Arriving home from work and finding my season ticket package sitting in a FedEx box in the front door, the excitement for the 2010 season finally started to bubble to the surface. With that in mind and since there finally seems that enough time has elapsed in Spring Training to adequately make some judgments, perhaps now would be a time to Spring for some Tomahawks…

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While I haven't been able to watch many of the games (work and all) on TV, in the one that I did catch, Jhonny Peralta looked noticeably heavier than he has in years past. Maybe it was just how he looked at a particular moment (and that "moment" can be seen here after he hit a HR and it's when he's rounding second), but Jhonny looks to have put on a few pounds.

If he has, maybe some of that has to do with the fact that he no longer is under the guise that he's a SS (on the Indians at least), but Peralta's added tonnage could mean a couple of things. Either he's bulked up and is serious about making a valiant return in 2009 (with the knowledge that this is essentially a Free Agency year for him) in as much that wants to re-assert himself as an above-average MLB player…or he's just let himself go in the off-season.

Here's hoping for the former because as much as guys like LaPorta and Brantley and Santana are fun and exciting and new, the return of a guy like Peralta (v.2005 not v.2009) goes much further in the current Indians team sniffing a record close to .500 than much of development by the young guys. Additionally, since Peralta is unlikely to be in the team's plans past this year, his success (particularly in the early going…which has never been his strong suit) may make him more appealing to a team looking for a RH bat come July.

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Following this "battle" for the back of the rotation, is anyone else noticing that it looks as if all of the "participants" (sans Sowers) could make the 25-man roster out of Goodyear?

If the Indians decide to fill one of their bullpen spots with long man, you're talking about Huff, Laffey and Talbot "battling" for those last two rotation spots and a spot perhaps being open in the bullpen for the "loser". It is important to remember that we're just talking about initial roles here in that the situation could come about that two of these guys are in the rotation on Opening

Day and one is in the bullpen as the long man…for the time being.

Seeing as how the fact that somebody is the 5th starter out of Goodyear doesn't mean that they'll be the 5th starter on Memorial Day...ahem, Scotty Lewis…this whole "battle" could be much ado about nothing in terms of all of these guys seeing significant inning workloads. In terms of expected workloads, it is worth pointing out again that Mitch Talbot threw 68 1/3 total innings in 2009 and the assumption that he would be able to ramp that number up to be even double that may preclude him from overuse.

Given that there looks to be quite a few innings that are going to be consumed by that long man/"loser" of the rotation (if that's where the Indians decide to put him), it really just comes down to who gets the ball on a more consistent basis. Seeing as how 3 of the 4 spots in the rotation will be filled by RH pitchers (Masterson, Westbrook, Carmona), it may make some sense to start the season with Laffey as the long man, in that he would then provide a LH long man to balance out what would then be 4 of the 5 RH arms in the rotation (if you add Talbot to that mix above) if he's called on in relief.

Personally, I'd prefer to see Laffey get a first shot at the rotation if only because he performed well in 2009 (while being moved in and out of the rotation) over his first 20 appearances (3.36 ERA, .689 OPS against in 96 1/3 innings) until his final 5 starts of the season, which were unquestionably awful (8.53 ERA, 1.057 OPS against in 25 1/3 innings), sabotaged his season totals.

Regardless of how it all shakes out, the innings are going to be there for Huff, Laffey, and Talbot (even if they decide to send one of them to Columbus…which I hope they don't as I think that Huff and Laffey have little left to prove in AAA and the "depth" could come from a long man just as it could from Columbus) in the early going as the inevitability of Sowers starting the season on the DL looks pretty firm. If (or is it when) Sowers comes off of the DL and comes back after some rehab starts, he can either sub for whichever of the three is struggling. There also exists the possibility that the Indians simply attempt to slip a healthy Sowers through waivers at a time when most teams are trying to make sense of their own 25-man witches' brew.

With Sowers out of the mix to start the season, the troika of Huff, Talbot, and Laffey all could ostensibly have a spot on the 25-man roster with plenty of innings to go around.

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If one of those three is going to start the season in the bullpen and Acta is on record saying that 5 spots in the bullpen are claimed (by Wood, Perez y Perez, Sipp, and Smith), that would mean that the 6th or 7th spot (depending on how you look at it) is still open. The main "competitors" look to be Jensen Lewis, Jamey Wright, Saul Rivera, and Hector Ambriz.

