In the throes of Trading Deadline week, after hitting on all those expendable pieces and parts (some of whom have already been assigned new laundry to wear), it's finally time to talk about the two prettiest lures in the Indians' tackle box of bait - it's time to ... gulp, talk a little CP Lee and Vic. Will we move them? Can we move them? If so, to who? And can the Indians contend in 2010 without them? Paulie C answers all of these questions for our readers in his last installment of this trade deadline three part feature.

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Whereas in the case of Mark DeRosa, Senor Slo-Mo, and Garko...Polo, questions as to where they fit (or didn't fit) into the Indians' plans after this year (either by virtue of their contract running out, an absurdly high number on a club option for a 34-year-old middle reliever, or a player about to hit arbitration with younger players behind him) do not apply to Clifton Phifer and El Capitan. Both are elite players in MLB, working under the last year deal of their current contracts, with the Indians holding affordable options on each player for 2010.

If they're ostensibly under club control through the end of next season, why in the world would the Indians trade these players then, right?

For these two, the question as to why they're being shopped have less to do with them as players and more to do with the Indians and their outlook for the 2010 season and beyond. For each player, there are questions as to the wisdom of extending them past 2010 (as there are with Vic in terms of similarly skilled players in the pipeline and the dollars committed to Hafner to DH) or simply the fact that they will not be Indians when presented with Free Agency after the 2010 season as is the case with Lee , who is sure to command a multi-year deal after the 2010 season for an annual

salary with eight digits associated with it, something the Indians are rightfully reticent to shy away from given that Lee will be 32 when his next contract starts in the 2011 season.

Nobody's questioning either player's importance to the team as Martinez's recent slump is the only thing that prevents him from being the most valuable position player this year (as determined by Fangraphs...hello, Mr. BLC), a category in which Lee's value to the team is equal to that of the 5 next most valuable pitchers (as determined again by Fangraphs) on the Indians' 2009 pitching staff...one of whom is Jeremy Sowers.

No, seriously.

As two of the probably three best players on the team, both are vitally important to any success that the Indians hope to achieve this year without question. But the question really becomes, rather quickly, what are the Indians' expectations for 2010 and what role to Clifton Phifer and Vic the Stick play in those expectations

An even better question to ask would be is whether contention with Victor and Clifton is possible in 2010, seeing as how each of the two players in question is performing exceptionally this year and the team still finds itself with the third worst record in the AL. If the team has posted the third worst record in the AL with the two of them (and with their recent start to a second-half surge the only thing pulling them ahead of the Royals in the woebegone Central), what point is there to keeping them around for 2010 on a bad team?

And now both seemingly rhetorical questions are out there - "if they're ostensibly under club control through the end of next season, why in the world would the Indians trade these players" versus "on the team that has posted the third worst record in the AL with the two of them, what is the point of keeping them around for 2010 on a bad team" - and suddenly, we get into the crux of the argument...more of a "State of the Organization" question than anything else.

Forgive me if this is revisiting "news" that isn't new to anyone, but the real issue facing the organization in regard to possibly moving Lee and Martinez is whether right now (with 1 ½ affordable years remaining on each of their deals) represents the point of greatest value in terms of netting a return for either or both

to augment the talent already in the organization to strengthen the quality and depth of the organization for a sustained run...just not necessarily a run that would include next year.

Is 2010 a legitimate year for contention, made more likely by keeping Lee and Vic, or is 2010 a "year to build upon" because the team is not close to contending (even with CP and El Capitan) with the eye on a longer timeframe in terms of sustained contention?

From the two schools of thought - one in which the Indians can contend in 2010 with Lee and Martinez versus the one that sees a more realistic timeframe of contention starting in 2011 when LaPorta, Huff, Rondon, Santana, Brantley, and Weglarz are all ready to contribute - the Indians' Front Office has about 3 days to decide which one they find themselves more firmly in as the value for Lee or Martinez will likely never be higher (1 ½ years under contract for each and two pennant races for an acquiring team) and contention next year without one or both seems rather unlikely, taking into account the adjustment period for the young players thought to be in line for Martinez's AB (if he is to be moved) and depending upon the MLB-readiness of the arms acquired for either (again, if either are moved) in terms of immediate impact.

