Fully in the throes of Spring Training with baseball on TV and in the air, it's finally time to talk about some of the PERFORMANCES and not just the projections associated with the upcoming 2010 season. So, with that in mind (and my brother-in-law on his way over to rip out carpet), let's get it going on a Sunday that will be anything but Lazy for me:

Right off of the top, while the pickings are slim in terms of legitimate clues as to what the regular season holds from what is seen under the Arizona sun, Andrew Humphries of LGT has a list of things to watch in Spring Training . In the piece, most of Andrew's focus goes (not surprisingly) to the pitchers and what to expect from the likes of Masterson, Huff, Carrasco, and Carmona and whether anything can be gleaned from their performance in Goodyear, or even just one aspect of their performance. Regardless of whether any of the numbers in Spring mean anything, if you really want to make the attempt to wade through box scores to see what it means for 2010, the list put together at LGT is where my eyes will go when it's all said and done.

In fact, I'd say that the list put together – which casts an eye to Carmona's K/BB, Carrasco's H/9, Huff's K/9, Masterson's splits, and the power from LaPorta and Peralta (the only two RH potential power bats in the lineup) – would be what should be watched all season long, and not just in Spring Training as those six components of the team are going to determine how quickly this reload is going to take or how far away this team is from legitimately contending.

Since a part of the aforementioned piece relates to Fausto Carmona and what can legitimately be expected from him, is there a player that's more emblematic of where this team has gone in

the last 3 years?

Dominant in 2007, with a future that looked so endless and bright…
Injured and ineffective in 2008, with hopes tempered but still relatively high…
A train wreck in 2009 – with memories of a bright future being just that, memories…

Am I wrong to assert that those three descriptions sum up both Carmona and the Indians of the last three years?

As Carmona has gone, so have the Indians and at a time when "hope" is the buzzword of the Spring and because of where Carmona now finds himself, somewhere between frustrating and depressing. However, most forget that back in 2007, Carmona posted the 4th best season statistically (as measured by VORP) of any and all pitchers in MLB. All this at the tender age of 23 and with a sinking fastball that made Torii Hunter think that he was hung-over. The world was at Carmona's feet as he endeared himself to Tribe fans during the "Bug Game" and looked to be the reason that the inevitable loss of Sabathia wouldn't hurt the team too much as the front-of-the-rotation starter role looked to be Carmona's for the foreseeable future.

Since that time (and even before it), Carmona has been on a roller-coaster ride since he was promoted to the team in 2006, starting with his time as a dominant set-up man in his rookie year from the time when he went from a swing man to his ill-fated stint as closer and from his dominance at the top of the rotation to attempting to right himself on the fields of Goodyear during the 2009 season:

Carmona – The Set-Up Man (2006)

1.07 ERA, 1.18 WHIP, 8.75 K/9, 3.43 K/BB in 24 2/3 IP

Carmona – The Gas Can (2006)

16.39 E**RA, 3.00 WHIP, 8.67 K/9, 1.28 K/BB in 9 1/3 IP**

Carmona – The Ace-in-Waiting (2007)

3.06 ERA, 1.20 WHIP, 5.7 K/9, 2.25 K/BB in 215 IP

Carmona – The Enigma Wrapped in a Riddle (2008-2009)

5.89 ERA, 1.70 WHIP, 5.0 K/9, 0.98 K/BB in 246 IP

What happened here?

How did Carmona, who so famously pulled himself out of the closer-induced abyss of 2006 to become a bona-fide top-of-the-rotation fall off the cliff again so quickly?

Could it really be something as simple as moving to the other side of the rubber, as that suggestion has been this Spring made in an attempt to make him more effective against LHP?

