Reality is seeping in quickly here on the North Coast as disappointment is turning into a depression that this Indians' team continues to flail away at the opportunities presented to it, turning victories into losses, wasting excellent outings by their starting pitchers, and sometimes just coming up on the wrong side of Lady Luck. In today's Lazy Sunday, Paulie vents, he talks organizational philosophy, and takes his usual whirlwind trip around the web and supplies us with all the best Indians related links from our favorite writers.

Reality is seeping in quickly here on the North Coast as disappointment is turning into a depression that this Indians' team continues to flail away at the opportunities presented to it, turning victories into losses, wasting excellent outings by their starting pitchers, and sometimes just coming up on the wrong side of Lady Luck.

Nevertheless, soldier on we must despite the punishment that we're exposing ourselves to as Indians' fans, particularly when a much happier story and easier ride as a fan unfolds out every other night for the Cleveland team on the hardwood.

Soldiering on then, let's get off on a Lazy One:

While this whole bullpen mess has the whole team reeling and wondering how it's possible for a bullpen to potentially be sabotaging the third of the last four seasons, the question needs to be asked - how did it get to this?

How have the Indians been fundamentally incapable of piecing together a consistent bullpen year after year, watching pitchers thought to be as close to a "sure thing" as there might be fall of the cliff, over and over?

Terry Pluto addresses the bullpen and how we may have gotten to where we are bringing up multiple salient points from particular players' performance to usage in

games. The underlying issue he gets to is that elusive consistent bullpen and how they've tried different strategies to no avail to fix the leaky pen.

Yes, bullpens are volatile by nature because of the fact that relievers are inconsistent from year to year almost as a rule... but how do other teams cobble together bullpens, usually with home-grown relievers serving as the backbone of said bullpens, while the Indians continue to struggle, year after year, to maintain any level of stability?

It's a question that Tony Lastoria and I got into during this week's edition of "Smoke Signals",
and it's the sentence in Pluto's piece that struck me as the most compelling problem with the Indians. Pluto wrote that,
"They have failed to develop relievers in the minors who can actually be effective for two years in a row",
which couldn't be more true and I think it gets to the crux of what the issue with these ongoing bullpen problems have become as the Indians, as an organization, have ignored the importance of building their bullpen from within and by doing so find themselves in this position of attempting to cobble together a bullpen every year.

But why is this?

The Indians, as an organization, have always operated on a certain set of principles or guidelines...call it "The Plan" if you want or whatever, but the idea that keeping the farm system stocked with players who could fill holes on the MLB roster is a basic tenet of what they believe.

Remember the old "Waves of Arms" thing in terms of keeping the rotation stocked?

Think about how when every season starts, there seems to be a contingency plan for most every position in Cleveland somewhere on the roster or at least in the organization. When each season starts, you can usually identify who the 7th or 8th starter in the organization will be or you can accurately predict what would happen if, say, the 3B went down with an injury or was ineffective. Those built-in contingency plans are often fairly obvious and usually the Plan B is one that makes sense at a number of levels in that the drop-off isn't too severe and it represents more than just hope...it represents an actual plan and foresight.

The concept is apparent everywhere on the roster at the beginning of each season - except in the bullpen that is, where the Indians continually attempt to find lightning in a bottle with veteran retreads or hope that some of their young players can emerge as viable relievers. Instead of ever having a bona-fide reliever option on the farm (as there often is elsewhere on the team), it always seems like the bullpen options are of the "throw it against the wall and see what sticks" variety.

Again, though, why is that...particularly for an organization that seems to plan out the minutia of every detail and seems to attempt to plan for every plausible scenario?

How in all of these years has the organization not developed at least a few relievers that project to the back end of the bullpen or at least are capable of remaining consistent?

As horrifying as it is to admit because it begrudgingly gives accolades to the Sawx, the Red Sox bullpen essentially lays out the exact way that the Indians' bullpen should have been blueprinted years ago. Between Jon Papelbon, Manny Delcarmen, and Justin Masterson (yes, I know he started the other night), Boston boasts three power back-end-of-the-bullpen guys, all of whom were developed by the Red Sox and put in the bullpen to thrive when the determination was made that the bullpen is where they may be most useful in the short-term as all three of those aforementioned names were minor-league starters moved to the bullpen, where they obviously found their niches.

So why are the Indians incapable of this?

Do they lack that talent or those power arms that seem to populate every other teams' bullpen? How do the Twins and Royals ALWAYS seem to have these guys just hanging around their organization while the Indians give try-outs to Juan Rincon and Brendan Donnelly?

Is it strictly a talent thing?

