Now that the hoopla surrounding Thanksgiving has died down, let's cast our gaze back to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario where things have remained relatively quiet. While things figure to remain quiet most of the off-season, it is Sunday and it's time to bring in Paulie C to let loose on a Lazy Sunday that today focuses on the Indians pursuit of a utility infielder, Hector Rondon & David Huff, and whether or not the Indians should spend money on a free agent starting pitcher this offseason. And with that, we're off...

Now that the hoopla surrounding the Thanksgiving Day Parade (for the DiaperTribe, who loves him some Kermit) and Thanksgiving dinner (for me, who loves me some turkey and mashed) has died down, let's cast our gaze back to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario where things have remained relatively quiet. While things figure to remain quiet most of the off-season (as I'm not sure if you remember the way that the roster was already disassembled around mid-summer this past year with an eye past the 2010 season), it is Sunday and it's time to let loose on a Lazy One before I have to pull the Christmas decorations out of the attic. And with that, we're off...

First things first, as it seems as if the dream to bring a slick-fielding, albeit aging, middle infielder back to the North Coast has died, as John McDonald has re-signed with the Blue Jays for a whopping (at least for Johnny Mac, given his skill set) 2-year, $3M deal.

What do you mean, that's not who you were thinking of when I mentioned a "slick-fielding, albeit aging, middle infielder" who recently signed with an AL team?

Oh, that other guy?

The one whose agent told the Indians that "the White Sox were a higher priority on his list" when they expressed interest in bringing him back?

That one who, with that message from his agent, made his "priorities" quite clear in terms of how he wanted to land with a "high-profile" club...and with those "priorities" obviously not including a return trip to Cleveland unless he was unwanted by a divisional rival, likely among others?

As deep as the hope runs for a return to the glory of the 1990's by the populace of the North Coast, it would certainly seem that the nostalgic feeling does not extend to Little O for one last swan song in Cleveland, at least at the expense of his personal goals. For those fans still intent on signing a middle infielder with ties to the past, maybe the Indians can still sign Alex Cora...whose 2009 numbers were comparable to those of Vizquel
.

Moving on from the past (please?) and in terms of creating some new memories (although memories that may not come for a few years yet), yet another Top 10 prospect list comes flying at us, this time from The Hardball Times , with Carlos Santana (not surprisingly) at the top of the list and THT touting him as "one of the top 10 prospects in all of baseball"...which is not too bad for half of a season of ol' Lacey Cake.

Other nuggets of insight that emerge from the list are the ideas that The Chiz has "a good chance to be an above average major league third baseman. An All-Star, though, may be stretching it" and that "it may take some time for (Mike) Brantley to produce like a lead-off hitter at the major league level, though, as I think he is destined for an up and down early career. Stay patient". THT is high on some of the power arms the Indians got this past year, although interestingly Jason Knapp (#4) and Alex White (#5) are listed...but Nick Hagadone is not.

On the pitching end, THT also diverts a bit from some of the lists that have already come out, most notably Kevin Goldstein's recent list at B-Pro , in that THT is extremely high on Hector Rondon describing him as such:

Rondon's electric four-pitch arsenal is the envy of minor league baseball, but his tendency to lose focus and leave pitches up and over the plate will need to be remedied if he is going to succeed against major league hitting. His questionable endurance could be to blame in late innings. He is very good, but not a perfect prospect.

The feelings on Rondon intrigue me not only in terms of Rondon as a pitching prospect, but how his promise without fruition at the MLB level to date (while certainly not his fault) is a great indicator of what the 2010 Indians' pitching staff is going to look like. As a bit of an introduction to that, take a look at these two compilations (that I think I've already posted but want to do so again in light of THT's high opinion of Rondon) in recent years by highly-thought-of pitching prospects:

Hector Rondon - 2009 - AA/AAA - 146 1/3 IP over 27 games

3.38 ERA, 1.18 WHIP, 8.4 K/9, 1.8 BB/9, 4.72 K/BB, 0.7 HR/9

Dave Huff - 2008 - AA/AAA - 146 1/3 IP over 27 games

2.52 ERA, 0.96 WHIP, 8.8 K/9, 1.8 BB/9, 4.93 K/BB, 0.8 HR/9

Seriously, the game and inning total is identical for the two...