Looking then, at these two schools of thought, if the idea is that the Indians CAN contend with Victor and Lee in 2010, how important is each to that idea of contention?

Starting with Victor, while the idea is out there that there are prospects that figure in eventually at C and 1B (Santana and LaPorta and maybe Weglarz) and DH is filled for the foreseeable future by Hafner meaning that Victor past 2010 isn't as crucial to the Indians' long-term success, moving Martinez PRIOR to 2010 assumes quite a bit in terms of the development of the young players in the Indians' system. Without Martinez on the Indians in 2010, the offensive burden would have to be carried by some combination of ShopVac (assuming he's around), LaPorta, and maybe even Andy Marte until the likes of Santana and Weglarz are able to contribute, perhaps later in 2010. That group of players assuming that offensive burden would have to combine to come close to Victor's production and provide some semblance of stability past Grady, Asdrubal, and Choo at the top of the lineup. Perhaps the offense is strong enough to make up for the loss of Martinez's bat next year, but it would take a number of players adjusting quickly to MLB as well as another batch of players not falling prey to

regressions or lingering injuries for that to happen.

If Martinez's presence in the 2010 lineup certainly allows the case for contention more compelling on the offensive side, Lee's presence in 2010 virtually dictates whether the Indians have a chance of contending or not, pitching-wise.

Consider this while pondering Lee's importance to the team for next year:

Starters 2009 - Cliff Lee Division

22 starts, 152 IP, 3.14 ERA, 1.30 WHIP, 6.34 K/9, 1.95 BB/9, 3.25 K/BB

Starters 2009 - Non-Cliff Lee Division

78 starts, 422 1/3 IP, 6.07 ERA, 1.56 WHIP, 5.32 K/9, 3.62 K/BB, 1.46 K/BB

Take Cliff Lee out of the equation for this year and the results for the 2009 rotation go from "not so pretty" to "girls in the hallway of ‘The Shining' terrifying" rather quickly. Sure, Jake Westbrook is still coming back this season and Fausto Carmona is still in search of his 2007 self, but look at the two rotations possible for 2010 (not taking into account the player coming back IF Lee were to be traded) with and without Lee:

Lee
Westbrook
Carmona
Laffey
Huff

Westbrook
Carmona
Laffey
Huff
Sowers

Is it even really necessary to look at the rotation without Lee to know what a year without him at the top would mean?

Not a real rosy picture, right?

However, the camp that asserts that 2010 will amount to nothing more than this year even with the rotation looking like it does in the top version. And that may be true, but the variable in the whole "contention in 2010" hinges on the effectiveness of Carmona and, to a lesser extent, the health of Westbrook. The notion of Carmona (in some version close to his 2007 self) and Westbrook (eating innings in the middle of the rotation) pitching behind Lee and in front of Laffey and Huff with Rondon as the 6th starter holds water for me as a viable rotation for contention in 2010. But with the version of Carmona that we've been "treated" to now for 2 years and with Westbrook still not pitching an inning in MLB, how much of a leap of faith is that assumption?

The "no chance of contention in 2010" crowd will crow that the idea of contention in 2010 takes some healthy assumptions that Carmona will return to form, that Westbrook and Sizemore will be fully healthy, that Hafner can play more than 3 games in a row, that the bullpen can somehow...somehow...evolve into an effective unit from Day 1, and that Lee and Martinez will be on the team when the club breaks camp next April.

Could all of those things happen?

Certainly, and the Indians as they are constructed right now surely won't be the way that the team leaves Goodyear in 2010 (not even taking Lee and Martinez into account), so contention in 2010 in the AL Central simply can't be written off as a pipe dream. If the idea that the Indians could contend in 2009 was out there with the thought that they would work in some of their young players along the way existed at the beginning of the season, with the augmentation of those young players to what would essentially be the same group of "core" players (assuming again, that Lee and Martinez stay put), has this season put that much of a sour taste in everyone's mouth to assert that the organization is entering the desert of non-contention, only to be saved by flipping Lee and Martinez for young talent?