If you look at the numbers above, Carmona's effectiveness seems to be dictated by his ability to limit free passes and, while that's no great revelation, take a look at Carmona's K and BB throughout the Minors prior to being called up in 2006:

2005 – 173 2/3 IP, 106 K, 35 BB
2004 – 163 IP, 122 K, 44 BB
2003 – 154 1/3 IP, 86 K, 14 BB

2005 – 5.5 K/9, 1.8 BB/9, 3.03 K/BB
2004 – 6.7 K/9, 2.4 BB/9, 2.77 K/BB
2003 – 5.0 K/9, 0.8 BB/9, 6.14 K/BB

The K rates always remained fairly steady (and fall in line with what he put forth in MLB from 2007 to 2009), but the sudden increase in walks since the 2007 have absolutely crushed Carmona's effectiveness. So the question becomes, how does a guy who walked 93 batters in 491 innings in the Minors from 2003 to 2005 (1.70 BB/9) and walked 92 batters in 289 2/3 innings in the Majors from 2006 to 2007 (2.86 BB/9) suddenly turn into the pitcher that we've seen for the last two years, who has walked 140 hitters in 246 innings (5.12 BB/9)?

Rather than simply chalking up his 2007 season as an aberration (which it very well could be), the thing that stands out to me is that Carmona's 2007 season falls in line with what he did in the Minors and only SINCE that 2007 season has the train come completely off of the tracks.

With that in mind, let me point something out – in the Indians' 2006 Media Guide, a 22-year-old Fausto Carmona's listed weight was 190 lbs. In his breakout 2007 season, he was listed at 220 lbs. and has been listed as 230 from 2008 to how it appears on the Indians' official site today. Seeing as how CC Sabathia's listed weight never went above 290 in the media guides despite his obviously growing girth, the listed weights often can be taken as "ballpark figures", particularly for MLB players with weight issues. Which is why Carmona's listed weight in 2006, when he was simply thought of as a "depth starter" in AAA, or in 2007 when the Indians famously pointed out that Carmona had put on weight because he had received some long-overdue dental work, is so interesting in that the listed weights in 2006 and 2007 needed no ceiling because there was no interest in that number.

However, since the 2008 season, he's always been listed at 230 despite coming to camp last year with what Castrovince recently referred to as a "spare tire" (to put it charitably). Now, if

Carmona's put on weight (reported or unreported), don't you think that it would have some effect on his mechanics?

I'm not a doctor, nor do I even play one on TV, but remember the hip injury that derailed Carmona's 2008 season and led to the domino effect of CC going to Milwaukee? Have we ever considered that Carmona's "evolving" body type has forced him to change his mechanics or that it even affected his delivery back in 2008, which led to the hip injury? If NBC can put multiple bobsleds or downhill skiers on the screen at the same time to examine how the two compare, isn't it about time to see how Carmona's mechanics look now compared to 2007 and even in the Minors?

Obviously, this has likely been done (or at least I hope it has), but maybe the mechanical problems that Carmona hasn't been able to rectify have to do with the fact that Carmona CANNOT get back to the repeated delivery that provided him his greatest success in 2007 because his body is not the same as it was in 2007 (or previously) and the Indians are left attempting to modify Carmona's delivery in the context of his current body.

Essentially, the Fausto Carmona that blazed through the minor-league ranks and flat-out dominated the AL in 2007 hasn't toed the rubber for the Indians for the last two years. Why that is remains anyone's guess, but the Indians still owe Carmona $11M over the next two years in guaranteed money on a deal that looked like an absolute heist when it was signed back before the 2008 season.

It's been said before, but it bears repeating – as Carmona has gone the last three years, as have the fortunes of the Tribe over those three years. While it's fun to argue over the back-end of the rotation and who fills the last couple of slots in the pitching staff or on the position player side, a trim, healthy Carmona goes a long way to making the 2010 Indians less of a mystery and would be the best "building block" or point of developmental progress that could come out of the 2010 season, given that the Indians do hold club options for him through the 2014 season.

At one time, Carmona looked like the pillar of the pitching staff of the present and of the future. Today, the Indians (in dire need of legitimate, internal top-of-the-rotation options above Kinston) are hoping to raise that pillar once again, regardless of how unlikely it seems.

