As my bracket has been shredded by the Madness of March and while Winter attempts to make one final pass over the North Coast, let's get rolling right away on a Lazy Sunday to think of warm, sunny days at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario and of whether a certain team from Cleveland could fit into Cinderella's slipper this summer.

And with that, we're off…

The biggest news of the week obviously is the news that Kerry Wood will be missing 6 to 8 weeks because of an upper back injury. While this development causes the dominoes to fall in the bullpen, perhaps the most important factor in this injury news is that the vesting option in Wood's contract (if he finishes 55 games in 2010, his 2011 option for $11 vests) is not going to be possible for Wood to reach, considering that he's not going to be seeing action until May at the earliest, assuming he's even healthy at that point and won't need multiple rehab appearances to get back to the Indians.

Of course, the fact that his option is unlikely to vest could make Wood MORE attractive on the trade market come July as teams won't have to entertain the possibility of acquiring an $11M commitment in 2011 if they traded for Wood to augment their 2010 bullpen. Of course, his attractiveness in July makes the assumption that he comes back healthy AND effective, which is no given as there exists a very real possibility that Wood attempts to come back too early to justify his contract or to put a body of work forward in what could be his Free Agency season that would make him attractive in the off-season, compromising his effectiveness as a late-inning reliever.

As a quick aside on Spring injuries and Free Agency seasons, did anyone catch that CP Lee has been sidelined with a "right abdominal strain", which is supposed to set him back for a week?

Everyone remembers the last time Clifton Phifer battled this same injury in Spring Training, right?

It was 2007, the year that saw Lee rush back and never find his rhythm, causing a late-season demotion, the tip of the cap, and his exclusion from the postseason roster. Everyone knows that Lee's pitching for a giant contract at the end of this season (likely with the name "Steinbrenner" somewhere in it), right?

This could get interesting up in the Pacific Northwest…

But I digress, back to Wood and the immediate impact on the team as the Indians immediately will slot Chris Perez (or CFP, which would be "Chris…um, Firetruckin' Perez, as Nino at The Tribe Daily has taken to calling him because of Perez's professed love of "Eastbound and Down") into the role of closer in Wood's absence. There was certainly a prevailing school of thought that Perez would be closing games for the Indians at some point in 2010…just not to start the season.

Perez has been thought of as a "Closer-of-the-Future", even when a member of the Cardinals, and his 10.74 K/9 rate ranked 16th among all MLB pitchers with more than 40 IP last year (career MiLB K/9 rate of 12.0) showed why he was seen as a power pitcher with a bright future at the back end of the bullpen. However, the greatest strides that Perez made last season had little to do with the strikeout totals and more to do with his BB totals. As Andrew Simon adroitly points out in a 2010 preview for the Indians , "after the Indians acquired him in the middle of last season, Chris Perez cut his walks per nine innings from 5.7 to 3.2." If you want something to watch with Perez once he toes the rubber in the 9th, his BB rate may be more telling than any other statistic as he walked an improbable 75 batters in 108 innings in the Minors and his success may be tied very neatly by his ability to limit the free pass.

However, the biggest effect of Wood's injury does not have anything to do with Perez slotting into the closer role, but rather the way that Perez's ascension to the role of closer pushes everyone else in the bullpen up that ladder of roles. With CFP out of the set-up role, that 8th inning now falls into the lap of either Rafael Perez (and his 1.89 WHIP and .899 OPS against from 2009), Tony Sipp (who has walked 6 and given up 5 hits, while striking out only 2 in his 5 innings of work this Spring), and Joe Smith (who has given up 7 hits and 5 runs in 5 innings this Spring and is better suited as a straight right-on-right reliever). Sorting out those arms in the 6th or 7th innings is a completely different animal from seeing these guys vie for the spot in the 8th inning, with the recent bullpen struggles in Cleveland bearing testament to that.

