the pitching staff seems to be full of potholes.

Maybe that's what we're in store for here, before the rotation shakes out (and it's nice to see you two, Clifton and Fausto) and as the reliever roles evolve...maybe we're looking at some shoot-outs with the offense trying to carry the team until the pitching can (hopefully) rectify itself. There's no question that the concerns about certain offensive players that were closely held in the off-season (Hafner and Martinez's health and power, Choo and Cabrera's legitimacy based on their second halves of last year) are being answered in a positive manner.

With the way that the season has gone so far (and, admittedly, the games have been played in that Video Game park in Arlington and new Yankee Stadium, which looks to be just about on par with some of the newer launching pads), it might be time to buckle up and get ready for some 12-10 affairs that go 4 hours into the night.

It might not be pretty baseball, but until the Indians can find the right mix of pitchers to attain success on the mound, it may be time to saddle up the offense and ride it for a while.

Finally and apropos of nothing having to do with the Indians, one of my favorite writers (and fellow native South Euclidean), Joe Posnanski is going to be the keynote speaker at SABR's Seymour Medal Conference at the Radisson Gateway Hotel on April 24th and 25th. If you're not reading Posnanski, who is not a great sportswriter, but a great writer (don't believe me... read this while looking at the breadth of what he writes about shown in the pictures above the post), you should start immediately and, if you're available, here are

the details to the Conference

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Pavano returns to The Bronx today...maybe the Indians can throw Yankeedom into full and complete meltdown mode by getting at Burnett early (and, while I would never wish harm upon another...maybe get hurt) and watching Pavano mow through a lineup at New Yankee Stadium the way he never did in the Old one while donning the pinstripes.

Regardless of the outcome, I'll let you know when the 22-4 t-shirts are ready ...