By the same token, as much attention is being paid to the young hitters in the Indians' lineup and how the team looks to be a potential offensive juggernaut, the one piece of the lineup that (like Carmona) was thought to the foundation of the lineup in the present and the future remains clouded in uncertainty as Travis Hafner attempts to re-capture the success that has eluded him for far too long now.

According to most reports, Hafner is completely recovered from his shoulder injury (and let me pause as I recount how many times I've believed that to be the case in the past) and is looking to get back to Pronkian levels that he hasn't approached in recent memory. Like Carmona, most people today forget how truly dominant Hafner was over a 4-year stretch that ended with the close of the 2007 season, a period of time over which he posted these cumulative numbers:

.296 BA / .410 OBP / .567 SLG / .976 OPS while averaging 35 2B and 32 HR a season

His 156 OPS+ in that stretch put him in some pretty rarified air among MLB sluggers who amassed 2,000 plate appearances or more in those four years as he posted the third highest OPS+ in that timeframe in MLB
(with Victor coming in at #28 and Grady coming in at #31). Seeing as how Hafner was the 2nd youngest on that list among the top 7 (with Pujols younger and Big Papi, A-Rod, Berkman, Vlad, and Manny all older than Hafner at the time), his fall of the cliff has been preposterously fast.

The reasons for the drop-off can be debated and debated again, but since the start of the 2008 season, Hafner's posted an OPS+ of 101 (MLB average is 100) in just over 600 plate appearances. For a player that was once among the most feared hitters in MLB (for 4 years no less), his contributions of league average production have contributed greatly to the Indians' struggles of the past two years.

Whether Hafner is truly healthy or whether that 4-year stretch, during with Pronk was a menace in the AL, will simply represent a peak never to be climbed again could start to find answers in the 2010 season. Like Carmona, Hafner was thought to be the anchor in the middle of the lineup to keep the Indians in contention for years to come after 2007. Instead (again, like Carmona), he's been an anchor of a different kind, weighing the team down with his lack of production and the team's financial commitment to him.

While many eyes are watching Carlos Santana and Hector Rondon and Chris Perez and the other players that many people think can be significant contributors to the next incarnation of a contender in Cleveland, it's easy to forget that the ghosts of the last contender (of just 3 years ago) remain on the team in the personages of Carmona and Hafner. A return to form by either or both (which shouldn't be counted on any more than a sudden break-out from one of the youngsters) would lessen the pain and length of the rebuilding process that the Indians find themselves in the midst of once more.

Since Spring is the time that hope is permitted to spring eternally, maybe one final last hope should go into those two players, or the team is looking simply at the hope that the youngsters develop while the players who were thought to be the bridge fall deeper and deeper into disrepair.

Speaking of the youngsters that the Indians hope to develop, everyone should obviously be going out and purchasing Tony Lastoria's Prospect book (and here's how you can get it, if you take a look at the top bar and the sidebars of this link , which provides some handy-dandy "options remaining" information) to learn more than you would ever need to know about some of the Indians' prospects.

What's interesting to me at this time of year is when some of the national prospect lists emerge as it starts to put the names that we've heard about and read about for a couple of years now into the greater context of MLB. Some of the lists have already come out; most of them listing the top Indians' prospects just as Kevin Goldstein of Baseball Prospectus does in his recently published listing

:

8) Carlos Santana
43) Lonnie Chisenhall
77) Alex White
82) Jason Knapp
91) Nick Hagadone

On Goldstein's list, the Indians tied for 2nd on the list with 5 prospects (the Rays had 7 and the Angels, Royals, and Twins also had 5), which isn't surprising given the trades of the last year, but even more interesting is the list from Matt Hagen at The Hardball Times , who lists these Tribe prospects (with applicable comments on each) among his top 200:
7) Carlos Santana - One of the Top 10 prospects in all of baseball, Santana brings solid defense to the catcher position and the type of power bat and middle-of-the-order mentality that could make Cleveland fans quickly forget about Victor Martinez.

