With a house full of in-laws for the big baptism this weekend, let's get rolling right away on a Lazy Sunday before anyone figures out that I'm hammering away at a computer keyboard…

Much of the uncertainty regarding the fringes of the 25-man roster has focused on the "winner" of the back-end-of-the-rotation competition as Huff, Laffey, and Talbot continue to battle for the spots in the rotation. With Talbot now having already secured a spot in said rotation , I'd like to put in my order for some crow with some Sriracha sauce…though it is still March. The corresponding move of The Babyfaced Bulldog heading to the bullpen shouldn't come as much of a surprise if you've been coming here regularly as the idea that a long man for this team would seem to be a pretty important role to fill to perhaps eat more than a few innings, particularly in the early going.

With Talbot in the rotation and Laffey headed off to the bullpen, the last spot in the rotation has now come down to Dave Huff now, quite suddenly , Los Carrasco. The inclusion of Carrasco comes as a bit of a surprise (though he has had a good camp) and frankly, I have trouble believing that Carrasco is seen as a legitimate option to break camp. To me, his sudden inclusion is not much more than a veiled attempt to build Carrasco's confidence and to put a sense of urgency in Huff's push. In fact, I think that Terry Pluto probably has it right in the new "battle" between Huff and Carrasco when he writes , "hard to know if the Indians are serious about Carrasco making the rotation, or if this is designed to push Huff to throw more strikes early in the count."

As the Opening Day rotation is finally coming into focus, and with all of the hand-wringing (admittedly done here) about which of these pitchers are going to fill out the back-end of that rotation, I thought it would be a nice time to introduce a piece from Marc Hulet at Fangraphs, who asserts that "Fifth Starters Don't Exist" . While the "analysis" at Fangraphs can tend to overly weigh their own curious formulas and valuations and get bogged down in some newly created metrics, Hulet's piece (and subsequent one…which is coming) has some fascinating numbers on how many teams in MLB realistically had five bona-fide starters throughout the course of the season.

Hulet's research found the following regarding starting pitchers and 5-man rotations:

If we look back to the 2009 season, only two teams had five starters on their pitching staffs that made 24 or more starts: the Chicago Cubs and the Colorado Rockies.

• All 30 teams had at least one pitcher make 24 or more starts.
• Twenty-six teams had two pitchers make 24 or more starts.
• Then the number drops to 22 teams that had three pitchers make 24 or more starts.
• Then we hit a cliff. Only nine teams were able to rely on four pitchers to make 24 or more starts.

Think about that – less than a 1/3 of teams in MLB had 4 pitchers make 24 or more starts last season!

Obviously, the Indians weren't one of those teams as Carmona was the only pitcher to log 24 starts, meaning that the 24 number may have been created to include the Indians in the "All 30 teams…" portion of the exercise. Considering that Ant Reyes, Tomo Ohka, Scott Lewis, and Zach Jackson combined for 16 starts last year or nearly 10% of the 2009 games, does anyone have trouble believing this idea that the back-end-of-the-rotation for most teams falls somewhere between "hope" and "prayer"?

Regardless, in light of Hulet's findings, I find his proposal to this issue that he finds in teams always chasing that 5-man rotation (sometimes to the detriment of developing players or receiving value from overpaid veterans like Livan Hernandez or Sidney Ponson) even more fascinating as he takes the next step and presents "A New Approach to Fifth Starters" .

While the idea that the Indians are chasing that mythical 5-man rotation doesn't apply to what we're looking at for 2010, his "approach" does hold some merit in attempting to figure out which pitchers are going to start games for the Indians in 2010 as it goes a little something like this:

The best bet is to focus on securing four starters that can make 24 starts or more. In the fifth spot in the rotation, a three-man job-share could then be developed and it would break down like this:

1. A long reliever who would serve as the seventh arm in the 'pen and be expected to make eight to 10 starts on the year. Ideally, this would be a proven veteran who could stick at the MLB level all season.

2. A pitching prospect that projects to be a fringe No. 3 or 4 with two or three minor league options remaining. He would be introduced to the Majors in this low-pressure role over the next two to three seasons before officially (hopefully) graduating to the role of a reliable third or fourth starter. In this role, the pitcher would need to make about 10 starts at the MLB level each season.

3. A minor league "veteran" pitcher (somewhere in the 25-30 year old range) who has been unable to stick in the Majors – and still has at least one minor league option left – and can be relied on to make at least five starts on the season.

