Since pitchers and catchers have now reported to Goodyear and are preparing themselves for Spring Training, let's finally put a nice little bow on this series that examines the most important (and most volatile) part of the 2010 team – the starting rotation. Having examined the troika that are all but certain to break camp with the team (assuming health) in Westbrook, Carmona, and Masterson, the duo that has proven themselves to be worthy of a long look in 2010 in Huff and Laffey, and the duo that figures to be the first legitimate replacements from AAA in Carrasco and Rondon, let's close this thing out by examining the trio that need to stick on the 25-man roster this year (because of options remaining or Rule 5 machinations) and thus could find themselves starting games for the 2010 Indians, but represent little more than depth options or even inning-eating arms on a team that may be in dire need of eaten innings.

The trio that enters 2010 either are out of options or as Rule 5 draftees, meaning that they have to stay on the 25-man roster, will finish off the "Ten Little Indians" series here as today's magnifying glass is placed over Jeremy Sowers, Mitch Talbot, and Hector Ambriz. Their inclusion wraps this thing up and, while you can argue that Ambriz projects as more of a reliever (or at least that the Indians took him in the Rule 5 with that idea in mind), I'm trying to examine pitchers that legitimately figure into the 2010 rotational mix, even if you're talking about a spot start here or there. I suppose you can throw a couple of other names on top of those 10 if you really want like Yohan Pino (acquired for Hot Carl Pavano, though not on the 40-man) or Rafael Perez, whom Manny Acta suggested may start at some point this season depending upon inning counts, but Sowers, Talbot, and Ambriz all figure into the mix right out of the gate for the Indians either as rotational options, as long relievers, or as spot starters.

Starting off with the player that is most familiar on the North Coast, we all know about Sowers and his difficulty with multiple times through the lineup in 2010, but in the interest of attempting

to find a role for Sowers this year, let's relive the carnage once more while attempting to determine if the issue was unique to last year:

Jeremy Sowers – 2009

1st Time Facing - .576 OPS
2nd Time Facing - .806 OPS
3rd Time Facing – 1.014 OPS

Jeremy Sowers – Career

1st Time Facing - .703 OPS
2nd Time Facing - .838 OPS
3rd Time Facing – .755 OPS

So, maybe the issue with Sowers is not necessarily tied to how many times certain batters face him and maybe the shoulder issues that are just now seeing the light of day had something to do with it. As much as those 2009 numbers suggested that maybe a salvageable reliever (even a LOOGY) could be made out of Sowers, perhaps that simply was a by-product of an injury last year.

If that "times through the lineup" thing (which was the impetus for my "move Sowers to the bullpen" crusade last year) may not the issue with Sowers, here's one – Sowers has now thrown 400 MLB innings and has posted a cumulative line of 5.18 ERA, 84 ERA+, 1.44 WHIP, with peripherals of a 3.9 K/9 rate and a 1.32 K/BB rate. Take out his 2006 numbers (remember, back when Jeremy Sowers' future looked bright) and the numbers that he's put up over the last 3 years (5.63 ERA, 1.51 WHIP, 76 ERA+ over 311 2/3 IP from 2007 to 2009) show that Jeremy Sowers is what he is…and it's not a legitimate MLB starting pitcher.

The troubling thing about Sowers is that his skill level appears to be above AAA as he's compiled a 2.60 ERA, and a 1.17 WHIP with 6.7 K/9 and 3.09 K/BB rates in his 297 2/3 innings in AAA. Seeing as how Sowers has thrown MORE innings in MLB than he has in AA and AAA combined, what you see at this point is what you get for Sowers, who turns 27 this May.

That's not to say that Sowers is worthless to the team as he can still contribute some innings to this team, as long as there's not an expectation that Sowers is anything more than what he's proven himself to be over 400 innings. Given that, the idea of giving Sowers that "one last chance" at a rotation spot doesn't hold a lot of water as he's best suited to play the role of long reliever/spot starter for this team as essentially a depth bullpen option to eat up some innings for the team, particularly early in the season as the assumed starting five attempt to settle in. That idea then of his ability to "contribute some innings" really equates closer to just eating up innings, likely in losses that the starting pitcher gets chased early, not that those contributions are going to be unneeded in 2010.

