Opening Day is only a week and a half away and with that in mind, let's get some tomahawks in the air to catch up on the latest and greatest (comparatively speaking) from The Reservation as well as hitting on the activity of another certain AL Central team…

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While the news of Joe Mauer re-upping with the Twins being met with nearly universal praise, there is a feeling about it that I just can't shake. As much as I love the fact that Mauer is staying in his hometown of the Twin Cities from the perspective of a local prep star achieving greatness in his hometown, the risk associated with the Twins meting out a deal like this (which again, I LOVE from the standpoint of a player staying with the team that drafted and developed him) is too big to ignore in that a huge portion of the Twins' overall payroll figures to be given out to one player for a better portion of the next decade.

When Mark Teixiera was inked to a contract similar to Mauer's, his 2009 salary ($20M) contributed a little less than 10% of the overall Yankee payroll for 2009. If Joe Mauer is going to be paid $23M annually starting in 2011, how much of the overall Twins' payroll do you think he will make up?

Yes, the Twins have more revenue streams now that they're moving into a new ballpark and they HAD to sign Mauer, but the Twins' highest payroll prior to the 2010 season over the past 10 years was $71.4M in 2007. Maybe Mauer's signing signals the beginning of a brand new day in Minnesota, but short of the Twins bumping up their annual payroll to the $125M range, it's more likely that the Twins will attempt to build a team, ostensibly around Mauer, surrounding him with the same cheap talent that they've come to rely on for years.

The bigger issue than that however, is that while some will point to the Mauer deal as proof that competitive balance is alive and well in perpetuity and a sign that it's up to teams like the Twins to "pony up" the cash for their own stars, the opposite is true as the risk that the Twins are exposing themselves to is a burden that will never fall onto the shoulders of the large-market teams.

Despite everything that you will read to the contrary in the coverage of this deal, the Mauer deal

only further highlights the disparity in MLB's competitive balance as (God forbid) if something should happen to Joe Mauer, in terms of injury or effectiveness, the Twins will find themselves with an albatross around their necks through the 2018 season.
Let me repeat that - through the 2018 season.

By no means am I suggesting that this injury or regression is obviously in Mauer's future, but just consider the Hafner deal that the Indians meted out in the middle of the 2007 season.

First, take a look at the statistics for each player in the three years leading up to their extensions:

Hafner 2004 – Age 27

.311 BA / .410 OBP / .583 SLG / .993 OPS with 41 2B, 28 HR and 109 RBI in 573 PA

Hafner 2005 – Age 28

.305 BA / .408 OBP / .595 SLG / 1.003 OPS with 42 2B, 33 HR, and 108 RBI in 578 PA

Hafner 2006 – Age 29

.308 BA / .439 OBP / .659 SLG / 1.097 OPS with 31 2B, 42 HR, and 117 RBI in 563 PA

Mauer 2007 – Age 24

.293 BA / .382 OBP / .426 SLG / .808 OPS with 27 2B, 7 HR, and 60 RBI in 471 PA

Mauer 2008 – Age 25

.328 BA / .413 OBP / .451 SLG / .864 OPS with 31 2B, 9 HR, and 85 RBI in 633 PA

Mauer 2009 – Age 26

.365 BA / .444 OBP / .587 SLG / 1.081 OPS with 30 2B, 28 HR, and 96 RBI in 606 PA

We all can see the age difference in the comparison and by no means am I suggesting that Joe Mauer and Travis Hafner are similar players as Mauer's positional value as a catcher (for the time being) trumps the restrictions that Hafner being a DH places on the flexibility of the Indians. Further, Mauer's prime years are still ahead of him while Hafner's are obviously behind him…and perhaps already were when he signed his extension in 2007 in hindsight.

Also, by this is not an attempt to besmirch Joe Mauer as a baseball player, just to remind people that Hafner ranked in 2nd in OPS in the AL during the 2004 and 2005 seasons and topped all AL batters in terms of OPS for the 2006 season. So as much as Indians' fans are quick to point to Hafner being on the current roster as a contractual mistake, the 3-year body of work was there to justify his extension, just not in hindsight. That extension (the one that weighs

the Indians' ability to be financially flexible on a number of levels), it should be noted was for 4 additional years of Hafner at a price of $57M additional to his previous contract, a paltry sum compared to the 8-year, $184M that the Twins just committed to Mauer.

The introduction of the Hafner comparison is simply to serve as a startling reminder that past performance does not guarantee future success. Realizing that Travis Hafner (circa 2007) and Joe Mauer (circa 2010) exist on different planes, there is compelling evidence to suggest that a significant drop-off is possible for Mauer because of the possibility of a major injury (he is a catcher and has caught 600 games, a milestone that Sandy Alomar did not hit until 1996, when he was a 30-year-old, 6 years removed from his Rookie of the Year season of 1990) or serious regression because of a lingering injury.

