As the inevitable second-half push continues and Kerry Wood is getting perilously close to being on pace to vest that third year option (on pace for 53 games finished with the option vesting at 55 games finished), Paulie checks in to release some tomahawks of what might have been, what is, and what could be ... wondering why this hot streak couldn't have started a month earlier, and fawning over some of the Tribe's young players.

As the inevitable second-half push continues and Kerry Wood is getting perilously close to being on pace to vest that third year option (on pace for 53 games finished with the option vesting at 55 games finished), let's release some tomahawks of what might have been, what is, and what could be:

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In case you haven't noticed, the Erie Warriors have now won 8 of the last 11 series, only losing series to the Angels twice and the Rangers once in that span that includes 4 series "wins" against AL Central opponents, besting Minnesota twice and Detroit and Kansas City once each in recent series.

Why is this relevant?

You may have blocked out this unhappy memory, but the Indians started the season out winning only 6 of their first 21 series to start the season, culminating in that travesty in Wrigley, after which their record stood at 29-42 (10 games out of

the AL Central) on June 22nd. But that didn't even count as their low-water mark of the season as the Tribe would sit at 36-57, an embarrassing 21 games under .500 (only losing 3 ½ games in the AL Central standings despite going 7-15) on July 20th, nearly a full month after the season was essentially lost under the summer sun on the North Side of Chicago.

Since that low-water mark of 36-57 however, the Indians have somehow rallied (as they always do) with two of their best players and some complementary players at the beginning of the season competing elsewhere and have posted a 20-13 in their last 33 games (.606 winning percentage) to pull as close to .500 as they've been since late June...still a whopping 14 games under .500.

Realizing that this is all terribly painful to read, watching the events in the Mile High City forces this to be re-visited. That is, Colorado manager Clint Hurdle was fired on May 30th, with the Rockies sitting at 20-28, a shocking 12 ½ games out of the NL West race. As you may have noticed, the word "Rocktober" has apparently entered the general lexicon once more, since they Rockies have gone 52-27 since that time, playing at a nearly impossible .658 clip over nearly ½ of an MLB season to pull within 3 games of the NL West, taking a lead in the NL Wild Card race in the process.

Yes, this is likely the exception to any and all rules having to do with managerial changes, but let's just say this recent hot streak by the Indians could have started...oh, I don't know...after that series in Chicago with the Indians starting this stretch of .600 baseball starting in late-June instead of late-July. Instead of the 27-28 that they've gone since exiting the "friendly confines" of 1060 West Addison Street, (taking great leaps in assumption, I know) the Indians would be sitting on a record of 33-22 in those 55 games, which would have put their cumulative record at 62-64 or ½ a game behind the Twins and White Sox in the standings and 5 games back of the AL Central leading Tigers.

By no means am I suggesting that this WOULD have happened as the team is the team is the team and the bullpen revival has certainly assisted in this stretch of good baseball, but the remote chance that this hot streak could have started a month earlier was taken out of play when the Indians decided to "stay the course" and, as a result, the Indians' careers of CP Lee and El Capitan were ended, as was much hope that 2010 represented any more than a transitional year. Maybe that's putting too much credence into the spark that a managerial

change can cause (and certainly not every team does what the Rockies have done or managers would drop like flies every May and June), but the opportunity to turn the page was lost.

Certainly, it can be argued that the performance of the team over the last three weeks (with what looks to be pretty much the 2010 roster) portends good things for the Indians, if they can ride this wave of momentum into April of next year. But I've learned my lesson (the hard way...a couple of times) on that to know not to base expectations on second half performance.

Unfortunately, I know because the Jensen Lewis down the stretch in 2008 was not necessarily what should have been reasonably expected from him in 2009, just as the current stretch of success from Chris Perez, Tony Sipp, and Matt LaPorta may not have too much bearing on what expectations should be for 2010 for each player.

That all being said, and looking out at the future from these rose-colored glasses, there are promising signs...

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While this probably feels like old news, the continued development of Louis V.B. continues to be one of the great revelations of the 2009 season, particularly given his age and his advancement. Realizing that I've used this same comparison to point out how special Asdrubal's season truly is in context, realize that there are only 18 players in MLB that are 23 or younger that have appeared as many plate appearances as Luis Valbuena (Asdrubal is obviously one of them) this season.

The only players among those that have posted a higher OPS to date than Valbuena are guys that you may have heard of - Pablo Sandoval, Justin Upton, Evan Longoria, Andrew McCutcheon, Billy Butler, Gordon Beckham, the aforementioned Asdrubal, Adam Jones, Dexter Fowler, Everth Cabrera, and Colby Rasmus.

Most of those players have shown themselves to be impact MLB players at a wildly young age or their names dot the pre-season top prospect lists.

While Valbuena's moderate platoon split is should not go unmentioned (career OPS of .710 vs. LHP, career OPS of .813 vs. RHP), take a look at these comparisons when between what looks to be the double-play combo of the future against a familiar double-play combo of the past when all four players were playing out their seasons at the age of 23:

Luis Valbuena - Age 23 - .732 OPS

29 extra-base hits in 280 PA

Asdrubal Cabrera - Age 23 - .812 OPS

41 extra-base hits in 455 PA

Carlos Baerga - Age 23 - .809 OPS

53 extra-base hits in 716 PA

Omar Vizquel - Age 23 - .593 OPS

7 extra-base hits in 285 PA

Beginning to see how special the two of those players could be for the Indians going forward?