--snip--

So, to recap… This job-share plan is good because…

A) The inevitable pitching injuries will have a lesser (negative) impact
B) It will help train young pitchers for an eventual larger role
C) It's cost efficient

While there is not a clean application of this for the Indians (and while the "best bet is to focus on securing four starters that can make 24 starts or more" leaves the Indians out at the first sentence), I think that the idea of concocting a witch's brew of arms for the rotation does hold some merit in that it points out that there are certainly going to be games available for starting and innings out there for these guys to pitch.

Thus, if we're looking at the 2010 Indians, who are really looking to fill out two of the final spots in the rotation and not just one and, they would seem to have fringe-MLB 6 arms that factor into the rotational mix this year, some more obviously than others.

While Hulet's idea of a "veteran long reliever" may not necessarily apply to the Indians in the sense that the Indians are probably not going to give Jamey Wright 8-10 starts this year, they do have two guys who are out of options who would have to "stick at the MLB level all season" in Unleash the Fury, Mitch Talbot, and, to a lesser extent, Jeremy Sowers.

If we're extrapolating out two rotation spots instead of one (as Hulet does), expecting Talbot and Sowers to combine for 16 to 20 starts is more than reasonable…assuming Talbot gets 15 to 19 of those starts.

Hulet's criteria of "a pitching prospect that projects to be a fringe No. 3 or 4 with two or three minor league options remaining" to be "introduced to the Majors in this low-pressure role over the next two to three seasons before officially (hopefully) graduating to the role of a reliable third or fourth starter" could apply to either the tandem of Huff and Laffey or the duo of Carrasco and Rondon. For the purposes of this exercise, I'll go with Carrasco and Rondon in that they'll both be slowly introduced into the Indians' rotation this year. While each (hopefully) has a higher ceiling than being a "fringe #3 or #4", ingratiating each into the rotation win an eye past 2010 makes a lot of sense. Expecting them to combine for 10 starts this season is likely to be on the conservative side because of circumstances outside of those #4 and #5 spots, but I'll get to that in a bit.

For the final criteria of "a minor league "veteran" pitcher (somewhere in the 25-30 year old range) who has been unable to stick in the Majors – and still has at least one minor league option left", I'd put the likes of Huff and Laffey above this designation and I'd certainly expect them to start more than 10 games between the two of them, but it gets back to the idea that "back-end-of-the-rotation-by-committee" that offshoots from Hulet's proposal is one that's going to take place in Cleveland this summer. What Hulet asserts makes sense on a number of levels in that it allows the team to discern as much as possible about a number of different players (at a reasonable cost) and allows multiple arms to see starts in MLB.

Given that there is so much uncertainty around the back-end-of-the-rotation (as well as the front), as much attention is paid to who breaks camp with the team (again, admittedly by me), it's more likely that the question of who starts the season in Cleveland or Columbus or in the rotation or in the bullpen is ancillary to the better discussion of how many starts and innings are each of these pitchers going to throw for the parent club.

Tony Lastoria and I touched on in this week's "Smoke Signals" , but the starts and the innings are going to be there for these guys, regardless of who starts the season where and how the initial slotting of Talbot, Laffey, Huff, Carrasco, and Rondon plays out on April 5th. I don't think that it's much of a stretch to say that it's going to be a veritable carousel at the back end of that rotation, not to mention a bullpen in which pitchers like Sipp and Smith and even Chris Perez retain options…and those are the guys guaranteed a spot out of Goodyear.

Back to that rotational mix, while the Indians are on record as saying that their top 3 is essentially set in stone, that tune is certain to change as the hills and valleys of the season present themselves. That is, if Westbrook gets traded or if Masterson is not able to improve his command or struggles against LH hitters or if Carmona shows that his Spring performance is just a mirage (breaking my heart in the process), the opportunities to start games are going to be there for the taking for the "losers" of the Spring Training battle or the pitchers that figure to start the season in Columbus.

While Masterson in the rotation and, most notably, Smith and Sipp in the bullpen may be guaranteed spots out of Goodyear, that means little on Memorial Day (or sooner) if any or all of them are struggling with options remaining and with plenty of other arms waiting for their turn in Columbus.

That being said, I'm all for a long leash for a couple of these guys (particularly in the rotation) in an attempt to give them consistent starts in MLB to see if they can be counted on for the rotation past 2010. Even with those long leashes for a couple of these guys, I don't think that it's a stretch to say that there's a possibility that we see 5 to 6 starters (I would probably exclude Sowers from that sextet that was used to flesh out the Fangraphs' piece) get anywhere from 12 to 20 starts this year for the Tribe as they attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff not just at the back-end-of-the-rotation, but throughout the whole pitching staff.