Of course, there is the obvious age discrepancy as Rondon was 21 when he put up that line this past year while Huff was 23, but Rondon had thrown 333 2/3 innings over the previous 3 years in the Indians' organization while Huff had notched only 67 1/3 innings in his previous 2 years after being a 1st Round Pick out of UCLA. The entrance of the organization for each player (Rondon as an International FA, Huff as a Draft Pick coming out of college) plays a role in the age difference, but if those two arms that put up those two seasons at the upper levels of the Minors are in the Indians' organization, shouldn't the focus be on parlaying the success of the two seasons shown above to MLB success above all other priorities in an attempt to contend in 2011?

Obviously, Huff's 2009 was uneven and his bizarre comments that "strikeouts are boring" are more than a little unsettling (particularly when you consider that he WAS able to rack up K's in the Minors) as missing bats is certainly preferable to relying on defense and luck. But the idea that these two players likely fit into the 2011 rotation is where I'm going with this, as where they fit in that rotation remains to be seen and determining where they fit are the EXACT answers that the Indians need to find as the determine how the 2010 MLB innings are going to be doled out, particularly in light of the growing belief that the Indians need to add another arm to the rotational mix.

Maybe Huff is simply a middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation starter and nothing more (just like Laffey and even Sowers), but as a quick reminder, those middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation starters (particularly when coming cheap and under club control) is precisely what this Indians team needs to find to fill out their rotation and to do so within a budget. If the stretch runs of 2005 and 2007 provided us any lessons, it was that strong starting pitching makes winning much easier, and that the importance of the starters in the middle to back end of the rotation were just as important as those cogs at the top. Once the playoffs begin, that becomes another story, where dominant top-end starters are the desired commodity, but the Indians won the 2007 title because of the contributions of Westbrook (once he was healthy), Byrd, and Laffey (don't forget that the Indians got this from their 5th starter down the stretch ...who was not named CP Lee), just as much as the dominance that came from CC and Fausto at the top of the rotation.

Don't get me wrong, top-of-the-rotation arms make winning much easier for an organization (though apparently not all that easy if you look at what the Tribe did with CC and Lee in their rotations during the first halves of the past two years), but the depth of arms that seems to be on the cusp of contributing is vital to the long-term prospects of the team, even if it is just as starters #3 to #7. If one of the young arms (like a Rondon or a Huff or even a Masterson) develops into an ace or even a #2, that's marvelous; but these young players (Huff, Laffey, Masterson, Sowers, Carrasco, Rondon, etc.) should be getting every inning available in 2010 that doesn't go to hopefully establishing some mid-July trade value for Jake Westbrook or rescuing Fausto Carmona from the "Pool of Regression" that has enveloped him since Game 6 of the 2007 ALCS.

Maybe the Indians are thinking of shuttling these guys back and forth between Columbus and Cleveland (as only Carmona and Sowers are out of options), but the point of finding a guy to take innings away from an arm that legitimately figures into plans beyond 2010 accomplishes what exactly?

Essentially, this organization doesn't need middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation options to appear from the FA market or via trades this off-season as they look to be flush with internal options to play those roles. Instead they need to find that front-end stud (or studs) that anchors the staff and gives the team a chance to win every five days, and that answer isn't going to come on the FA market in this economic structure. Where those arms are eventually going to emerge from within the organization is frankly a more pertinent matter (even for today) than how the

team is going to divvy up innings for 2010.

That development of a legitimate frontline starter is another topic for another day and maybe two of the arms they added (Hagadone and Knapp) represent "a pair of pitchers who throw 100 mph; extremely projectable arms" as Ross Atkins said, but Hagadone and Knapp have thrown a combined ZERO innings in AA or above, so we're not exactly looking at "knocking at the doorstep" aces here, and simply potential aces at that as more can go wrong than can go right between Kinston and Cleveland than even Atom Miller (among others) would like to admit.