Realizing that little to no stock should be placed in Spring Training stats, here are the Spring lines, through Wednesday's games for each:

Lewis
4 games, 5.0 IP, 5 H, 1 ER, 2 K, 1 BB

Wright
4 games, 5.0 IP, 2 H, 1 ER, 4 K, 2 BB

Rivera
4 games, 4.0 IP, 2 H, 0 ER, 3 K, 1 BB

Ambriz
2 games, 2.0 IP, 2 H, 0 ER, 1 K, 3 BB

There you go…figure out which one of these guys should make the team.

By the way, Lewis still has options and Wright and Rivera are on Minor-League deals, so none of them have to break camp with the parent club to stay in the organization. That designation falls to Ambriz, who is actually still around after the day when most Rule 5 picks were returned or deals were worked out for them to remain with the team that drafted them, evidenced by the Lofgren-for-Aguilar move.

Who “wins” this battle?

If I had to venture an early guess, it’s Jamey Wright with the Indians working out some deal to keep Ambriz around in the system so they can send him down to the Minors in an attempt to make him a reliever.

Why Jamey Wright?

I suppose it has something to do with that idea that this spot in the bullpen is essentially going to be a mop-up role and Wright’s pitched 240 1/3 innings over the last 3 years in 160 games (only 9 of which were starts), meaning that it’s a role to which he’s had some recent experience in. Other than that reason, I suppose it really doesn’t matter all that much. I guess I'd rather see Jensen Lewis getting regular work in Columbus to see if he can re-capture that 2007 velocity. By starting Lewis there (with Saul Rivera), he can perhaps be the first option to arrive when somebody in the bullpen gets hurt or needs to be sent out, perhaps in a more meaningful role.

Ultimately, you’re talking about an innings-eater who will be pitching between the 5th and 7th innings in games in which the Indians are losing by a considerable margin. Eventually, I'd like to see those innings go to guys like Jesse Ray Todd (10.97 K/9 in 2009), Josh Judy (11.68 K/9 in 2009), or even the newly-acquired Omar Aguilar (11.6 K/9 in 2009) so the Indians can start to get some of these high K-rate relievers into the mix in 2010 to see how some of these arms translate to an MLB bullpen.

That “translation” is a long way away though, and if Jamey Wright and Saul Rivera cycle through the bullpen this year so guys like Joe Smith and Tony Sipp aren’t forced to unnecessarily eat innings in blow-outs, that 6th or 7th bullpen spot is not real high on the priority list of “things to watch” this Spring.

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Suffice it to say, but the imminent return of Rusty Branyan does not look nearly as imminent as it once did. Between the mish-mash of reports and quotes, it sounds like Branyan will be given every opportunity to get healthy and stake his "claim" to 1B. However, there exists the very real possibility that he's going to start the season on the DL, perhaps for an extended stay.

While most would take that as an obvious prelude to the Indians going back to the LaPorta at 1B, Brantley in LF arrangement, consider this recent quote from Shapiro:

"LaPorta's a guy that, age-wise, profile-wise and experience-wise, is ready to compete at the big league level. Regardless of what adjustments he has to make, he has to be up here in order to get better. Michael Brantley is a different story. He's 22 years old, he had a solid but not special Triple-A season, and he had 100 good plate appearances up here, whatever that means. He does have an approach on the field that's above his chronological age. That being said, there's benefits to him being here and there's benefits to him being finished in the Minor Leagues. We're not going to make a decision off a Spring Training performance for anybody."

The most pertinent (and dismissive) portion was admittedly bolded by me, but do you still think that Brantley's the obvious choice to make the team if Branyan's back acts up after reading Shapiro go out of his way to mention that and as it sounds like minds are already made up if they're "not going to make a decision off a Spring Training performance for anybody"?

This could certainly something to watch this Spring if Branyan's back does put him on the DL and if the team is intent on managing Brantley's service time. That is, if Branyan starts the season on the DL and the Indians are THAT committed to keeping Brantley's service clock in check (although he can always be sent down later), that would mean that the likes of Andy Marte or Trevor Crowe assumes the AB that were designed to go to Branyan.

Obviously, the easy fix is to start Brantley in LF and LaPorta at 1B if Branyan starts the season on the DL…but why make things easy?