Combined with Sizemore in CF and Santana presumed to be knocking down the door in 2010 as the catcher, strength up the middle may finally come into play again for the Indians, boasting exceptional players (both offensively and defensively) up the middle.

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Does anyone else continue to be blown away that the Indians netted Chris Perez from the Cardinals for a few months of Mark DeRosa, with Jess Todd to boot?

While this has been covered elsewhere, look at what hitters have done against

the 23-year-old Perez in his last 16 appearances:

.118 BA / .182 OBP / .157 SLG / .339 OPS with 20 K and 4 BB in 16 1/3 IP

To put Perez's youth in perspective, he's 5 months younger than the closer in Akron and 4 months older than the closer in Lake County. While that may be more of an indictment of those two minor-leaguers as organizational depth than anything else, Perez is accomplishing exactly what the Cardinals thought he would when they made him a 1st Round Pick as he looks to be on track as a potential future closer.

As long as we're lauding our new bullpen, how about what opposing hitters have done against LHP Tony "Don't Give Up The" Sipp over his last 11 appearances:

.156 BA / .182 OBP / .281 SLG / .463 OPS with 10 K and 1 BB in 9 2/3 IP

Yes, I know that things can fall apart rather quickly for young relievers (Jensen Lewis and Rafael Perez, wherefore art thou), but Christopher Ralph (Mercedes) Perez and Sipp look to be moving comfortably into the role of set-up men, along with Joe Smith as the designated ROOGY, with a greater level of talent beneath them on the bullpen ladder.

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Staying in the small-sample size department, how about this comparison:

Matt LaPorta since first game after being recalled on August 19th

.346 BA / .333 OBP / .654 SLG / .987 OPS with 6 XBH in 27 plate appearances in 7 games started

Ryan Garko since trade to San Francisco on July 27th

.235 BA / .295 OBP / .358 SLG / .653 OPS with 5 XBH in 88 plate appearances in

21 games started

Ben Francisco since trade to Philadelphia on July 29th

.220 BA / .267 OBP / .463 SLG / .730 OPS with 6 XBH in 45 plate appearances in 8 games started

Just to take one more swing at the dead horse at my feet - why didn't LaPorta come up earlier to play everyday, even if it meant Garko and Francisco moving to part-time roles back in June?

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Going back to the idea that the team that we're seeing likely makes up the 2010 roster, this off-season is likely to be one of crickets and minor moves, particularly if you figure that the Indians already made their moves for 2010 about a month ago and this year and next represents the time to let those moves play out. Of course, that's not to say that some moves aren't coming - most notably, Shoppach (for better or worse) looks to be headed elsewhere for someone else to pay that arbitration number with Marson/Toregas/Gimenez in the fold and Santana presumed to be knocking at the door and a decision on whether Peralta would look like "Second Half Jhonny" with a full off-season knowing where he's playing on the field needs to be made - but in a 2010 season in which contention is a possibility and certainly not a foregone conclusion, can we put a moratorium on the "where we should dip into Free Agency would be..." talk as the pieces seem to be in place both at or near the MLB level to fill every spot on the team. It may not be filled with a sure thing, but you want some "additions" made to this current crop of talented youngsters coming up?

Looking at the list of potential Free Agents and realizing that the assumed pay grade of the guys who would figure into the Indians' radar trends closer to Brad Penny than John Lackey, does anyone really want to see innings taken away from a potential stalwart in the rotation (yes, maybe that "stalwart" status takes a year or more to develop) by a reclamation project?
Haven't we played this game before?

You want some "additions"?

OK, here's my wish list for "additions" for 2010:

Fausto Carmona - closer to 2007 form than 2008/1st half of 2009 form
Travis Hafner - playing every day
Jake Westbrook - healthy for a full season
Grady Sizemore - 100% healthy all season

You'll notice that there are no names on that "wish list" that aren't currently under contract for 2010 or well past 2010.

Know why?

This team is getting closer (but is by no means undoubtedly close) to contention in 2010; if we're all surprised by a run at contention in 2010...great. But I don't have a problem making that run with a payroll that hovers around $60M to $65M, even if it means that placeholders like Andy Marte, Jordan Brown, or Trevor Crowe holding down a position on an everyday basis for the likes of Mike Brantley, Nick Weglarz, or Lonnie Chisenahall later in 2010 or in 2011.

If you think the team needs some "veteran presence", how about Wood, Westbrook, Hafner, and Sizemore leading the way for the youngsters in the bullpen, the rotation, and the lineup?

Ultimately, I'm all for the idea that this collection of players we're seeing today is the beginning of the team that is supposed to lead us into the next run. Knowing that there's more beneath this group of players within the system, let's figure out what we have internally before wasting time and money on someone who doesn't factor in when the real contention is supposed to start.

Is that too much to ask for this off-season, besides a new manager for 2010?