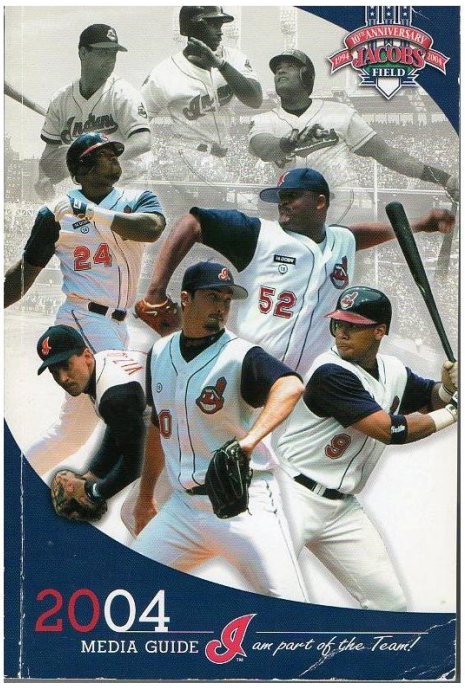

Now embarking on the first full season since the latest rebuild/reload/whatever began in earnest last July, the comparison as to where the current Indians team finds themselves on the path that (hopefully) leads back to contention is both inevitable and painful, particularly considering that the previous tear down/build up happened so recently and ended with unfulfilled expectations. Nevertheless, the Indians find themselves rebuilding again, attempting to find that mix of players that will mature at the same time, with injuries and regressions minimized in an attempt to outwit a flawed system.

While other MLB teams can build out from a strong core, the demarcation line between how a certain percentage of teams can build for the future against how the rest of the teams are left to search for these windows of contention is not lost on the Indians. You know that the saturation point on how the structure of MLB has become common knowledge when even players are surmising the situation as Grady Sizemore did when he said , “I think it happens in 95 percent of the teams. Four or five teams in the league don’t go through that. You have to deal with it and play through it. You can’t control anything else. You only worry about what you can control.”

Regardless, the Indians are attempting to once again shorten that “rebuilding” period and the 2010 season should provide some clues as to where the Indians are in the timeframe of legitimately contending again. The immediate comparison is to the 2003 and the 2004 seasons, as they represented teams not quite ready to compete for the division, but trending in the right direction, with varying degrees of trending. Since this was something that was touched on back during the “All Bets Are Off” guest-hosting and fleshed out a little bit in the Rotational preview of Dave Huff and Aaron Laffey
(and how each compare now to Lee and Westbrook going into the 2004 season), I thought it would be interesting to try to compare what the Indians team looked like going into the 2004 season, with ages and career numbers to that point only posted, in an attempt to get a better sense of where this 2010 team is on the rebuilding ladder.

Back in 2004, the Indians were famously under the clock to say that the team would contend in 2005, a mere three years after the rebuild began when Bartolo Colon found himself in the Great White North, so the 2004 season represented a big hurdle that they had to clear on the path from “young” to “respectable” with the idea that the contention would come in 2005…as they had “promised”.

Attempting to remember what the feelings and expectations were prior to the 2004 season aren’t as easy as jumping into the Silver Delorean, though the cover of the 2004 Media Guide offer a clue as to who the Indians (or at least their media relations staff) were looking at as the bedrocks for the next Cleveland contender. Yes, that’s Jason Davis and Jody Gerut and Milton Bradley (who would never make out of Spring Training in 2004, traded to Los Angeles before the season in the infamous “Taxi Cab” ride after butting heads with The Atomic Wedgie) on the cover with Omar and CC in the foreground, ahead of the black-and-white pictures of the most beloved Indians (because of public perception, not performance) of the “Era of Champions” – Charlie, Sandy, and Kenny.

Generally, we have little way of knowing what to expect in 2010, taking out what we know now about certain players, what was known about these guys prior to the 2004 season even getting underway?

