The trades of CP Lee and Vic Martinez, among others, over the past few weeks have left the Indians' organization in a state of flux in terms of what players fit where. The biggest area of change has come in terms of the pitching ranks and the departure of Lee from the rotation for 2010 certainly throws conventional wisdom out of the window as to what can be expected from any and all spots in the rotation going forward. In Paulie's latest "As The Dust Settles" piece, he takes a look at the reconfigured Indians pitching staff.

The trades of CP Lee and Vic Martinez, among others, over the past few weeks have left the Indians' organization in a state of flux in terms of what players fit where and trying to figure out where all of the "HELLO MY NAME IS" tags are in the clubhouses throughout the organization. The biggest area of change has come in terms of the pitching ranks and the departure of Lee from the rotation for 2010 certainly throws conventional wisdom out of the window as to what can be expected from any and all spots in the rotation going forward.

The return on the trades resulted in a number of arms coming into the organization that became embarrassingly bereft of pitching talent in a short amount of time as the starters posted a 5.24 ERA, 2nd worst in MLB in 2009...and that was with Clifton Phifer Lee. With the idea that the trades of Lee, Martinez, Garko, Betancourt, and DeRosa began to re-stock the Indians' pitching pipeline, both at the upper levels and lower levels, the notion that the short-term future of the pitching staff, and particularly the starting rotation is filled with question marks - players attempting to recover from injury or ineffectiveness or players trying to establish themselves in MLB - up and down the list of possibilities.

How full of question marks is the potential 2010 rotation, assuming no other arms

are added either via trade or FA?
Consider that among the pitchers that legitimately figure into the 2010 plans in the rotation (Hot Carl Pavano and Thomas Ohka need not apply), here are the inning totals as a starter for those pitchers in 2009:

David Huff - 80 2/3 IP as an MLB starter
Fausto Carmona - 65 2/3 IP as an MLB starter
Jeremy Sowers - 65 1/3 IP as an MLB starter
Aaron Laffey - 53 IP as an MLB starter

Could I throw in Scott Lewis' 4 1/3 IP in 2009 as an MLB starter or Zachson's 4 IP in 2009 as an MLB starter?

I suppose, but doesn't it actually make you feel worse about the situation?

I know...it discounts the idea that Jake Westbrook is coming back to the rotation next year and doesn't take into account some of the young talent (namely Carrasco and Masterson) who factor into the 2010 rotation.

Fine then...how about this little list to show the number of career MLB starts among pitchers who figure into the mix in 2010, in descending order:

Jake Westbrook - 160 career MLB starts
Fausto Carmona - 74 career MLB starts
Jeremy Sowers - 61 career MLB starts
Aaron Laffey - 34 career MLB starts
Justin Masterson - 15 career MLB starts
Dave Huff - 15 career MLB starts
Carlos Carrasco - 0 career MLB starts
Hector Rondon - 0 career MLB starts

Let's say that the average MLB starter, assuming health throughout the year, gets in about 30 starts a season (CP Lee had 31 starts last year) which would mean that three of the Indians potential starters next year (two really, as Sowers is...well, Sowers) have more than two complete MLB seasons under their belt and those two who are thought to "anchor" the top of the rotation are coming back from Tommy John surgery and still trying to find success that has eluded him for nearly two full seasons now.

Now, we get into the whole crux of the argument against keeping Lee and Martinez for 2010 and certainly the factors that influenced the Indians' decision to jettison both of them for pitching, both close-to-MLB-ready pitchers and potential impact arms down the line. That is, beyond Cliff Lee at the top of the rotation, the question marks were big and getting bigger with Westbrook's setback in his recovery and without a guarantee that Carmona would ever re-capture the magic of 2007. To me, the Front Office's statement that contention in 2010 was unlikely even with Lee and Martinez (if, in fact, there were no hidden payroll agendas pushing that movement...and there may have been) is the most damning indication of where they felt that Westbrook and Carmona would be when 2010 arrived. If they thought that Westbrook and Carmona could be healthy and anywhere close to their former selves, the 2010 season is certainly in play in terms of contention. Without them performing at past levels though, the rotation looks a lot like the 2009 staff which was Cliff Lee and...well, Cliff Lee.

Now with Lee out of that rotation, replaced by a couple of talented, if very inexperienced arms, the Indians find themselves unquestionably in a transition year in the rotation where many options exist, just not many of them looking like sure things from the top on down.