While all of MLB is flush in flowery tones and "this is right for baseball" talk, the cautionary tales of Travis Hafner and Mike Sweeney (lest anyone forget that Sweeney averaged a .931 OPS in the 4 years prior to his extension in KC, after which he never played more than 122 games in a season while earning $55M over 5 years) are what bears worth mentioning in the context of Mauer's new contract. They need to be referenced not to douse the excitement for the Mauer family and fans of the Twins, but instead to point to specific instances in which small-market teams were "doing right" in extending their own productive players, only to regret the contracts not too long after the signatures were dry.

With the opening of Target Field and with the Mauer signing, the Twins seem to entering a new era of their existence, with a new ballpark and new revenue streams, allowing them to offer a player like Mauer a deal commensurate with his abilities. What comes with that however, is risk and while an extension to Mauer can certainly work out just as beautifully as everyone sees it today, it can just as quickly devolve into the organization-choking contracts that burdened the Royals and the Indians with Sweeney and Hafner, new revenue streams or not.

The risk has been assumed by the Twins and it's a risk that the large-market teams could only assume if they committed 20% or more to one particular player on their roster, a preposterous proposal. How Mauer's performance stacks up against his contract will go a long way in determining whether the Twins just opened the door to consistent contention in the AL Central or whether it will serve as an anchor to the organization to the depths of the division.

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Quickly returning to the topic of Hafner, the topic du jour certainly seems to be that Pronk (or some facsimile of Pronk) has returned based on his Spring Training numbers (2 2B and 2 HR in 26 AB) and that may certainly be the case. However, I've played this "get-my-hopes-up" game too long (since about mid-2007) with Hafner's shoulder and his inability to play (much less perform) in consecutive games prevents me from wholeheartedly buying into what some may be selling.

Look, I want to believe that the monster that put the numbers up at the top of the piece lurks somewhere within that #48 jersey, but I'll wait until Hafner is playing in consecutive games, turning on fastballs and turning pitchers' mistakes into Pronkville (if The Mezz still bears his nickname) souvenirs before declaring definitively that Pronk has returned.

The ball flies in the desert air and there's only so much optimism (much less that of the type that has come back to bite me before) in me to go around…

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In fact, since there's only so much unfounded optimism and hope to go around, I might as well be forthright about why the idea that Pronk is back is relegated to the borders of my brain. Truth is, I'm in the process of emotionally vesting myself completely in the return of one Senor Fausto Carmona.

I know…I know, the same thing applies with Carmona, in that I've played the "get-up-my-hopes" game with Carmona probably more than I have with Hafner. However, if Spring Training is all about pitchers "catching up" to the hitters, explain to my irrational mind how Carmona is leading the Cactus League in ERA and flat-out dominated the Cubs' regulars earlier in the week?

If you're not on board on the "Fausto is Back" bus that I'm driving, let's go to the quotes on record after Fausto went 6 scoreless innings , allowing only two hits and, most importantly, no walks…

***Mike Redmond*** *– "I can't believe he was any better in '07 than he was today…Those last two innings, he took it to another level. He was phenomenal."*

***Manny Acta*** *– "That was great to see -- especially against the Cubs' 'A' lineup…He didn't even reach his pitch limit. That he could go six on 68 pitches tells you a lot."*

***Lou Piniella*** *– "The best Spring Training start I've seen here of any of the Spring Training pitchers who've faced us. He made it look relatively easy…hard sinker, pitched inside, had a nice breaking ball. He made it look easy. He was impressive."*

***Redmond*** *– "I know I'd much rather catch him than try to hit against him… [Cubs batters] weren't having a lot of fun. You could see him get more confidence with each inning. You could see him get stronger as the game went along."*

***Redmond*** *– "Today, nobody could go up there to take pitches. They had to swing, because he was pounding the strike zone."*

Sound like the same soundbytes that we heard from Victor and the rest of the merry band of 2007 Tribesman?

The final quote is obviously the most important quote among them all (and remember that Redmond was on that Minnesota team with Torii Hunter, who said that facing Carmona in 2007 "felt like being hung-over"), in that the issue that has arisen with Carmona since that 2007 season has been his sudden predilection for walks , a trend that reared its ugly head for him after the 2007 season.

While I attempt to temper my enthusiasm that some semblance of an effective pitcher has been found in the Arizona desert, let's all remember that Carmona just turned 26 this past December

(Trevor Crowe is a month older, by the by) and even if he never fully re-captures the dominance of his 2007 season (see how I'm tempering my enthusiasm), the prospect of having Carmona as an effective upper-portion-of-the-rotation starter goes longer in making this team competitive in a shorter timeframe than any other (mildly conceivable) possibility on the roster.

Again, let us not forget that the Indians still hold club options on Carmona through the 2014 season (during which he'd be paid $12M), when he'll be all of 30 years old. If he's even a middle-of-the-rotation innings-eater and no longer the ¡Fausto! that so famously could not be distracted by midges, the most questionable portion of the Indians in the short-and-long-term future can find an answer.