Essentially, this is the same reason that Minnesota should be worried with Joe Nathan likely to be out for the season, in that losing a 9th inning reliever forces pitchers who would normally slot into middle relief into the 7th inning and pushes arms that a team wouldn't generally use late in a game with a lead into those very games. Of course, this could open up some opportunities for guys like Sipp or Rafael Perez to assert themselves as back-of-the-bullpen mainstays and could even open up meaningful spots in the bullpen for guys like Jesse Ray Todd or even Josh Judy earlier than expected, but in the short-term, it throws what looked to be a fairly pleasant progression in the bullpen into a bit of confusion.

All told, it looks like the "future" starts earlier than expected in the bullpen and the young arms will have more opportunities (particularly later in games) to show that they should be counted on for 2010 and beyond.

If the "future starts now" in the bullpen, what is to be made of the recent reports concerning 2B?

In the midst of some notes from Goodyear , Tony Lastoria reported that:

"The real interesting story may come later in camp as I'm hearing if Mark Grudzielanek continues to play well and makes a run these last few weeks that Luis Valbuena may be the odd man out and be sent to Columbus to start the season. Even though the Indians have played him some at third base this spring, Grudzielanek is viewed strictly as a second baseman at the moment."

So…is the organization hedging on the idea that Louie V is the Opening Day 2B?

I found it interesting that Hoynes decided to do a piece on Louie the Fifth right after this nugget from Tony, with Hoynes writing that :

"When spring training opened, Acta said Valbuena was his second baseman. Acta added that the Indians weren't in the business of turning 24-year-old infielders into platoon players…"Valbuena has played well the whole camp," Acta said. "He hasn't done anything to hurt his chances to be our everyday guy. We like Grudzielanek and Rodriguez has done well. We've got two weeks to go, but Louie has done everything we've asked him to do…He's had some good at-bats against left-handed pitchers. He has done nothing to change our minds."

The "we aren't in the business of turning 24-year-old infielders into platoon players" comment from Acta is still a highlight of the Spring for me (if only because it represents such a departure from managerial comments in years past), but let's not pretend that there aren't issues with Valbuena's ability to hit LHP. While he only has 48 MLB plate appearances against LHP in MLB (even though he's played in 121 MLB games), consider what Valbuena's splits looked like in the Minors:

2005 vs. LHP - .624 OPS
2005 vs. RHP - .808 OPS

2006 vs. LHP - .748 OPS
2006 vs. RHP - .738 OPS

2007 vs. LHP - .510 OPS
2007 vs. RHP - .795 OPS

2008 vs. LHP - .717 OPS
2008 vs. RHP - .843 OPS

In 2009, he only had 78 AB in Columbus, so the samples are just too small to develop any kind

of opinion in his AAA time last year; but those numbers account for 441 plate appearances against LHP and 1,230 against RHP, so the disparity in those numbers (except for 2006) do cause some pause in terms of Valbuena's ability to hit LHP if he's only show proficient in doing so in one of the last 5 years.

Don't get me wrong, I'd still prefer to see Valbuena get everyday AB from the beginning of the season to see how he adjusts to playing everyday (against RHP and LHP) in MLB. Looming over the whole "splits" concern, there is the service time issue and, while I know that people don't want to hear about that and want to throw the young guys out there now and allow them to sink or swim on their own, Valbuena (with 1 year and 12 days of MLB service time) needs to spend some time in the Minors to…here it comes…manage his service time to push off his first year of arbitration and of Free Agency.

That being said, I think that there is an easy solution to this service time issue that doesn't include thinking about a season starting with Grudzielanek and Branyan (although Terry Pluto reports that the Indians "have to be concerned" about Rusty's back …even if they're not saying so publicly) on the right side of the infield to start the season. Quite simply, the Indians can start the season with Valbuena in MLB and demote him at some point in the season for a month or so. They can blame the demotion on the aforementioned struggles against LHP (regardless of what he's doing in MLB) and simply call up Jason Donald (who would, like Valbuena, be playing 2B every day) to take his place, while Valbuena's service time issue is rectified. In that scenario, the Indians get to see a body of work put forth by both Louie the Fifth and Donald while ensuing that Valbuena's service time issue is fixed.