Now, with the news that Sowers will be "a couple of weeks behind his fellow pitchers in camp" because of "left shoulder inflammation", the possibility for him to fill that role might be more

muddied and it would seem that Sowers is likely to start the season on the DL, if only to stash him somewhere to start the season. It's possible that he may take the "Andy Marte 2009 Path" of getting DFA'd at the end, only to find himself back in the Columbus rotation for a rainy day in Cleveland or maybe the Indians explore a trade with him at the end of Spring Training to in an attempt to get something for the former 1st Round Pick.

Ultimately though, the body of work is there with Sowers in MLB and seeing as how a long reliever/spot starter without options handcuffs the team in terms of roster flexibility, the Indians shouldn't go out of their way to attempt to find answers on Sowers that already appear to exist.

If the issue with Sowers being out of options has to do with the fact that he's had an opportunity to pitch significant innings in MLB and has failed to distinguish himself, the issue with Mitch Talbot is that he's thrown 905 innings in MiLB (to the overall tune of a 3.79 ERA and a 1.30 WHIP) but only 9 2/3 innings in the Big Leagues.

Yes…9 2/3 innings is the basis on which the Indians have to determine how Talbot's stuff relates to MLB pitching after putting up a composite 4.23 ERA and a 1.36 WHIP with a 7.4 K/9 rate and a 2.82 K/BB rate in his 376 1/3 innings in AAA throughout his career in the Tampa organization.

As for putting some context around those AAA numbers, how about comparing them to the cumulative lines for Talbot, Laffey, and Huff with their ages:

Talbot (turning 27 this October) – Career AAA stats
4.23 ERA, 1.36 WHIP, 7.4 K/9, 2.82 K/BB in 376 1/3 IP over 67 starts

Laffey (turning 25 this April) – Career AAA stats
4.06 ERA, 1.35 WHIP, 6.7 K/9, 2.74 K/BB in 168 1/3 IP over 29 starts

Huff (turning 26 this August) – Career AAA stats
3.45 ERA, 1.12 WHIP, 8.5 K/9, 3.65 K/BB in 120 IP over 23 starts

While Talbot and Laffey seem to exist in the same universe (and Huff's numbers make it look like one of those Sesame Street "which of these things is not like the others), let's remember that Laffey has thrown 264 2/3 innings in MLB with an ERA+ of 98, meaning that he (a year and a half younger than Talbot) has succeeded to some degree past AAA, with the adjustments to MLB already in process. Against that, consider again that Talbot has 9 2/3 MLB innings on his resume and those innings came in 2008.

Remember, age and level of development is important here, so…really, is there logical thought that puts Talbot in the rotation instead of Laffey or Huff to see what he's got, simply because he's out of options?

Why should Aaron Laffey be the long man or why should Dave Huff start the season in AAA to accommodate this guy…simply because he's out of options?

If you want a long reliever/swing man on this team (and I want two…but I'll get to that), make Talbot the long reliever/swing man on the team or make him compete for it with Sowers (assuming he's healthy) and Ambriz instead of bouncing Laffey and Huff around to see if Talbot has anything to contribute at the MLB level by giving him the opportunity every 5th day that should be afforded to Laffey and Huff (at least) ahead of him.

One of the starting options (if you can really even call him that) behind Talbot would be Hector Ambriz, the Rule 5 draftee from Arizona who the Indians are attempting to transition into the bullpen as a reliever. While this transition begins in earnest this Spring, 79 of the 83 games he pitched in over the last three years have come as a starter. While the bullpen may be where his future lies, if Ambriz is used to starting and the Indians have a compelling reason to expose him to MLB hitters as much as possible to see if he can stick on the 25-man roster because of his status as a Rule 5 draftee, then long relief might be a good place to start to see how his stuff holds up against MLB hitters. Like Sowers and Talbot, Ambriz needs to make the 25-man roster out of Spring Training and needs to stick with the team, so if the Indians need an answer on his talent (or his ability to pitch out of the bullpen), let that happen in the long relief role.