17) Hector Rondon - 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.

41) Lonnie Chisenhall - Sporting the swing and approach of a true professional hitter, Chisenhall impressed in 2009. He has a developing blend of power, patience, and contact skills that make me think he has a good chance to be an above average major league third baseman. An All-Star, though, may be stretching it.

46) Jason Knapp - Knapp has the ceiling of an ace, and the work ethic and smarts to get to that point. His high-90s fastball is his meal ticket, but the rest of his game lags behind. Watch for his secondary stuff to take a step forward in 2010.

55) Alex White - White is expected to make an immediate farm system impact in 2010. His tremendous repertoire will keep hitters off-balance from the get go, but Cleveland will surely be keeping an eye on his mechanics and control.

119) Michael Brantley
134) Alexander Perez

Yes, that's Hector Rondon at #17 on Hagan's list whereas Rondon doesn't even appear on Goldstein's top 100. While I attempt to rein in my excitement about Hagen's comments about Rondon, let me link something that SI.com's Jon Heymann passed along from scouts who have watched the Indians' (now nearly) unquestioned top 2 prospects, The Chiz and Santana:

• One scout said of Indians third base prospect Lonnie Chisenhall, "He's going to be a star. He's a bad---." (He meant that in a good way.) The scout said he sees him as the next George Brett but didn't wish to put Brett's name between quotes in a comparison because Brett "did get 3,000 hits."

• The scout also said Indians catching prospect Carlos Santana is "another Victor Martinez."

In case you didn't notice (and I bet you did), the only name that appears on either list that came over in the CP Lee is the 19-year-old Jason Knapp. Just as a quick aside, and just to point out a quick example of how subjective these lists are (and to bring in two non-Indians names who you may be familiar with because of the CP Lee/Halladay deals), The Hardball Times lists Kyle Drabek and Michael Taylor as their 62nd and 63rd best prospects, whereas Baseball Prospectus has Drabek rated #16 in MLB and Taylor as #20 in MLB entering the season.

Back to the players that came over for Lee from Philly, there was an interesting piece in the Philadelphia Daily News about Marson, Carrasco, Donald, and Knapp with quotes from Antonetti peppered throughout. Most of the quotes are of the ilk that we've seen for years, saying nothing while talking, but since I haven't seen these specific on-the-record quotes, here are Antonetti's "thoughts" on all four.

On Marson:

"Lou's coming into camp with an opportunity to be our starting catcher," said assistant general manager Chris Antonetti. "He did have some exposure at the major league level with us last year for a more extended period than he'd had in the past and we saw some good things. We were encouraged by some of the things he's done both at Triple A with us and in a short time at the major league level."

On Carrasco:

"We're very encouraged by what we saw developmentally with him last year when he came over and pitched for us in Columbus. He pitched deep into games a number of different times and showed some really good stuff."
Antonetti said the team wasn't turned off by Carrasco's struggles after he was called up.

"It's very difficult to make the transition from Triple A to the major league level, especially on the pitching side," he said. "Carlos needs to do some of the things that made him very successful in the minor leagues. Commanding his fastball to both sides of the plate, working down in the strike zone, mixing in his secondary pitches. I think as part of the transition for a younger pitcher, he'll eventually make that transition successfully."

On Donald:

"Unfortunately, after we got him last year he had some back tightness that's been fully resolved," Antonetti said. "He's 100 percent now. He's coming into camp with the opportunity to potentially make the club as a utility guy, but we have to weigh the benefits of that and him fitting on the major league team in a part-time role vs. playing every day because last year he only had 250 plate appearances.

"But in a brief time with us and consistent with our scouting reports he made a very favorable impression on everybody. Staff and teammates. By the way he carries himself and the way he

approaches the game. His toughness. It's been fun to watch."