Regardless of the machinations in the bullpen and in the lineup, the big issues are still in the rotation as outlined by Ryan Richards (usually of the LGT), who wrote a great piece for The Hardball Times . In it, he is right to assert that "by this time next year, the Indians will have taken a big step forward if they have only a couple spots in the rotation to fill, instead of having to fill the entire rotation" and absolutely nails the major issue staring the Indians in the face as 2010 dawns:
The absence of starting pitching throughout the organization was what largely led to last year's mid-season trades of Lee and Martinez, and while the Indians now have some depth thanks to those deals, they don't yet have a credible rotation. The three pitchers who are expected to head the staff (Jake Westbrook, Justin Masterson, and Fausto Carmona) all have serious flaws, and in most rotations would be classified as back-end projects. Westbrook hasn't thrown a pitch in the majors in almost two seasons, Carmona was a disaster in 2009, and Masterson is still transitioning from the bullpen. Again, that's the top of the rotation.

As a quick aside, here's a little snippet about one of the guys at the top of the rotation from Nick Cafardo's Sunday Baseball Notes
column in the Boston Globe:

"Looking for a good trade-deadline pitching option? Westbrook will be Cleveland's Opening Day starter after spending the last two seasons recuperating from Tommy John surgery. Westbrook, 32, won 44 games from 2004-06 and will earn $11 million in the final year of a three-year, $33 million deal. He has had a strong spring training and looks to be healthy."

As for the back of the rotation (and it will be interesting to see how the Wood injury affects the Indians' decision on who starts the season in the rotation and if one of the pitchers starts the season in the bullpen), here's an interesting little quote from Acta concerning Spring Training results against what the coaching staff may be looking for in terms of performance:

"Talbot wasn't as sharp as he was the last time, but he did make pitches when he had to. Too bad he ran out of pitches," Acta said, alluding to Talbot having reached his pitch limit by the time he struck out Corey Brown for the first out in the fourth.

"Huff stayed aggressive and continued to pound the strike zone," Acta added, discounting the home runs off the lefty by Kevin Kouzmanoff and Matt Carson.

Acta said this after "Unleash the Fury", Mitch Talbot, went 3 1/3 scoreless innings on Saturday and Dave Huff gave up 3 earned runs in 4 innings, also on Saturday. How much of this is empty quotes or motivational tactics or even the truth remains to be seen, but it's a lesson to not look too closely at Spring Training numbers or even quotes in an attempt to read the tea leaves.

Back to the piece on issues facing the Indians, here's a piece on the Detroit pitching staff from Rob Neyer at ESPN , reacting to the rumors that Dontrelle Willis may be working his way back into the Tigers' rotation:

** Max Scherzer averaged fewer than six innings per start in the National League last season;*

** Jeremy Bonderman is 14-14 with a 4.96 ERA over the last three seasons;*

** Nate Robertson is 18-27 with a 5.52 ERA over the last three seasons; and*

** Dontrelle Willis is ... well, you know about Dontrelle Willis.*

They say Eddie Bonine's in the rotation mix, too.

If you choose whichever three of those you like, and add them to Verlander and Rick Porcello, do you think you've got the rotation of a contending team? All those bad contracts -- Willis and Bonderman and Robertson, but also Magglio Ordonez and Carlos Guillen -- eventually had to roost, and it looks like this is the Year of the Chicken.

To go further with the topic of the Central, Fangraphs has been running a countdown of organizations from #30 to #1 with Dave Cameron of Fangraphs explaining the evaluation process thusly:

Having a chance of winning it all this year is great. Having a great farm system is great. Having a forward thinking management staff is great. But by themselves, none of those things are enough to earn a high grade overall. We're really trying to highlight the balance between winning now and winning in the future. There will be teams that are high on the list because of how good they may be in 2011 or 2012, while teams that are better in 2010 will be behind them. It's not just a short term thing, and these aren't projected order of finish for 2010. It's our

perspective on the total health of where each team is, relative to their peers, going forward.