On the flip side, so many assumptions are necessary and as 2009 has shown some cracks in what was thought to be the Indians' foundation going forward, how much validity is there to chalking up 2010, jettisoning both Lee and Martinez and building this thing with the same focus on a multitude of arms that it was supposed to be?

If 2010 is, in fact, a pipe dream or built on assumptions, wouldn't now be the time to strike when the proverbial iron is hot and capitalize on dangling 1 ½ years of Lee and Martinez for a maximum return?

Perhaps it is, but only for that deal that gives the Indians the arms that are past that adjustment period in terms of acclimating themselves to MLB. And therein lies the rub for the Indians as few, if any, teams are willing to part with the type of arms that legitimately make sense in terms of giving up 1 ½ years of Martinez and, more obviously, Lee as the arms added would have to ostensibly replace Lee in the rotation in short order before chalking up 2010 turned into chalking up 2011 and so on.

Why are teams reticent to make moves to give up those arms?

Consider the since-shot-down rumor of both Lee and Martinez going to Chavez Ravine because Joe Torre wants to "win now", with the return for the duo allegedly being Chad Billingsley or Clayton Kershaw, James Loney, and one or two high-end Dodger prospects. Take Loney out of the equation as his acquisition would make little sense for a team that just traded a fair-to-middling 1B about to hit arbitration in Garko only to add another in Loney.

Rather, look at what would be the centerpiece of the deal coming back to the Indians - Billingsley or Kershaw - those young, MLB-ready arms that no team wants to part with

Cliff Lee 2009 - Age 30

3.14 ERA, 3.21 FIP, 1.30 WHIP, 6.34 K/9, 1.95 BB/9, 3.24 K/BB
Free Agent after 2010 season

Clayton Kershaw 2009 - Age 21

2.96 ERA, 3.38 FIP, 1.26 WHIP, 8.79 K/9, 5.03 BB/9, 1.75 K/BB
Arbitration-eligible after 2011 season
Free Agent after 2014 season

Chad Billingsley 2009 - Age 24

3.72 ERA, 3.54 FIP, 1.29 WHIP, 8.53 K/9, 3.79 BB/9, 2.25 K/BB

Arbitration-eligible after 2009 season
Free Agent after 2012 season

Why in the world would a team like the Dodgers make that deal, giving up multiple years of club control (at a lower price) of a younger pitcher performing at a level close to the 2008 AL Cy Young Award winner?

If they would, certainly that's the perfect deal; but can the Indians sit and wait out that perfect deal?

At this point, that's the move as they sit in the proverbial catbird's seat where they're not compelled to absolutely move CP or Vic because of oncoming Free Agency and because both will be playing under club-friendly deals in 2010. If, in 2010, the Indians find themselves similarly out of contention in late-July, an opportunity will have been missed as the value for ½ of a season (and one pennant race) pales in comparison and perceived value for 1 ½ of a season (and two pennant races) for any team that would net Lee or Victor.

To me, contention with Lee and Martinez in 2010 isn't a pipe dream and while it may be banking on a multitude of assumptions, it also assumes that the Indians will figure to have a better team than the one that broke camp in 2009...the same one that was thought to be in contention for the AL Central with this season dawned. If, however, that deal is out there that doesn't completely take 2010 out of the equation and doesn't set the Indians contention clock back to "hopefully 2011" if everyone matures as expected, the Indians would be foolish not to entertain those deals if only to maximize that return on Lee and/or Martinez.

For all intents and purposes the balance of the Indians' season and perhaps all of next year, in terms of expectations, figure to go one way or the other in the next three days. The bait is in the water and the Indians are feeling the nibbles. Whether the original bait or the catch of the day is at the other end of that line come Friday remains to be seen.