It's probably pie-in-the-sky thinking, but wouldn't it make much more sense to wait to spend any available money on a starter next off-season when the pickings are far from slim and when questions have been answered about the existing internal options in 2010? Wouldn't the idea that Westbrook and Wood (please, can we not let that option vest) being off of the books help in even entertaining the idea that an arm from the stacked 2011 FA class of starting pitchers makes much more sense? By no means is this putting forth the idea that Felix Hernandez, Justin Verlander, Edwin Jackson, Josh Johnson, Wandy Rodriguez, or Zach Duke would be coming to the North Coast this time next year, but wouldn't the idea of NOT spending unnecessarily on an arm this off-season and "spending when the time was right" hold much more water?

Obviously, the eventual need for a frontline starter is there (though the Twins won the 2009 AL Central with one starter with an ERA+ over 100) and that need is still painfully obvious in the organization; but where does the idea that an arm needs to be added this off-season come from, particularly given the landscape of the FA market for starters?

On that FA market for rotational options, Eric Seidman at Baseball Prospectus has a terrific primer on the Free Agent starter pool as the intro alone can attest:

If this year's free-agent crop of starting pitchers were a graduating high school class, their prom theme would have to be "Risk and Reward." Having passed the November 20th commencement ceremony, after which members of the class can be hired by prospective employers, one market aspect has become

increasingly clear. Aside from valedictorian John Lackey, the student body consists of one of two types: either the troublemaker with the potential to achieve, or the consistent yet unnoticed pupil whose lack of flakiness tends to overrate his attributes in relation to the former archetype. Essentially, teams are going to dole out lucrative contracts to mid-pack starters, else they decide to diversify their risk amongst those voted "most likely to spend time on the disabled list," signing a couple to incentive-laden contracts in the hopes that at least one will pan out and reach his potential.

The piece is pay content, but the "Risk and Reward" idea is what should immediately give you the idea that this isn't the avenue for the Indians to explore (this off-season at least) as it divides some of the available arms in the FA starting pool into very definitive classes. From Joel Piniero to Rich Harden to Doug Davis to Jon Garland to Jarrod Washburn, all of the pitchers below Lackey come with their warts (and even Lackey isn't wart-free), and none jumps out as fitting the description that Acta used in his desire for another veteran starter which was "You have to bring the right guy. We're not bringing a veteran guy just to bring him...We're going to be very careful that we're not going to block the progress of these young guys."

Because most of these options would look like a "guy" to me, not "the right guy"...and even if that "right guy" was out there, what is the cost associated with bringing that "right guy" into the fold?

For that, we go to the more definitive piece from Baseball Prospectus , this time from Joe Sheehan, who takes a stab at some of the dollars that will be doled out to the arms, guessing that a guy like Doug Davis gets 2 years and $16M and that Jarrod Washburn gets 3 years and $30M.

That would be the same Doug Davis that has posted a cumulative ERA+ of 110 over the past three years in Arizona, with a cumulative WHIP of 1.54 and a K/BB of 1.53 in those three years in the desert...2 years, $16M for a mediocre innings-eater. And the same Jarrod Washburn that had an ERA+ of 96 with a K/BB of 1.77 in his first three years in Seattle and who posted a 7.33 ERA and a 1.56 WHIP in the 8 starts for Detroit after he was traded to the Motor City. So that's a guess of 3 years and $30M for Washburn because he had a good 20 starts to start the 2009 season in his contract year in the Emerald City.

If you think that the Indians would spend that type of money, you weren't paying

attention when the Indians traded Cliff Lee and his $9M option for 2010 in the middle of this season because they didn't think that the team, as presently constructed, would compete WITH CLIFF LEE at the top of the rotation. Thus, if you think that signing one of these lesser lights for comparable money as a downgrade from CP Lee at the top of the rotation and that it would be money well-spent, well...

If you really want a veteran presence on the rotation, pray for Jake Westbrook's health during this holiday season, because if you're looking for someone to sit near the top of the rotation and give 200+ innings and put up an ERA of 4.00 or thereabouts, on the open FA market that's going to cost you about what Cliff Lee's going to cost the Phillies in 2010. Debate away as to whether Lee should have been moved, but the Indians moved Lee and essentially punted on 2010 when they did so, acknowledging that the team (again, WITH LEE) was no shoo-in to compete in 2010 because of their pitching, even in the weak AL Central.