Who gets closer to 12 starts and who gets closer to 20 starts will bear itself out based on results in Cleveland (and Columbus) instead of just in Goodyear. Regardless, with Laffey going to the bullpen and either Huff or Carrasco heading to Columbus, their role and standing in the organization is going to evolve throughout the season and the opportunity will be there for them (and others) to assert themselves in what is likely to be a constantly fluctuating pitching staff.

Moving on to the local fishwraps, Terry Pluto (and it nice to have him on the ground in Goodyear, where he combines with Castro to make all other outlets obsolete) had an interesting bullet-pointed column on Friday
, in which he pointed out that Matt LaPorta has yet to play an inning in the OF this Spring.

Still thinking Rusty's the Opening Day 1B?

I don't (and neither does Shelly Ocker)…but I still don't think that means that Brantley's the Opening Day LF.

Not that I don't WANT Brantley to be the Opening Day LF, I just don't think that he is. Unless Manny Acta brings with him a new philosophy that he's able to convince the organization otherwise, the strategy of the Indians (love it or hate it…and I probably know which one of those feelings apply) is to start the season with their young 'uns in AAA, calling them up later in the season to replace the player that has proved to be the washed-up veteran. The clause in Austin Kearns' contract (and the service time issue with Brantley) makes me think that Kearns will get the nod in LF over Brantley.

Maybe this is Juan Gone-Grady all over again, but I think the extra year of control over Brantley in six years (when he's 28) means more to the Indians than two months to start the 2009 season with a 22-year-old Brantley.

Moving on, if you remember from last week (or even if you don't), Fangraphs is running an organizational ranking rundown (with the Tigers, White Sox, and Royals all coming in within the bottom 1/3 of MLB) and YOUR Cleveland Indians have made their appearance on the list, which attempts to measure the talent on hand for each team and the talent in the pipeline.

Since I know you've been waiting breathlessly to find out where the Indians rank, according to Fangraphs, in MLB so I'll delay the announcement no longer.

The Indians came in at…#13…cue the applause and the backslaps all around!

Obviously this is a wildly subjective ranking (and Fangraphs admits as much), but it is interesting to see a perspective in the context of how the team stacks up (in their eyes at least) against the rest of MLB, and not just at the MLB level.

While the piece evaluating the future talent is erroneous at times (asserting that "Choo might be a platoon player when looking back at the recent swaps for other teams' minor-league talent) and laughable at others, the one evaluating the current talent is a nice, clean (if not overwhelmingly insightful) look at the MLB roster , and here's the big finish from Dave Cameron at Fangraphs in the summary piece :

The core of the team is young and cheap, as the organization has quality players or high level prospects at nearly every position on the diamond. The rotation is a big question mark, but there are a quantity of arms to sort through with differing levels of potential.

The bullpen is full of young power arms who rack up strikeouts. Give this team a year to mature and figure out how many starters they need to add, and they could be a serious contender in the AL again. There's that much young talent in place.

And, despite the backlash against the Indians front office for the lack of results, this is still one of the best run organizations in the game. They have a large enough payroll to win, especially considering how many below market contracts they'll have on the team, and the farm system is deep enough to provide necessary trade chips for when the organization shifts into go-for-it mode.

Don't sleep on the Indians – they're on the verge of being good once again.

While I know that few people who read this are "sleeping on the Indians", with Opening Day 8 days away, the question of where that "verge of being good once again" actually exists is where answers need to come in 2010.

The roster is starting to flesh itself out, with the final decisions on the last spot in the rotation (my guess – Huff), the last two spots in the bullpen (my guess – Jen Lewis and Jamey Wright), the Branyan fiasco (my guess – Branyan to DL, Brantley to AAA, Kearns in LF, LaPorta at 1B), and the remaining bench spots (my guess – Marte, Crowe, and Hernandez) coming later in the week. However, the turnover from the Opening Day roster to the roster at even Memorial Day could be pronounced and heavy while the Indians filter through their options (particularly in the rotation) as they attempt to answer more questions about the team going forward instead of creating more questions past 2010.

If that can be accomplished, with certain players asserting themselves into the club's future plans (again, particularly in the rotation), 2010 could be viewed as a success, regardless of record, and as a jumping-off point for the Indians to be "good once again".