In terms of the top, at this point it would seem that Jake Westbrook is the 2010 Opening Day starter if only by the virtue that he's the best looking option among those on the table. Of course, this represents a stark difference from the past few Openers when the Indians boasted reigning Cy Young winners, but what's done is done and Westbrook looks to be the de facto top-of-the-rotation starter for the Indians even if his numbers suggest that he simply doesn't possess top-of-the-rotation stuff. Even during the 5-year stretch from 2003 to 2007, when Westbrook was averaging 28 starts and 184 IP, he posted a 4.11 ERA (107 ERA+) and a 1.36 WHIP. Nothing to sneeze at, but more along the lines of what could be expected from a nice middle-of-the-rotation presence on a team, not the assumed "best" pitcher...when healthy.

And there's the caveat with Westbrook as he hasn't thrown a pitch in MLB since last May and has thrown only 34 2/3 innings since the end of 2007 as he's coming back from Tommy John surgery and a hip injury that sidelined him for a year and a half to date. Westbrook is in the final year of his deal, which will see him "earn" $33M from 2008 to the end of 2010 with those 34 2/3 innings being the only return to show on the Indians' investment.

Maybe Westbrook comes back like he once did, inducing groundball outs and eating innings in 2010; but even if he does, he'll likely do so at the same serviceable clip that he has established for himself, certainly not in line with what the Indians have enjoyed from their top starter for the past few years...but that's going to be an ongoing trend here when looking at the 2010 rotation.

Speaking of the man thought to be the "top starter" in waiting back in 2007, the long, strange trip of Fausto Carmona rolls on. From going to a 23-year-old sinkerballing machine making Torii Hunter feel "hung over" when he faced him to being relegated to the back lots of Goodyear a mere two seasons later looks to be nothing short of the Devil calling in his due on this apparent Faustian bargain.

Carmona's descent and problems are well-documented (too many BB, perhaps poor conditioning, an inability to repeat his mechanics, etc.), but over the past weekend, Sandy Alomar Jr. was in the Indians' broadcast booth to talk about his Hall of Fame induction while Carmona was on the mound. One of the broadcasters asked Sandy what he thought of Fausto who was on the mound that night and Alomar mentioned a name that I had nearly forgotten about in terms of comparing him to Carmona - Kevin Brown, that nasty sinkerballer who complemented his nearly-unhittable sinking fastball with secondary pitches that generated some phenomenal years.

If you'll remember, Brown was nothing short of dominant for those years with the Marlins, Padres, and Dodgers. Interestingly however, Brown didn't become that dominant pitcher until he was 31 years old and while most people remember THAT version of Kevin Brown, he actually struggled somewhat to get to that point as he didn't strike a lot of batters out and walked a number of hitters in his early career to the point that perhaps this is relevant to point out:

Kevin Brown - first 4 full seasons in MLB

9.0 H/9, 3.4 BB/9, 4.5 K/9, 1.32 K/BB

Fausto Carmona - first 4 full seasons in MLB

9.2 H/9, 3.9 BB/9, 5.5 K/9, 1.40 K/BB

Obviously, Carmona's numbers look better when looked at cumulatively because of his 2007 season balancing out a lot of the ugliness since then as his K/BB ratio has been UNDER 1 in both the 2008 and 2009 seasons; but I bring it up if only to assert that maybe Carmona achieved too much, too soon. Perhaps his 2007 was an aberration in that he jumped to the head of the class without taking the proper steps to get there and with the lessons learned by taking those proper steps not there to fall back on, he regressed quickly and frightfully.

What does 2010, much less the future, hold for Carmona?

It's certainly possible that he's a one-hit wonder, never to come close to achieving the success he found in 2007; but it's just as possible that he works his way back by taking the long road to the destination instead of the easier path.

We're going to find out with him in an Indians' uniform, for better or worse, as he's guaranteed $4.9M next year and $6.1M in 2011 with the club holding options on him for 2012 for $7M, 2013 for $9M, and 2014 for $12M. Thus, he's "only" guaranteed $11M for the rest of his contract at numbers that look far too high for what he's been putting forth in the past two years.

However, if he rebounds to even find some semblance of his 2007 form through a new evolution, his contract looks palatable and even attractive going forward.

Whether Carmona, who was thought at one time to be the heir apparent to Sabathia, even makes it to the next stretch of contention (if that's going to happen in the 2011 or 2012 season), is certainly one thing that could tip this rotation from being average to very good in a shorter timeframe, but could also tip the rotation from average to below average if he continues to struggle.

OK, now how does it feel to be through the "known" quantities of the equation of the 2010 rotation?

Yeah, I know...