Starting off, looking at the ages for the year indicated and career OPS prior to the season for each position is telling:

C
2004 – 25 years old, .688 career OPS
2010 – 24 years old, .771 career OPS

1B
2004 – 27 years old, .737 career OPS
2010 – 34 years old, .822 career OPS

2B
2004 – 29 years old, .741 career OPS
2010 – 24 years old, .708 career OPS

SS
2004 – 37 years old, .695 career OPS
2010 – 24 years old, .766 career OPS

3B
2004 – 30 years old, .709 career OPS
2010 – 28 years old, .756 career OPS

LF
2004 – 32 years old, .791 career OPS

2010 – 25 years old, .750 career OPS

CF
2004 – 24 years old, .665 career OPS
2010 – 27 years old, .851 career OPS

RF
2004 – 26 years old, .830 career OPS
2010 – 27 years old, .887 career OPS

DH
2004 – 27 years old, .795 career OPS
2010 – 33 years old, .921 career OPS
Kind of crazy to look at how inexperienced and unaccomplished some of those 2004 regulars were without adding names to the ages and numbers, isn't it?

Before going forward on this, it should be noted that one of those positions is filled by the same player, an astonishing fact considering that the separation between the two teams is merely six years and that the Indians actually achieved success in a few of those six years, meaning that the turnover shouldn't be that pronounced.

Nevertheless, while I hate those position-by-position "analysis" pieces that come out before every playoff series (2007 ALCS – Joe Borowski vs. Jonathon Papelbon…Advantage – RED SOX), it's often forgotten that the 2004 team, that finished 80-82 and flirted with 1st place as late as August, was not exactly full of known quantities much less established stars.

It's easy to look back at that 2004 team with today's knowledge and see a young Victor break out in his first full year and see a 27-year-old Travis Hafner show the first signs of being Pronk, just as it is interesting to look back at a team that "boasted" one regular position player under the age of 25 in Coco Crisp (24 in 2004).

As inexperienced and unaccomplished as some of those guys were heading into the 2004 season, it did represent the year that a few principals of the offense unquestionably broke out with more on the way as a 21-year-old Grady received 159 plate appearances late in the 2004 season and a 22-year-old Jhonny Peralta sipped an MLB cup of coffee during the season after getting a look in 2003. However, that 2004 team was largely (with a few notable exceptions like Victor) full of mainly fair-to-middling prospects and veterans who were holding the place for younger players or younger players getting their first extended chance in MLB.

Some took the opportunity and ran with it as they began to establish themselves as legitimate MLB stars (Martinez and Hafner), some showed flashes of promise that proved to be just flashes (Broussard and Gerut), and some went elsewhere when the team had exhausted their usefulness (Belliard and Lawton).

What does that mean for what 2010 holds in store for us?
Who knows, but the more in-depth comparison at what those players looked like prior to the

2004 season and what the current assumed group of regulars looks like today is more than a little revealing.

Catcher
Victor Martinez's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.288 BA / .343 OBP / .346 SLG / .688 OPS in 210 PA

Lou Marson's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.262 BA / .355 OBP / .415 SLG / .771 OPS in 76 PA

This isn't really a fair comparison to start off as Martinez's 2004 season (when he was 25) was the one in which the highly-touted catching prospect put himself onto the map by posting a line of .283 BA / .359 OBP / .492 SLG / .851 OPS in 591 PA. Marson (23 this year) falls more in line with the Josh Bard (circa 2003) placeholder with Carlos Santana playing the role of Vic the Stick, perhaps as early as this summer. Marson likely factors into the Josh Bard role going forward as well as Bard served as the placeholder, then cheap backup catcher, before finally being traded as part of the Crisp-Marte deal as his usefulness with the team had decreased.

First Base
Ben Broussard's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.247 BA / .308 OBP / .430 SLG / .737 OPS in 549 PA

Rusty Branyan's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.234 BA / .331 OBP / .491 SLG / .822 OPS in 2,824 PA

It is often forgotten that back when the 2004 season was just beginning, Ben Broussard was seen as a viable, if not spectacular, 1B in MLB just in need of some regular exposure to MLB pitching. While his 2004 season (in which he was 27) represented his high-water mark as a player, posting a line of .275 BA / .370 OBP / .488 SLG / .878 OPS in 485 PA, Broussard was a relative unknown going into the season, unlike Branyan (34 this year), who is more than a known quantity, whether that knowledge elicits hatred or curiosity.