On Knapp:

"He'll come into spring training on the minor league side and continue his rehabilitation and we're hopeful he'll get back on the mound this year in a competitive setting," Antonetti said. "He won't be ready going into the season. He'll be behind. How much behind, we'll get a much better sense when he gets into camp."

In case you were wondering about ol' CP Lee up in the Pacific Northwest, SI.com's Jon Heyman has a piece about how the M's would love to lock up Lee
. Call me overly suspicious, but if you don't see that Lee as a Free Agent after this year would coincide with him taking Andy Pettite's spot in the rotation next year in the Bronx…you're not looking hard enough.

Moving on from prospect and from Clifton Phifer, there's a terrific analytical piece on batting orders, that site friend Jon Steiner wrote for WFNY penned (don't let the byline confuse you), as it pertains to idea that Russell Branyan will ostensibly be taking the spot of Mike Brantley (at least to start the year), using CHONE Projections and
Baseball Musings' Lineup Analysis
tool to assert the following conclusion:

Best case scenario with Brantley in the game? 5.171 runs per game. Best with Branyan? 5.257 runs per game. That's comes out to 14 more runs over the course of a season with Branyan over Brantley—or an extra win or two over the course of a season. An added bonus? Playing Branyan for a year keeps Brantley's arbitration clock from ticking! This way, we get an extra year of club-control for Brantley, while only paying Branyan $2 million.

I'm a sucker for analysis like this, so check out the whole thoughtful piece courtesy of Jon and WFNY.

Moving to the other end of the spectrum of analysis, we have Tim Marchman's piece from SI.com that ranks the current GM's
that you've likely seen at some point by now. While most of the local coverage has centered on Marchman's ranking of Mark Shapiro as the 22nd rated GM in baseball, what stands out to me is the process (or rather, lack thereof) that he comes to his rankings. Marchman himself states that "there isn't any good, objective way to rate general managers" and that "the best way to judge general managers might be to measure their wins against their payroll". He then diverts from that path and makes up his own (by his own admission "subjective") criteria of success, not doing "stupid things", efficiency, and tenure to come to his rankings which seem more wildly subjective than probably he intended.

The most noteworthy thing to me about Marchman's "exercise" is that Shawn Hoffman of Baseball Prospectus did an analysis based on what Marchman even states as the "best way to judge general managers…to measure their wins against their payroll"
, as Hoffman quantified how well each GM spent the money made available to him by

ownership, more accurately defining who had done the best job as a GM, with Marchman's created criteria (or the sense that you get from the Marchman piece of "what have you done for me lately"…like Andy MacPhail of the Orioles coming in at #12 probably because of his off-season, despite his Baltimore teams finishing with 93, 93, and 98 losses since his arrival) not getting in the way. Hoffman even posted the results of his analysis for all of the GM's of the 1990s and 2000s that quantified how he got to his conclusions, something Marchman either does not engage in or simply doesn't explain.

Ultimately, each person's individual feelings on these "GM rankings" are going to dictate whether you think that Marchman was spot-on in his evisceration of Shapiro as a GM or if the performance of the Indians over the last few years falls more in line with what Bill James stated in his recently published Gold Mine 2010 (via CastroTurf) as he opined thusly:

In my many years as a baseball fan, I've rarely seen things go bad for an organization, through no fault of their own, the way they have gone bad for the Indians. Two years ago, the Indians appeared ready take on the world. Two years later, with CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee long gone, Victor Martinez gone, Carmona having imploded, and even Grady Sizemore not playing as well, they've been pushed down to near the back of the line. I've never really seen anything like it.

Again, pre-existing feelings on the Indians' Front Office will determine which camp you reside in when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of the Indians in terms of building a team. As Spring Training continues, while most of the attention will be paid to the back end of the rotation and the last couple of spots in the bullpen, the performances of the players thought to be the bedrocks that took the Indians into the land of consistent contention (something that obviously didn't happen) could provide a greater clue as to how quickly (or slowly) the next "window of contention" opens.