The countdown has only made it to #21 and it is more than informative as they've analyzed both current and future talent for each team. You may find it interesting that 3 of the teams in the Central rank among the bottom 10 ranked to date…and none of those three teams in the bottom 10 are the Indians:

Detroit Tigers - #21

You can't build a long term winner through free agency alone, and the Tigers are now paying the price for some of the contracts they've handed out in years past. They're attempting to rebuild the core of the team while also contending, but from my perspective, it looks like they're not going to get maximum results from either effort. The effect – an older team with lots of future question marks that isn't quite good enough to win in 2010. That's not a great spot to be in.

Chicago White Sox - #24

But while this is not a bad team, neither is it a good team, and the future doesn't look especially bright...With the Twins moving into a new park that should increase their revenues, the division will only get more challenging, and the White Sox are in danger of getting left behind. 2010 is going to be a critical year this team. With some breaks, they could challenge for a playoff spot, but they also need to continue to add young talent to the organization. Trying to do both at the same time is not easy.

Kansas City Royals - #29

The Royals are behind the curve, and they've got a lot of catching up to do before they can contend again. Moore may believe in his process, but he shouldn't. The Royals are bad now, they're going to be bad next year, and they'll be bad until someone injects some new thought into that front office.

Take all that for what it's worth (and the Indians could easily show up as #20 on the list, not too far removed from the rest of their AL Central brothers), but the analysis on both the White Sox and Tigers attempting to simultaneously compete and add young talent does bring to mind those Indians' teams of the early 2000s. Back then, the Indians thought that they could have their cake and eat it too as they attempted to contend and rebuild at the same time. We all know how that worked out for them in that it just delayed the "tear-down" that began with the Colon deal, so how the newest "tear-down" plays out should be begin to have answers in 2010.

To that end, in case you haven't seen it, there's an even-handed and (dare I say) optimistic season preview for the Indians at CBS Sports.com
that gets into the whole "managing the cycles" speech that we've been hearing for a while now.

Past that "old news" here's a bit that I haven't seen elsewhere that gets to that point of contention vs. rebuilding, which is a quote attributed to Sandy, talking about the team today compared to the teams of the early 90s, when he arrived in Cleveland:

"I think the amount of talent we have here now is a little more we had back then," Alomar, now the team's first-base coach, says of those early-'90s Indians. "We had some talent then, but there was no mix of veteran players. Now there's Grady Sizemore, Travis Hafner, Jake Westbrook. There are a few front-line players.

"Back in '90, '91 and '92, it took a little while until Eddie Murray, Dennis Martinez and Orel Hershiser came. That's when everything got put together and we were really good.

'When John Hart felt guys were ready to compete, that's when he brought in Murray, Martinez, Hershiser, Tony Pena."

At first blush, it looks like an extremely positive comment until you see the years that Alomar references. The records of the three teams that he mentions were:

1990 – 77-85
1991 – 57-105
1992 – 76-86

As long as Alomar's not talking about the 1991 season (his second with the club…and did you know that he only averaged 70 games a year from 1991 to 1995?), when the Indians lost 105 games, I think I'm OK with the comparison. It should be noted that in 1993, the team went 76-86 again just before the break-out (if interrupted) 2004 season, so while Alomar's words look great in that "the amount of talent we have here now is a little more than we had back then", putting it in the proper context and timeframe is important.

Is the team destined for a couple of 76 to 77 win seasons before (hopefully) breaking out into contention, or is the team only a few steps away from that break-out?

With Wood on the shelf, Branyan still yet to play in a Cactus League game and the roster finally rounding into shape, the future may be starting sooner than previously thought on the North Coast…and that may not be such a bad thing.