Before getting into some of our shiny new pieces however, let's take a moment to attempt to quantify one of the in-house options prior to the Lee/Martinez deals that

should factor into the rotational mix just as prominently as the young arms - the Babyfaced Bulldog, Aaron Laffey. After Wednesday night's game, Laffey now sits as a 24-year-old with 208 1/3 career IP, a 4.10 career ERA (110 ERA+), and a career WHIP of 1.40. While his groundball tendencies and low K totals often force him to be overlooked in terms of potential, realize where Laffey stands among AL pitchers with more than 60 innings pitched and at least one start:

3.58 ERA (15th in AL)
3.71 FIP (16th in AL)

Pushing aside the nonsense that Laffey could eventually slot into the bullpen because he "warms up quickly", there's a certain point that gets reached with him when the Indians need to start putting him in the "definite" category in terms of future starters based on what he's accomplished. Assuming the consistent health that has eluded him since he's arrived in the Bigs, Laffey's done nothing but perform in whatever role the Indians have asked him to fill. Whether that means he evolves into a Jake Westbrook-type innings eater or a Derek Lowe-type top-of-the-rotation starter eventually remains to be seen, but his numbers are getting hard to ignore, particularly when you consider that he's 6 months younger than Dave Huff, a year-and-a-half younger than Scott Lewis, and two years younger than Jeremy Sowers.

Perhaps some want to push the out-of-options-after-this-year Laffey into that soft-tossing lefty column based on his handedness and his high hit rates, but Laffey might represent more of a fit with what Westbrook and Lowe put forth for all of those years as groundball-inducing presences, whose readiness for a full-time spot in the 2010 rotation shouldn't be questioned.

If the idea that Westbrook, Carmona, and Laffey (all assumed to be healthy) are likely to handle 60% of the rotation for next year, how about the odds that the MLB-ready pitcher netted from the Red Sox, Justin Masterson, also has a pretty good chance of breaking camp next year in the Tribe rotation which would suddenly "boast" four groundball-inducing starters?

Masterson, as we have all now seen on the field for the Indians, is a big RHP with a low-angle arm-slot who as a reliever has mainly thrown his sinking fastball and his slider with much success in the pen and as the Indians have stated that he will make the transition back to the starting rotation, the development of his secondary pitches, and the refinement of his changeup in particular, are going to go a long

way in Masterson's success as he moves back into a starting role.

He is still very young (one month older than Laffey) and has experienced success against MLB hitters, even coming in 14th in FIP in the AL (3.67) using that same criteria that we did with Laffey, having pitched 60 or more innings and having started one or more games, moving up to 10th in FIP if we use 70 innings as the threshold . The impressive K numbers that he's posted (8.52 K/9 this year) may drop as he transitions back to the rotation, but his talent as a pitcher is substantial.

The question as to whether Masterson's future lies in the rotation or back in the bullpen as a late-inning option is probably going to begin to find an answer starting in a couple of weeks as the Indians stretch him out and transition him into the 2009 rotation with the idea that there are plenty of innings to be had for him as a starter in 2010 to assert himself as a viable middle-of-the-rotation starter.

As for the other new option for the Tribe's 2010 rotation, the jury is out as to what Carlos Carrasco projects as due to conflicting schools of thought as to where Carrasco fits in. His three pitch mix may simply slot him into being a middle-of-the-rotation starter, while the possibility exists that his high K rates certainly portend front-line stuff; unfortunately just as likely is the idea that his propensity to let innings snowball on him may force him to become little more than a tantalizing project, never able to break out oft the frustration as an organizational filler.

Carrasco was certainly highly-thought-of throughout his MiLB career, sitting as the #1 prospect in the Phillies' organization to start both 2007 and 2008, dropping to #2 this year prior to the year according to Baseball America. While his 2009 season has certainly taken some of the short-term luster off of his star, Carrasco remains a 22-year-old strikeout pitcher who has been a fixture in Top 50 Prospect lists for a few years now. With the caveat that the list of pitchers who appear in said Top Prospect lists, then never make any kind of a dent in MLB is long and undistinguished, the Indians should go about finding out how Carrasco translates to MLB once the trade of Hot Carl Pavano comes about (and now would be a good time after his last outing) or the Indians decide to cut ties with Tommy Ohka. The idea that Carrasco figures prominently into the 2010 rotation means that Carrasco should be facing MLB hitters soon, if only to take his lumps in MLB the way that one of his competitors, Dave Huff, for a 2010 rotation spot currently is.

As for the "lump-taker", Huff finds himself adjusting to MLB as a young pitcher experiencing some success (4 starts of 7+ IP), some real struggles (5 starts not making it to or out of the 5th inning), and some results in the middle (5 starts of exactly 5 IP) against MLB hitters. Huff certainly put himself squarely into the future of this team with his 2008 in the minors (2.52 ERA, 0.96 WHIP, 8.8 K/9, 1.8 BB/9, 4.93 K/BB), but 2009 has shown that he is far from a finished product. Whether that finishing needed to take place in AAA and whether the fortunes of the parent club cut that finishing short will never be known, but Huff is working out the kinks against MLB hitters and paying the price for it from time to time.