Second Base
Ronnie Belliard's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.266 BA / .343 OBP / .398 SLG / .741 OPS in 2,435 PA

Luis Valbuena's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.249 BA / .300 OBP / .408 SLG / .708 OPS in 452 PA

Whereas both Martinez and Broussard were players who emerged from the farm system, Belliard was seen as more of a placeholder in 2004 until Brandon Phillips could eventually assume the mantle of "2B of the Present and Future", a crown that would never rest on his head in Cleveland. Belliard, who was 29 in 2004, came to the Indians and posted a line of .282 BA / .348 OBP / .426 SLG / .774 OPS in 663 PA. Valbuena enters the 2010 season as a 24-year-old, 5 years younger than Belliard was in 2004, with the idea that he is going to be given a chance (and a long leash) to establish himself as the new "2B of the Present and Future", a title that

may not still be his when the season ends.

Shortstop
Omar Vizquel's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.273 BA / .340 OBP / .356 SLG / .695 OPS in 8,246 PA

Asdrubal Cabrera's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.287 BA / .355 OBP / .411 SLG / .766 OPS in 1,185 PA

Yes, the now-24-year-old Asdrubal has posted higher career numbers in his first 3 seasons than Omar did in his first 15 seasons. The Indians new lead-off hitter actually has the same amount of seasons with an OPS+ over 100 (2) in three seasons as Vizquel does (2) in 21 seasons. That's not meant to besmirch the legacy of Vizquel (who posted a .291 BA / .353 OBP / .388 SLG / .741 OPS in 651 PA in 2004 as a 37-year-old, in what has been the 3rd best offensive season he's compiled) as much as it is an attempt to put the level of success that Cabrera has already accomplished into perspective. If Cabrera posted a line similar to Vizquel's 2004 season, it would come off as a disappointment. Cabrera is among the Indians' best hitters and, at the age of 24 with nearly 1,200 MLB PA under his belt, he may still just be scratching the surface.

Third Base
Casey Blake's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.253 BA / .310 OBP / .399 SLG / .709 OPS in 746 PA

Jhonny Peralta's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.266 BA / .331 OBP / .425 SLG / .756 OPS in 3,456 PA

Peralta enters the 2010 season in a position not unlike how Blake came into the 2004 season, as a player attempting to prove that he should be in the Indians' long-term plans. Blake "won" the Indians 2003 3B job out of Spring Training as a 29-year-old with 125 MLB PA (still think that 2010 is close to 2003?) and used the regular AB given to him in Cleveland (specifically in 2004, when he posted a line of .271 BA / .354 OBP / .486 SLG / .839 OPS in 668 PA as a 30-year-old) to establish himself as a solid, if underappreciated, all-around contributor to a good team. Peralta goes into 2010 fighting for his life in the organization, as most have written him off as an inconsistent "is-what-he-is" player, with his club option for 2011 certainly looking unlikely to be picked up. Over his up-and-down career, Peralta has compiled an OPS+ of 100 (league average by definition), which certainly doesn't merit his option being picked up for 2011. However, out from under The Atomic Wedgie's thumb, it will be interesting to see if Peralta is able to recapture the success of his 2005 season, when (as a 23-year-old) he hit 35 2B and 24 HR with an OPS of .885. If that player still exists behind those sleepy eyes, the Indians have an established, dynamic player in Peralta that they lacked among 2004 regulars.

Left Field
Matt Lawton's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.267 BA / .370 OBP / .421 SLG / .791 OPS in 4,276 PA

Matt LaPorta's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.254 BA / .308 OBP / .442 SLG / .750 OPS in 198 PA

While LaPorta could (and maybe should) be included in the 1B portion of this exercise, as that looks to be his eventual position on the team, LF represents one of the spots in which the 2004 team had a placeholder in Lawton. While Lawton was paid more than the going rate for a placeholder, the Indians weren't making any future plans around Matt Lawton (who posted a line of .277 BA / .366 OBP / .421 SLG / .787 OPS in 591 PA as a 32-year-old in 2004, frighteningly close to his career line) or working off of any assumption that Matt Lawton would be around if the rebuild came to fruition. Not so with LaPorta, who looks to be the only RH bat amongst the many LH sticks up and down the lineup and up and down the organization. Getting LaPorta as many PA this season is as important as any other development this year given that he has less than 200 MLB PA and turned 25 this past January.

