On a day that looks like the snow may have finally stopped and when it really doesn't matter because USA-Canada isn't allowing anyone to leave the house this afternoon, let's get right off on a Lazy Sunday to hit on the high (and not so high) points having to do with YOUR Cleveland Indians…

The news that caused the biggest stir of the past few days is Manny Acta's declaration that Grady Sizemore's going to be moved down in the lineup. While I'll spare you the link to the PD story (your time does mean something here), where the cause of the "Indians' once-powerful lineup" being "reduced to a moth-eaten T-Shirt at an Army surplus store" is chalked up to the departure of "Victor Martinez, Mark DeRosa, Ryan Garko, Ben Francisco, and Casey Blake".

No seriously, the "reason" being given as to why the Indians find themselves no longer able to field a "powerful lineup" is that DeRosa (here for ½ of a season), Garko (attempting to platoon at 1B in Seattle, where he may actually catch because they don't know what to do with him), Francisco (a 4th OF in Philly…which he always should have been in Cleveland), and Blake (wildly unappreciated while in Cleveland and turned into Carlos Santana) are not in the lower portions of the "Indians' once-powerful lineup".

Complaining about the Indians' performance and decisions over the past two years is one thing, failing to use logic or even offer compelling examples that mistakes have been made are quite another…

But I digress, as we move back to the news that Grady's moving down the #2 hole , so if lineup construction is a point of contention, have at it…I'm not really not all that concerned about where these guys hit (as long as there's an ounce of logic beyond it), so it doesn't register as earth-shattering for me as it may for some.

Just for some background here, more than a few years ago, Tom Tango (and others) attempted to quantify the importance of batting lineups and optimize them, throwing out the conventional wisdom at each position in the process. Last year, Sky Kalkman at Beyond the Boxscore attempted to summarize those conclusions, to quantify and put some hard ideas together as to what each hitter in the lineup should ideally contribute. Here's what Kalkman asserts that the #2 hitter in the lineup should be :

The #2 hitter comes to bat in situations about as important as the #3 hitter, but more often. That means the #2 hitter should be better than the #3 guy, and one of the best three hitters overall. And since he bats with the bases empty more often than the hitters behind him, he should be a high-OBP player.

Sounds like Sizemore, if you're looking at the Indians' roster, right?

If the idea is to see the leadoff hitter and the #2 hitter get on base, both Cabrera and Sizemore fit that bill, regardless of where they hit:

Cabrera
Career OBP - .355
Projected OBP (PECOTA) 2010 – .366

Sizemore
Career OBP - .367
Projected OBP (PECOTA) 2010 – .389

It will be interesting to see how Acta handles the left-handedness behind Sizemore at #2 in the lineup as Choo (who has been the team's best hitter for the last 2 years) and Hafner and Branyan all likely factor in somewhere between #3 and #6, assuming all are healthy and in the lineup. However, this news does come in February and it will be interesting to see how Acta's lineup evolves throughout the season, and not just in the #2 hole in the lineup.
In the midst of a number of topics (none of them very compelling and nearly all of them depressing), Paul Hoynes drops a couple of notes that actually mean more for the team than how much Manny Acta likes John Wooden and how The Sporting News (which I was surprised to learn was still in print) picked the Indians to be the worst team in MLB. Before getting to the points of interest and just to put a yin to the prediction of The Sporting News' yang, it should be noted that the new PECOTA projections have the Indians finishing at 79-83, tied for 3rd with the Tigers and 2 games back out of 1st place the Central and
CHONE's most recent projections

have the Indians finishing at 82-80, 2nd in the division, 4 games back in the Central.

But back to the interesting nugget in Hoynes' piece as he notes that "Jeremy Sowers (left shoulder), who threw a bullpen session Friday, could get into a Cactus League game before the end of spring training".

Wait, we went from JUST finding out that Sowers had a sore shoulder earlier in the week to (assuming it's accurate) reading that "Sowers COULD get into a Cactus League game before the end of Spring Training"?

Is that to say that there's no guarantee that he's even going to be ready to play in a Cactus League game all Spring? Remember that whole idea from Acta that he wanted to have his team essentially set a week to ten days before the end of Spring Training to see if it would result in a better start in 2010?

If Sowers "could" (nothing more) see some time in a Cactus League game and Acta wants to have his team in place a couple of week before camp ends to give the team some level of consistency in the hope that a better start is possible, what chances do you think Sowers has of breaking camp with the team…2%...5%?