With the names ahead of him, it's likely that Huff closes out 2009 with the Indians (at least until he hits an inning total), then goes into Spring Training fighting for a spot in the rotation but could just as easily represent the first depth option from AAA. The mixed success that he's experienced in 2009 has shown flashes that Huff belongs, with his numbers in 2008 backing that up...it just might not be right now.

If Huff is likely to represent the 6th starter in 2010 based on his success in the minors last year and his performance in MLB this year, where does Hector Rondon fit into this mix? Rondon has put forth a similarly impressive year in AA and AAA as Huff did last year, posting a cumulative 2.76 ERA, 1.09 WHIP, 9.3 K/9, 2.0 BB/9, 4.73 K/BB line, doing it as a 21-year-old compared to Huff's season last year as a 23-year-old. Rondon has burst onto the prospect map this year and likely would have factored into the Indians' 2010 plans more substantially had the likes of Masterson (already in MLB) and Carrasco (more time in AAA) not entered the organization.

It's not inconceivable that Rondon makes his MLB debut in 2009 depending upon what happens with some of the aforementioned arms and he'll likely go to Goodyear next year with the chance of winning a spot in the rotation, but will more likely head to Columbus to start the season, if only to allow him to finish off his repertoire of pitches. That would allow him to enter the rotation when (not if) one of the names ahead of him falters or is injured and puts him squarely in the mix for the 2011 rotation without unnecessarily allowing him to accrue service time on a team going nowhere.

If that's thought to be the top seven starters going into next year, let's at least mention Jeremy Sowers, who is out of options after this year and can't conceivably be thought of to stay in the rotation to start 2010 and to remain

effective enough to be there all year without a deserved demotion.

Nothing against Jeremy Sowers, who certainly looks to be an MLB pitcher with some merit, it's just not as a member of this 2010 rotation. So, rather than letting Sowers simply walk at the end of the year and realizing that the idea of slotting him in as a long man is not a radically new concept (but a sound one based on his numbers each time through a batting lineup), how about a practical suggestion to begin that transition?

Seeing as how the Indians are in the process of "stretching out" Justin Masterson in relief with the idea that he will begin starting soon, but on a likely limited pitch count, how about using some sort of defined combination of Masterson and Sowers in starter and relief role to accommodate Masterson's transition to the rotation and Sowers' transition to the long man? Allow Sowers to start games until Masterson is ready, then have Masterson take Sowers' spot in the rotation with the idea that Sowers will come into relieve him after 4 or 5 innings. Sowers goes the rest of the way, or turns it over to the bullpen, getting used to the routine of pitching out of the bullpen while keeping Masterson on a limited pitch and inning count doesn't overly tax the rest of the bullpen.

It almost makes too much sense to actually happen though, you know...with the foresight to look ahead to the role of each in 2010, with the idea that Sowers needs a spot on the 25-man after this year or another 1st round pick goes away.

Nevertheless, if I were forced to venture a guess on the 2010 rotation right now, I think that you're looking at it looking like this:

Westbrook
Masterson
Laffey
Carmona
Carrasco

If that looks like a lot of middle-of-the-rotation starters with the hope that one of the pitchers can re-capture top shelf stuff or one of the youngsters can evolve into a top-of-the-rotation starter...well, welcome to 2010 in the Cleveland pitching staff.

The depth at AAA starts with Dave Huff and Hector Rondon as legitimate

replacements for the first five and with names like Chuck Lofgren and Jeanmar Gomez a little further down the developmental ladder. If you want to throw Scott Lewis in there as an option, have at it, although the doctor's orders that he needs to learn to "pitch through pain" and his injury history doesn't have me too optimistic on his health, much less his effectiveness.

After those names, the depth breaks off into two directions in terms of guys being older, lower-ceiling "prospects" like Ryan Edell and others who may factor in at some point as organizational depth or relievers and not much else as Edell is older than Laffey, Masterson, Carrasco, and Huff and just made it to AAA.

The other group of depth going forward would be those young, high-ceiling arms like 19-year-old Alexander Perez, a healthy Kelvin De La Cruz, 2009 1st Round Pick Alex White and the newly-acquired Nick Hagadone, Jason Knapp, Bryan Price, and Scott Barnes all of whom have the potential to fill out an MLB rotation, some of them perhaps slotting higher in the rotation than others as they progress. Of course, some of those arms are a long way from Cleveland but with what we've seen this year and knowing that the Indians made their trades this year to fill that pipeline of arms for now AND for the future, the sense that the Indians can never have too many arms certainly finds some footing.

As for the arms that figure into the 2010 rotation, it certainly be full of question marks - either shaped like pitchers trying to re-capture success lost to injury or ineffectiveness or young pitchers trying to establish a toehold in MLB as a legitimate starting pitcher. Whatever the answer to the questions may be, the 2010 rotation is certain to be full of answers, both good and bad.