Maybe (and if it is we're talking about a much deeper organizational problem in terms of selecting and acquiring players), but I'd go at it in another way in that the organization places a high value on starting pitching and particularly on depth in their starting pitching ranks. That value may be too high when you look at how the

Indians are often too reticent to make a move with some of these young arms (in the interest of "preserving that depth") to the bullpen even if their ceiling is that of a depth starter or as a 5th starter...at best.

What the result of that "preservation of depth" does is mire some of these arms in AA or AAA until they're suddenly 26 or 27, with no real shot at contributing at the MLB level, but also with too few bullets left in their arms when (or even if) the Indians decide to try them in the bullpen as a last resort. Due to those arms not making the conversion to becoming a reliever to see if a two-pitch or three-pitch mix suits them or to see if a trip to the bullpen adds MPH to their fastball, the Indians find their options for the bullpen to be lacking, forcing the signings of the veteran retreads and allowing the vicious cycle to continue.

Yes, there are instances that the Indians have converted a starter pitching in a level as high as AA to the bullpen with success (Jensen Lewis and Rafael Perez are the prime two examples), but this idea that this Front Office is smart enough to simply put together a bullpen in a patchwork fashion is dismissive of the notion that TALENT is needed in the bullpen and not simply being lucky enough to hit on a reliever in a year that he's going to be effective.

Did the freefall of Fausto Carmona as a closer in 2006 and his ensuing renaissance in 2007 as a starter make the Indians' THAT gun-shy on making that conversion, despite the fact that the only two other examples I can think of beside Carmona that made that transition (Lewis and Perez) have been two of the better bullpen options in the last five years or so?

In all of their plotting and planning, the bullpen remains the one component of the team that has been consistently overlooked and while it may not be the "closers fall out of trees" mentality of John Hart bearing itself out, there is fault here. The fault lies in this idea that the Indians can never have enough starting depth, regardless if some of that starting depth is NEVER going to see the mound in the 1st inning of an Indians' game and the result is a dry pipeline for arms in the bullpen. The rotation as a strength of this team going forward from year to year has been emphasized to such a degree that the bullpen is left with the scraps off the table from the starting pitching depth and forced every year to get by on less talent and more hope.

If you want a flaw in "The Plan", there it is - the inability of the team to effectively produce a stable of relievers from within the organization full of talent

and consistency. For an idea of how to do it, simply watch the 7th, 8th, and 9th innings of a Boston game to see players who once represented starting depth for the Red Sox, but whose usefulness (and immediate usefulness) to the organization bore itself out in the bullpen and the move was made without overly affecting their starting pitching depth in the minors.

Is the talent level a factor here?

Sure, but really at this point who knows?

Who knows where Atom Miller would be if he would have been converted to a reliever in 2007 or if a guy like Brian Slocum would have done better with a full-time move to the bullpen before he was 27 and in AAA for his third year?

Ultimately, the blinders that the organization has had on to protect their starting pitching has affected the bullpen and its viability from year to year and the changes that the Indians are now making to load up their bullpens in the minor-league with talented, if not earth-shatteringly talented, arms is long overdue.

Am I suggesting that EVERY promising pitcher should be moved into the bullpen to fix these problems, as some have asserted that Hector Rondon may be able to help this team?

Certainly not, as starting depth IS important to this organization...but only to a degree that may be a little less than it is being seen as now. At some point, the appropriation of arms and of talent has to bear itself out to be spread out over both the rotation and the bullpen with some sort of discernment over which pitchers project as legitimate MLB starters and which would simply top out as depth starters and could make a more immediate and immediately effective impact on the Indians in the bullpen.

Maybe this organizational flaw is being corrected as the Indians have recently moved Zach Putnam (whom Chris over at Tribe Times has a nice write-up on) and Steven Wright to the Akron bullpen and Frank Herrmann to the Columbus bullpen.

If you've heard of all three of those guys prior to this week, congratulations on being one of the 100 or so people in the world that can make that claim; but if you

haven't, Putnam is a recent draftee who could move fast with a two-pitch mix and Herrmann and Wright have been in the organization now for a couple of years as starters whose best-case-scenarios you would charitably call "depth options". All of them have hit 93 MPH in the recent past and may thrive in the bullpen being able to focus solely on a two-to-three pitch mix.

The question becomes, though, why these moves to the bullpen (particularly with Herrmann and Wright) weren't decided upon before Spring Training this year so the Indians wouldn't be sitting here at the beginning of May attempting to find out if Herrmann or Wright will thrive in the bullpen, because they would have a month of results from the Columbus bullpen instead of from the Akron rotation, where each of them spent the bulk of their 2008 season.

Why were those two put in the Akron rotation (again, after being there last year) to start the year if the bullpen could be in their future?

Whether they do thrive or not, let's hope their movement to the bullpen is a sign of change in organizational thinking, one in which the bullpen no longer is an afterthought that can be "patched together" but a part of this team that is stressed in terms of player development...because we sure need it.