Not that it's going to be a surprise (as I guessed this last week), but that news (again, assuming it's accurate) would certainly point to Sowers heading to the DL to start the season, likely heading off to some rehab assignments after that, allowing the Indians to filter through Mitch Talbot and Hector Ambriz (who would need to break camp with the team) while Sowers can be stashed on the DL and in the Minors until a roster decision is forced on the team when (or is it suddenly "if") Sowers gets healthy.

The second little bit that Hoynes mentions in passing at the end of the piece is that "Acta said second base is 'Luis Valbuena's job to lose'"
and while that doesn't come as a surprise either (even after the flirtations with Orlando Hudson fell short in the off-season), the Valbuena situation will be an interesting one to watch as it relates to the way the Indians use him and manage his service time. Acta came out earlier in the Spring to say that,
"we're not in the business of developing platoon players at 23 years old"
in that it looks as if the Indians don't have an interest in protecting Valbuena against LHP in the early going, but that doesn't mean that he's likely to remain the 2B (or even on the roster) the whole season.

The reason for that would be the service time issue alluded to above, which is something that Tony Lastoria and I touched on in this week's edition of "Smoke Signals" , when we discussed the infield and welcomed Jason Kipnis, the Indians' 2nd Round Pick from last year, to the show to talk about his transition from college OF to MiLB 2B.

To that end, Tony actually wrote a must-read service time piece that he posted as it related to the likely demotion of Mike Brantley to AAA to start the season, but here's what Tony relates about Valbuena, who has 1.012 days on MLB on his service clock:

Sending down Valbuena…to Columbus for a month at some point in the season is not a stretch as he has options remaining. While the reason would be more to get looks at other guys, it would also offer an excuse to align his service clock to where Valbuena finishes the year with under two years of service time…to essentially add another year of control to him.

If you're confused by that, Cot's Baseball Contracts has a spreadsheet available that shows the service time of all Indians' players which is extremely informative, particularly when partnered with the explanation of Tony's service-time article. Looking at both give you a great idea as to what roster moves could be in play in 2010, particularly in the case of Valbuena.

Before jumping out and asserting that this is the latest example of the Indians' frugality, realize that this in not a practice that's unique to Cleveland, as Tom Verducci relates in this week's print edition of SI . Essentially, the pattern is that a top prospect going into this season doesn't figure to get promoted until late May or so because of this service-time issue and how waiting equates to avoiding a year of arbitration and (as Tony states) an extra year of player control, at a time when the player should wildly more productive than when they are first promoted. Verducci explains the benefits of the practice, while mentioning some recent examples of non-Indians thusly:

One way for clubs to save millions on their best young players is to delay the start of their major league service clocks until at least late May, which generally leaves players with three cracks at arbitration down the road instead of four. Four impact rookies last season were promoted 10 days apart, beginning on May 29: Orioles catcher Matt Wieters, White Sox third baseman Gordon Beckham, Pirates outfielder Andrew McCutcheon and Braves righthander Tommy Hanson.

There's more than meets the eye here and baseball decisions do not always dictate the timing of when these young players spend time on the parent club and Brantley and Valbuena (and likely Carlos Santana) are going to be examples of the Indians managing service time for young players in 2010 with the idea that they retain control over the player for one more season, instead of seeing them hit FA as a 28-year-old because they spent two weeks on the MLB roster as a 22-year-old when they could have spent time in AAA.

Of course, the other way that teams manage the salaries of young players is to avoid arbitration from year to year, extending young players with long-term deals before arbitration with the promise of financial security.

It was thought that this practice (used with players from Sabathia to Sizemore to Carmona) was thought to have the next two targets this Spring in Asdrubal Cabrera and The BLC. However (and just to illustrate how important the management of service time truly is), the idea that SS Choo remains a candidate for a long-term extension, buying out his upcoming arbitration years (2011, 2012, and 2013) just took an ENORMOUS hit as the news hit that Choo has hired Scott Boras as his agent .

Why is this "enormous"?

Mainly because Scott Boras has never had a client who chose to give a “hometown discount” in signing away his arbitration years (much less a year of Free Agency) for the security of a long-term deal, something that the Indians likely hoped to ink this Spring with Choo’s former agent Alan Nero, who signed a deal with Indians as Victor Martinez’s agent in 2005 and as Rafael Betancourt’s agent in 2008.
As a quick aside here, Nero remains Asdrubal’s agent…

Yes, Prince Fielder (a Boras client) signed a two-year deal with the Brewers, avoiding the arbitration process, but it didn’t come with any “hometown discount” and it certainly didn’t forfeit any of Fielder’s FA years, where Boras will be looking for a huge deal for Fielder on the open market. With Boras in the fold, it’s likely that the Indians are going to have to go from year-to-year with Choo contractually, facing off with Boras and his portfolio of data that says that only 6 players in MLB have outpaced Choo in the last 2 years in OPS (Pujols, Berkman, A-Rod, Teixeira, Youkilis, and Holliday) in all of MLB and ask for the moon in each arbitration year for The BLC. If I can find that out in a quick OPS search, what else do you think Boras is going to arm himself with to look for a huge amount of money for Choo in each of the three coming off-seasons?