Center Field
Coco Crisp's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.264 BA / .305 OBP / .360 SLG / .665 OPS in 590 PA

Grady Sizemore's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.275 BA / .367 OBP / .485 SLG / .851 OPS in 3,612 PA

Now we get into the part of the lineup that separates very quickly from the 2004 team as the Indians did not have a player of Sizemore's caliber at Sizemore's age to anchor the lineup going into the 2004 season. One player had a career OPS higher than .800 going into the 2004 (we'll get to him in a second) and while many of the young offensive players used the 2004 season to "break out" (with the 24-year-old Crisp as one example as he posted a line of .297 BA / .344 OBP / .446 OPS / .790 OPS in 538 PA), no player on the 2004 team had the track record that Sizemore has entering the 2010 season, recent injuries considered.

Right Field
Jody Gerut's career numbers prior to 2004 season
.279 BA / .336 OBP / .494 SLG / .830 OPS in 525 PA

Shin-Soo Choo's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.296 BA / .386 OBP / .491 SLG / .887 OPS in 1,275 PA

Remember when Jody Gerut was thought to be a potential "core" piece to the Indians, before he wandered off into journeyman-land? Gerut entered 2004 as the only regular with a career OPS over .800 and that was only on the basis of the 525 PA that he accumulated prior to the season. His 2004 season would be the first step in the stairs going down as he posted a .252 BA / .334 OBP / .405 SLG / .739 OPS in 548 PA, disappointing numbers for a 26-year-old corner OF. One would think that The BLC's track record (read – more MLB PA) would portend more success for him in 2010 than Gerut attained and Choo's presence in the 2010 lineup provides (along with Sizemore) stability in the middle of the lineup that wasn't obviously there when 2004 began.

Designated Hitter
Travis Hafner's career numbers prior to the 2004 season
.252 BA / .327 OBP / .467 SLG / .795 OPS in 394 PA

Travis Hafner's career numbers prior to 2010 season
.281 BA / .387 OBP / .526 SLG / .921 OPS in 3,383 PA

Of course, that "stability in the lineup" in 2004 did come about with the first appearance of the monster that would heretofore be known as Pronk. Despite having only 394 PA under his belt prior to 2004, Hafner burst onto the scene in 2004 as a 27-year-old who obliterated his way to a line of .311 BA / .410 OBP / .583 SLG / .993 OPS in 573 PA. Whether that monster still lurks deep within the player thought to receive the majority of the plate appearances at DH for the Tribe in 2010 remains to be seen, but expectations for Hafner have been low in the past with pleasant surprises coming with his performance. Since it is Spring and hope is still eternal, I'll leave it at that…

All told, the two teams that were entering the 2004 and 2010 seasons were strikingly different in that the 2010 team seems to be flush in more established veterans than simple placeholders. I realize that I'm excluding MiLB track records and prospect rankings for any of these players, but on the surface it certainly changes the tone for the 2010 season seeing as how the 2004 season served as a pleasant surprise after it started with so much uncertainty.

Each team had young players with limited exposure to MLB pitching and the 2004 team responded by finishing the 2004 season with 858 runs scored, 5th among the 14 teams in the AL. This was all accomplished despite the fact that there were more than a few players on the 2004 team that didn't have 600 career MLB PA in Martinez, Broussard, Crisp, Gerut, and Hafner.

Interestingly, that success can be traced to so many of those players in 2004 were in their "peak production years" in that Gerut was 26 and Broussard and Hafner were both 27. Look who's going to be 27 this year on the Indians – Sizemore and Choo (who have the two highest projected OPS on the team, as per CHONE) – and only Peralta (28 this year), Hafner (33 this year), and Branyan (34 this year) are older.

Not included in this list are Santana and Brantley for the 2010 projected lineups (likely to displace Marson and Branyan in the mix), just as the 2004 lineups don't include Sizemore and Peralta. If Santana and Brantley (or further down, The Chiz) can burst onto the scene the way that Grady and Jhonny did in 2005, the offense's future gets even brighter.

Regardless of the future of the offense, the present of the offense looks superior to the 2004 version if you examine only what was known entering the two seasons. Players given the opportunity to play everyday in 2004 became cornerstones of the (short-lived) contention of the previous incarnation of the Indians and 2010 should provide that same opportunity.

All of that being said, I know…it's the pitching, or is it when you look at what the 2004 staff looked like coming into the season and what they actually put forth in the 2004 season?

Don’t worry…that’s coming next.