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While we're on the topic of promising signs this Spring, realizing that Spring Training stats are just that, how about the fact that after Monday's tilt against the Cubs, the Indians led all MLB teams in Spring Training with 6.63 runs per game?

Sure, but the offense was supposed to be the strength of the team, right?

Well, consider that (after Monday's game) the Indians' pitching staff had the lowest ERA in Spring Training at 3.38, the lowest WHIP in Spring Training at 1.20, the lowest H/9 in Spring Training at 8.20, and the second lowest Batting Average Against in Spring Training at .241

Curiously, the team ranked 28th in K/9 among all MLB teams this Spring, meaning that the Indians aren't blowing anybody away this Spring (OK, Masterson is with 13.94 K/9), but they're minimizing damage done by compiling the second lowest BB/9 this Spring and, as a result of that, ranked 7th in K/BB.

Maybe this is all a desert mirage, or maybe this "revolutionary" virtue of pounding the strike zone currently being preached is finding some attentive ears. Regardless, it's hard not to notice the BB/9 being put up by the "competitors" for the rotation:

Talbot – 0.79
Carmona – 1.38
Huff – 1.46
Masterson – 2.61
Westbrook – 2.84
Laffey – 3.38

Beyond those guys, Carrasco has compiled a 2.25 ERA and a 0.92 WHIP with 8 K and only 3 BB in his 12 Spring innings while Rondon did not allow a run in 5 2/3 innings, notching 5 K against 0 BB en route to a 0.88 WHIP before being cut late last week.

If those are your 8 top starting options for 2010 (sorry, Jeremy), maybe some surprises are coming in terms of the Rotation…or maybe it is not yet April and Spring Fever is running rampant on the North Coast.

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In case you haven't noticed (and judging by comment activity and activity on various Tribe forums…you haven't), Austin Kearns has made a little bit of a push recently in Goodyear as he attempts to claim a spot on the 25-man roster out of Spring Training. With the likelihood that Rusty Branyan's going to start the season on the DL growing (and with Tony Lastoria reporting that Mike Brantley's likely to start the season in AAA and stay for "a month of two" , regardless of extenuating circumstances), it would certainly seem that LF would be there for the taking for Kearns at the outset of the season.

With Kearns starting to perform in Spring Training, throw this log on top of that fire as Jon-Paul Morosi at Fox Sports reports on the stipulations contained in the "minor-league" contracts signed by Kearns and Jamey Wright :

*Two players competing for spots on the Indians' Opening Day roster have "out" clauses in their contracts, but one club official said those provisions "will not have an impact" on the makeup of the team.*

***Right-hander Jamey Wright can ask for his release if he's not on the major-league roster by April 2.*** *Wright, who is competing for a bullpen spot, is 1-0 with a 1.17 ERA in five appearances this spring.*

***Outfielder Austin Kearns can make a similar request if the Indians don't place him on their roster by April 3.*** *Kearns has batted .250 in 11 games while making a bid for playing time in left field.*

Um…so, Opening Day is April 5th, so both basically need to be on the MLB roster by Opening Day or they're free to go wherever they wish. Given the Branyan injury and the Brantley service time "issue", does anyone else get the feeling that Kearns is going to make this team and is likely to be the starting LF? You could believe the lead-in to Morosi's snippet that "those provisions 'will not have an impact' on the makeup of the team", but I have a hard time believing that given the injuries to Branyan and Wood (plus the service time management of Brantley) that so obviously open the door for those two players to make the club out of Goodyear.

If Brantley heads to Columbus and Branyan heads off to the DL, that would put Kearns in LF, LaPorta at 1B, Crowe as the 4th OF, and Andy Marte as the back-up 1B/3B to start the season…sound about right?

As for the other player mentioned by Morosi, you might as well as pencil Jamey Wright into one of the three spots now open in the bullpen, with Jensen Lewis likely getting another and either Aaron Laffey or Mitch Talbot getting the final spot.

Fully aware of the school of thought that exists that Laffey or Huff is better served starting the season in Columbus to "keep them stretched out" in case a starter is needed, I'm still of the belief that there's going to be A LOT of innings for these long men to eat up, particularly in the early going, and having the cavalry (if you can really call these guys the "cavalry") in the bullpen

instead of in Columbus continues to make more sense to me. Regardless, all of these guys are going to get plenty of starts this year, but that's a topic for another day.

Back to the "out clauses", if Wright isn't on the team on April 2nd (and there's no reason for him not to now that Wood is injured and the Indians seem to be sitting on an abundance of opportunity in the bullpen), then he can explore options on his own and one would have to think that the Indians would give Wright the first shot at sticking with the parent club over players retaining options or without those "out clauses" in their Minor League deals.

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Finally, it is worth noting that MLB Network has been running their "30 Clubs in 30 Days" series and on Wednesday night at 7:00 PM…YOUR Cleveland Indians went under the microscope.

In case you missed the first airing, the show will re-air on Thursday at 9:00AM, 11:00 AM, 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM on the MLB Network.