To that end, considering the out-of-options/Rule 5 issues, that's where starting the season with Talbot and Ambriz makes sense in that they should be given the first shot to succeed on the Indians before a decision is made on them. That "first shot" though doesn't need to come in the rotation and it should come instead as a long man and a middle reliever while providing a spot start here and there. Make Sowers and Talbot work THEIR way into the rotational plans (or, in Ambriz's case, the bullpen plans) by thriving as the long man rather than giving them a spot in the rotation from the get-go and making Aaron Laffey attempt to yo-yo between starting and relieving…because he's already done that.

An even more important factor in allowing Talbot and Ambriz (and I'm using those two because I think Sowers' injury just created the reason for him to start the season on the DL) is that the Indians look to have a rotation that's full of question marks, which means that there could be more than a few innings to mop up, particularly in the early going. If you think about it, maybe that's what the Indians are stocking up on in the form of Talbot and Ambriz, plus Jamey Wright and Saul Rivera and Jason Grilli…that mop-up guy. It was a revelation that was prompted by B-Pro's Christina Kahrl's comment on Jamey Wright getting a minor-league contract from the Indians that "there's some form of sports heroism due credit for an ability to sustain oneself as a mid-game sponge, mopping up after early exits or finishing games with well-nigh unbeatable leads."

While I'm not sure that "sports heroism" is exactly the term I would use, let's figure that the top 5 of the bullpen is probably going to look something like this – Wood, Perez, Smith, Perez, and Sipp – meaning that there are likely 2 spots in play here. Unless you want to see guys like Sipp and Smith loading up on innings in May and June, having those (for lack of a better term) "mop-up guys" around on the roster that, very frankly, you really aren't concerned about burning out protect arms like Sipp and Smith. If one of those "mop-up guys" turns into something more or succeeds – great…but otherwise, maybe Talbot and Ambriz are just the first two arms that are on the roster to protect the bullpen from overwork and to eat up some innings if Carmona or Masterson or Laffey…hell, if anybody in the rotation comes out after 2 or 3 innings of work.

There's not much question that there exists the possibility that there are going to be A LOT of innings for the bullpen to eat up, particularly to start the year, so if you prefer to see Rafael Perez face mainly LH hitters as he attempts to re-capture his former dominance and would prefer to see Joe Smith face mainly RH hitters because that's how he's most effectively used, then a the roster spot (or spots) that Sowers, Talbot, and Ambriz are going to be given first crack at become obvious.

If you really want to talk about a "Spring Training Battle", forget the starting rotation "battle" and slide Sowers, Talbot, and Ambriz into a competition to for two spots as long-men/middle relievers out of the gate, stockpiling relievers that retain options (Jesse Ray Todd and Jen Lewis most notably) or are in camp on minor league deals (Wright, Rivera, Gosling and Grilli) in the Columbus bullpen to be first in line to eat more innings or wait for a more substantial bullpen role (mainly in the case of Todd) to open up.

That "Spring Training Battle" then doesn't really ever have to materialize as Sowers' injury seems to be tailor-made for the Indians to allow Talbot and Ambriz to make the team out of Goodyear, with Sowers going to the DL then on rehab assignments where he would join the likes of Jamey Wright, Saul Rivera, and Jason Grilli as inning-eating long man options in May or June or July or whenever.

At the end of the day (and realizing that it's not even March), this is how I'd break camp from Goodyear:

Rotation

Westbrook
Carmona
Masterson
Huff
Laffey

Bullpen

Wood
Perez
Smith
Perez
Sipp
Talbot
Ambriz

If this is what the Opening Day pitching staff looks like, Sowers starts the season on the DL, then slides into AAA (on a series of rehab assignments) to enter the mix with Wright, Rivera, Grilli, and maybe even Yohan Pino to eat those innings from the spots initially filled by Talbot and Ambriz. Guys like Jensen Lewis and Jesse Ray Todd go to Columbus to be ready for the day when (not if) one of the first 5 names on the Bullpen list get hurt or need some time outside

of Cleveland.

And with that series (finally) out of the way and over 9,000 words having been written about the Indians' starting rotation in 2010, let's all give thanks that the first full squad workout is scheduled for Friday, if only so the discussion can turn to actual events and not simply the conjecture and projection that has kept us sane (more or less) all winter long.