If Westbrook is nowhere near ready by the start of Spring Training (and he made his first start in Puerto Rico last night, giving up 3 hits and 1 walk with 1 earned run and no strikeouts in 1 2/3 innings for Ponce), perhaps at that point the consideration is made to add an arm; but again...who and at what cost?

Every team needs starting pitching and that's why if you're going off of Matthew Pouliat's "predictions" what starting pitchers are going to get in the open market
, you're looking at pitchers like Carl Pavano and Jon Garland receiving contracts in the $7M per year range. That would be $2M less than the Indians were on the hook for in the Lee option, so explain to me how the Indians are going to upgrade their starting pitching with a legitimate veteran option that isn't going to cost an amount that isn't that far off from what they owed Lee for 2010.

Sure, there are guys that could be reclamation project options like Kelvim Escobar, Noah Lowry, and their ilk, but if the Indians are signing one of those guys, it's on a one-year, incentive-laden deal in which the best case scenario is for a replay of Carl Pavano's 2009, where you can flip that production into a semi-useful Minor-League player. That semi-useful player that the Indians netted for Pavano (goes by the name of Yohan Pino) may not be long for the organization as he was left exposed for the Rule 5 Draft, a topic that Crawfish Boxes (a Houston Astros' blog) delves into
, specifically touching on Pino and a couple of other Indian arms that may be

attractive to other clubs.

Are you starting to see how this thing isn't being built for 2010?

How the middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation options are supposed to use 2009 to separate themselves from each other, so when 2011 arrives (and contention is closer to being a reality) the Indians can have a better idea of what they have in Masterson, Huff, Laffey, Rondon, Sowers, Carrasco, and the like so they can make their moves NEXT off-season?

Adding an "inning-eater" or a pitcher to take innings away from being able to make those educated evaluations on all of the aforementioned names simply lengthens the timeframe as to when those arms are ready to contribute at a legitimate MLB level. For some of them, maybe that time to "contribute at a legitimate MLB level" is never, but wouldn't 2010 be a pretty good year to find out, given that their internal, legitimate front-of-the-rotation options figure to be at least a year away from even knocking on the door?

Perhaps everything goes right for the team and the young starting pitching steps in and contributes immediately to a suddenly winning ballclub; but the organization certainly didn't think that the pieces were in place WITH Lee and Victor added to the current mix of players to contend in 2010. Without question, the Indians need to add frontline pitching at or near the MLB level to their organizational mix, that time is just not now...and that arm is just not a veteran inning-eater who prevents the answers that need to be clear when 2010 is over.

Moving on from the pitchers for 2010, the only marginally relevant news coming from the Indians is the announcement that Torey Lovullo will leave the organization to become the Red Sox AAA manager in Pawtucket for the 2010 season. Lovullo described his feelings on the situation thusly:

It was a great relationship and it will continue to be. There's no bitterness, no resentment. There is a little disappointment. We're all competitive, we all wanted the position...I'll miss the staff members I got to know daily in spring training. I'll miss my relationship with the players that I've watched grow up over the last three to seven years. It's time to open my eyes to a new direction...It's unfortunate I didn't get a couple of opportunities that presented themselves with the Indians. Now I've got a different opportunity with a great organization in the Boston Red Sox.

The move was not a surprise at all, particularly in the wake of Steve Smith being named the Third Base Coach and Infield Coach, which is where Lovullo's natural fit on the 2010 staff looked to be, if there was one. You would have to imagine that Lovullo felt, after being passed over for the managerial position (not that he was ever a serious contender) AND as a coach on the staff that he could read the tea leaves telling him that the organization was going to likely ask him to return to manage their AAA affiliate for the fifth year. With an organization that saw a significant coaching shake-up and with him remaining in the same upper-level-of-the-minors managerial job, a change was obviously in his best interests unless he REALLY enjoyed the greater Columbus area. Since it seems that the beauty of Central Ohio was not enough to keep him in the organization, perhaps he'll enjoy sipping upon some Pawtucket Patriot Ale in his new office.

In light of all of this pitching talk, maybe I'll finally get a start on continuing the "Forward Thinking" series that started in earnest...oh, a couple of months ago. Until then, think of me as I trudge up and down the rickety ladder that leads to my attic and the giant Rubbermaid containers that hold all of the Christmas items that figure to be strewn about the Reservation at some point later today.