Maybe Choo really does believe that he has the final say in making a decision on whether or not he wants to sign a deal that would keep him in Cleveland past 2013 (the final year before his FA at this point), as he said “I really want to stay long-term…I have good teammates here. A good team. Everything I like. I feel at home here. I like the Indians.”

However, the Indians like to sign players like Choo to long-term deals, if for no other reason than to set a known value on a player going forward and, with Boras in the equation, you would have to imagine that the salary situation for Choo and the Indians from 2011 to 2013 just got a lot cloudier.

Jumping off from the idea that Choo isn’t likely to settle for any type of financial security in the present at the expense of future earnings, take a look at what the Indians’ financial commitments of this team past the 2010 season, not taking into account the arbitration years of players like Choo, who (it should be noted) will be 31 going into his assumed Free Agency year of 2014.

Financial Commitments in 2011

Hafner - $13M
Sizemore - $7.667M
Carmona - $6.3M
Peralta - $250,000 buyout of 2010 option

This assumes that Wood’s vesting option does not vest (or it vests with him not on the Indians) as well as assuming that Peralta’s $7M club option for 2010 is bought out (hence the $250K on the list), but that’s your whole list…

Obviously, you have to add in the arbitration-eligible players (and Rafael Perez would be in his

second year of arbitration after agreeing to an $895K deal in his first year of arbitration), but here's the list of guys that figure to be arbitration-eligible after 2011:

Asdrubal Cabrera
SS Choo
Joe Smith
Jeremy Sowers
Jensen Lewis

Figure in that Cabrera is still going to be approached for a long-term deal (and just for comparison's sake, the first year of Sizemore's long-term deal was $500K) and that Sowers and Lewis become less valuable as their salary rises, meaning that they may not even be around once they hit arbitration, and the 2011 payroll number doesn't figure to be a huge amount of money.

The total of the financial commitments listed above is a little over $27M and even if the payroll drops to $50M (and I'm not saying that it will) in 2011, the Indians have about $14M less than that committed to the players assumed to be on the team in 2011. That being said, the true indication as to where this team is heading, in a payroll sense, is coming after this season and it's important to note what the Indians' total payroll looked like the first time they went through this rebuilding process:

2004 Payroll - $34,319,300
2005 Payroll - $41,502,500
2006 Payroll - $56,031,500

Where the 2011 Payroll goes is anyone's guess, but The BLC moving into Scott Boras' stable brings the idea that the service clock "manipulation" game that the Indians play is not in vain.

Moving on from the payroll situation and just to put the last few years into some proper context (a concept that generally eludes the beat writers for the papers), Kelly Shoppach is interviewed in the Boston Globe's Sunday Baseball Notes column . After a lead in the "Notes" that examines why 2009 went so poorly for the Rays (with many of the same reasons we saw sabotage the 2008 and 2009 seasons in Cleveland), Shoppach touched on the "exodus" in Cleveland where the blame lies:

Shoppach, traded to Tampa Bay this winter, was one of the last Indians purged in the latest rebuilding program. Watching his teammates leave was tough.

"I had a lot of friends walking out that door," he said. "First C.C. [Sabathia] and then Cliff, and when Victor left, it was very hard from a personal point of view. All I really knew in the big leagues was that staff and Victor."

But he understood the exodus.

"We had three years to win," he said. "They put a team out there that could win, and we didn't

get it done. We have nobody to blame but ourselves.''

After the disappointments of the last two years in Cleveland, and the moves that were made as a result of those disappointments, Shoppach's summary accurately puts the current state of MLB into proper context ("we had three years to win") as well as how the Indians lost despite a stable of talent that has now turned into young players that Indians' fans are left to hope can turn into another stable of talent…who hopefully have longer than "three years to win".

Such is life among the have-nots in Cleveland, where service time management and payroll control are as important as anything that happens on the field, and while that may be a bitter pill to swallow on a morning when the ground is covered in snow and ice, the coming events on the Olympic ice this afternoon should warm Americans everywhere, regardless of location.