The roster for 2010 certainly looks at this point to be shaping up - with the majority of the lineup spoken for, the principals that figure into the rotation and bullpen essentially known if not who fits where, and the likelihood that a new manager will be filling out the lineup card next year. Paulie C sees one big question mark though. Who will be the Indians third baseman next season? Jhonny Peralta? Andy Marte? Or someone not currently on the roster? Paulie opines ...

The roster for 2010 certainly looks at this point to be shaping up - with the majority of the lineup spoken for (with a big question coming as to who's going to be holding a place for Carlos Santana when he's ready at C), the principals that figure into the rotation and bullpen essentially known if not who fits where, and the likelihood that a new manager will be filling out the lineup card next year.

As the situation gets clearer in most spots though, one is definitely seeing the introduction of shades of gray, with more brushstrokes clouding the picture by the day. I speak of course, as to who will be playing 3B for the Indians next year. When the Indians finally made the shift in their infield to move Jhonny to 3B, it was generally assumed that he would stay there at least until the end of his contract, with the guaranteed portion of his contract ($4.6M remaining) ending after 2010. The question as to whether his 2011 team option (for $7M with a $250K buyout) would be picked up looked to be one for a day far in the future, if only because it was assumed that no feasible alternative existed internally for the Indians at 3B for next year.

Then, Andy Marte started hitting in Columbus and kept hitting in Columbus...then Andy Marte started getting everyday playing time in Cleveland (albeit as a 1B) and kept hitting. Suddenly, the situation is not as cut-and-dry as one would have thought a few months ago as the presence of a viable internal option brings into question whether the Indians should pay Peralta $4.6M next year, given his inconsistencies as a hitter, his frustrating nature as a fielder, and the fact that a

more affordable alternative exists to take his place at 3B next year.

As it stands today, Peralta sits on a line of .275 BA / .335 OBP / .411 SLG / .743 OPS, a performance pretty much in line with what his career batting line looked like entering the season (.268 BA / ..335 OBP / .437 SLG / .771 OPS), and now at the age of 27, it's fair to assume that this basically is what Jhonny Peralta is as a hitter. He's streaky and while he found great success at a young age in MLB, he's never taken that next step into the elite, despite a few very good years in 2005 and 2008.

This year, Peralta has been moved out of his customary spot at SS, with the move to 3B coming after being told all winter that he would be playing SS. While the struggles of his early season (his OPS was .573 in early May) could be chalked up to the uncertainty of his situation, since he's moved to 3B full-time, he's posted a respectable .789 OPS over 93 games, batting clean-up for a good part of that stretch.

Would Peralta thrive similarly next year if he was given every indication that he would be playing 3B every day in 2010? Or would he continue to mire in the inconsistency that we've grown accustomed to with him as a player, subject to frustrating stretches most recently seen in the field on Wednesday night?

The questions that still plague Peralta, in terms of what can legitimately be expected of him given his contract status are made more important by the fact that Andy Marte now stands as a potential replacement - albeit a potential replacement about whom many more questions remain as to what can legitimately be expected from him in 2010 and beyond.

Before getting into the unknowns about Andy Marte, let's deal with the known factors - he was once a top prospect who has resurrected his career (this we all know) and, if you're looking at next year, it's inarguable that he is a capable defensive 3B who will make the league minimum this year.

But how does the Indians' organization feel about Marte as a hitter going forward?

Left unclaimed by 29 teams in the off-season and entering the 2009 season with a .603 career MLB OPS, he thrived in AAA (something he hadn't done since 2005 as a 21-year-old in the Braves' organization) to the tune of a .963 OPS for

Columbus, earning him a trip to Cleveland and ultimately a spot in the everyday lineup as a 1B. The opportunity is something that he has run with, albeit in a small sample size, posting a line of .340 BA / .353 OBP / .660 SLG / 1.013 OPS in the 13 games that he has started consecutively.

This, of course, may be a matter of Marte pulling a "Ben Francisco" by getting hot when called up, with the inevitable crash-and-burn back to reality just around the corner; but Marte's performance over the last three weeks has merited him a shot at a roster spot in 2010, and a pretty serious shot given the opportunities that currently abound within the organization. What role he is seen in remains the great unknown, as does the identity of the person who figures to be determining that role for Marte in 2010 - the manager.

The Indians face an interesting quandary at 3B and it's one that doesn't just affect Peralta and Marte as it would seem that the position occupied by Matt LaPorta would be directly affected by whether Peralta stays - meaning Marte presumably stays at 1B and LaPorta in LF - or goes - meaning Marte presumably moves to 3B and LaPorta moves to 1B. Beyond Vanilla Thunder (that's LaPorta) then, the waterfall rolls on with Michael Brantley likely coming into the mix at some point in 2010 as a potential LF and the thought that Jordan Brown could serve as a place-holder in LF or at 1B until the likes of Brantley and perhaps Weglarz are closer to being MLB-ready.

The decision on Peralta versus Marte is not as simple as some may paint it to simply jettison Peralta in favor of Marte to "see what he can do", if only because while 2010 represents a transitional year, going into the season without Peralta puts another young player (perhaps not quite ready for an everyday role) into the lineup and removes some of the "stability" that a relatively known quantity like Peralta provides. Removing Peralta from the lineup means that the most experienced player (assuming that Hafner could still be on the on-again-off-again playing time schedule and that Show Pack's arbitration number precludes him from the 2010 club) that figures into the everyday lineup past Sizemore is The BLC, he of the 288 career games.

While some may be clamoring for a complete page-turn in terms of the team, I suppose I'd fall more in line with the thought process that while Peralta no longer projects as a "core" member of this team, he still provides some semblance of stability and may actually grow into 3B at a salary that, while higher than that of Marte, certainly doesn't fall under the "albatross" category.

If Peralta thrives in his role as a 3B for the Indians in 2010 and the players who may need half of a season in AAA before being truly ready to contribute, the possibility of trading Peralta at next year's trading deadline exists with the idea that Marte could then slide over from 1B (unless Lonnie Chisenhall scoots through the system faster than we think...which is unlikely as he's more apt to follow the Carlos Santana path to the Bigs), making room for LaPorta at 1B and Brantley in LF in preparation for the year that the team is more likely to contend - 2011.

Ultimately, barring a "can't-miss-trade" that is unlikely to present itself this off-season, I'd keep Peralta into next year to see what "Jhonny the 3B" looks like with a full off-season to prepare himself for that role, leaving Marte at 1B to get everyday AB and LaPorta in LF, with a player like Jordan Brown or Gimenez serving as the back-up to both. If a decision is necessary on Peralta's trade value in July of next year (with his price tag for 2010 being cut substantially if he is moved), make that decision one that has become necessary because a young player has forced himself into the conversation (instead of ascending to MLB without arriving as a MLB-ready player) with the hopes that Peralta can keep the 3B seat warm for a little while longer, which is all the Indians really need him to do.