Off my bullpen soapbox and moving forward on this Lazy Sunday to this whole Manny thing, Bill Simmons has an interesting piece on how this news affects his feelings on the 2004 Red Sox Pennant , which begs the obvious question for Indians' fans - how does this Manny bombshell affect your feelings on the mid-1990's Tribe teams, especially in the context of the Simmons piece?

And I don't mean just Manny, I mean - does what Simmons writes about Ortiz, Millar, Pete Martinez, and the like make you think back about those teams with Belle, Baerga, Manny, Thome, Sandy, and Lofton just to name a few?

That 1990's run was a fun ride, but couldn't that Simmons' piece be written about, say the 1995 Indians with the same effectiveness?

As for how I feel about the Manny revelation and suspension, my feelings are effectively (though not surprisingly) put into word form better than I could compose by Joe Posnanski .

Keeping with topics initiated by Bill Simmons (who actually decided to put forth

some well-thought out pieces this week), he has some interesting insight as to what the evolution of access to athletes is doing to how we digest information on our sports teams and whose opinion we really should want to know.

Is it really that of the athletes?

If not, and you're more interested in the process by which those athletes come to wear the same laundry as you do, Vince Grzegorek at '64 and Counting has a tremendous piece on Keith Woolner
, the Indians' Manager of Baseball and Research, on how the Indians come to the decisions they do in terms of particular players and what role statistics and analysis plays in those decisions.

Additionally, here's the transcript of the Q&A with Vince and Keith with my usual proclamation that if you're not reading '64 and Counting...you really should be.

Back to what's happening on the field, Baseball Prospectus took a stab at what the final standings of the AL Central might look like
, based on a couple of different formulas, the first one looking like this:

MIN - 84-78
CHI - 82-80
DET - 81-81
KC - 80-82
CLE - 77-85

The second one, using the Odds Record , puts the Indians in third place at the end of the year, with their projected standings looking like this:

DET - 86-75
KC - 81-81
CLE - 77-85
MIN - 76-86
CHI - 75-87

Why is this interesting?

Essentially, because both projections have the Central being won by a team with

86 wins or less and, while the Indians may not look the part right now, things may not be as bleak as they may seem, as Adam Van Arsdale of LGT points out very well, summarizing in a great piece entitled "Taking a Step Back" that:

The Indians 7 game hole is real and presents them with a significant challenge. But that the two most important parts of the team, starting pitching and offense, are doing at least passably well, is significant. If the team can play .500 ball over the next three weeks and begin to stabilize the bullpen, I think the season will still be alive. I would not go so far as to say we're in a good position. No. We are in a terrible position. But perhaps there is hope for Indians fans that in baseball, it is better to fall behind early in the season than late in the season.

If that bullpen is incapable of stabilization, let me just point out what Ken Rosenthal wrote on the D-Backs' recent managerial change after the firing of Bob Melvin :

The D-Backs needed a change; I get that. Bob Melvin was the 2007 National League Manager of the Year, but the team seemed to have gone stale; the offense stunk, the young players were developing too slowly and the Dodgers' fast start put the team in an 8-1/2-game hole. General Manager Josh Byrnes and ownership had grown increasingly frustrated. New voices might help.

A little rough on him as Melvin certainly didn't acquire the players and certainly wasn't the one failing in the field. But that's what the manager does, right...takes the blame when things aren't going well?

Well...read that again with some changes made by yours truly in bold:

*The **Indians** needed a change; I get that. **Eric Wedge** was the 2007 **American League**
Manager of the Year, but the team seemed to have gone stale; the
bullpen
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Royals'
fast start put the team in an
7-game hole
. General Manager
Mark Shapiro*

and ownership had grown increasingly frustrated. New voices might help.

At this point, does that look like it's something you could read in the next couple of weeks?

Not sure if you're aware of this, but this is how each team has fared from the time that each went League Championship Series in 2007 to the day that Melvin was fired:

AZ - 2008: 82-80
AZ - 2009: 12-17

CLE - 2008: 81-81
CLE - 2009: 11-18

Just throwing that out there...

Finally, my favorite sentence of the week comes to us via Castrovince :

It was reported by the Plain Dealer this week that Fausto Carmona is no longer talking with reporters this season after he was ignored by reporters following Monday's game in Toronto. But Fausto assured me today that he was only joking.

I'll let you know when that same information shows up in my PD.

Happy Mothers' Day everyone, enjoy the day by telling your mother and the mother of your children (if applicable) how much they mean to you, then settle in with something tasty from Bell's Brewery (seriously, go find some...NOW) for some afternoon baseball with the hopes that these pink bats put some life into the Indians' offense.