It being Easter and with the fickle winds of Spring in Cleveland casting a favorable eye on us over the past couple of days, I'm not sure if anyone is aware of this but…um, Opening Day is tomorrow. While talk in Cleveland has revolved around the Cavs' imminent playoff push (and rightfully so) and the build-up NFL Draft (not so justifiably, though it is Cleveland), the Indians' season ranks somewhere ahead of the Gladiators (I think) and behind a team from CSU's conference making the national championship game. Nevertheless, it isn't Spring on the North Coast if the Erie Warriors aren't getting ready to step onto a green patch and play the kids' game that we all live and die for.

Regardless of the disappointments of the last few seasons and the lowered expectations heading into this year, watching baseball that counts is close once again and, because of that, the world is feels nearly complete once more.

Off of the pulpit and off to settle a 3-year-old down who has attempted to eat his body weight in sugar by noon, let's get this going on a Lazy Sunday that's a little out of the ordinary, but a little more in-depth (OK, more than "a little" than most season previews that you're going to find out there.

Before getting into it however, it is worth noting that the Season Previews have come out en masse, from Castro's piece on the rotation dictating the Indians' season , to Vince Grzegorek's…um, "admittedly unorthodox" preview , to Pete Gammons calling the Indians a "team to watch" while SI.com's Jon Heyman calls them a team that "could surprise" , over to Joe Posnanski's SI preview on the AL Central , right down to Terry Pluto's multiple part season preview (with pieces on the rotation , the bullpen , the offense ,

the defense
, and the definitive overview, which is not yet online), there is no shortage of reading material for tomorrow…if you haven't already caught up on all of those pieces worth more than just a cursory glance.

In addition to all of those pen-to-paper (so to speak) previews, Tony Lastoria and I were lucky enough to welcome the two members of the local mainstream media that make all other writers superfluous as Terry Pluto and Anthony Castrovince (who accepted the challenge to create his own Bruce Springsteen-only playlist for the Indians
) to last Thursday's
"Smoke Signals"
. The information and insight from both was (unsurprisingly) solid and puts the events of Spring Training and the season that lies ahead into the proper context.

With all of that out of the way, let's get right into a "season preview" that has become a bit of a tradition around these parts and take a look at the events about to transpire over the next 162 baseball games played by YOUR Cleveland Indians…at least according to one fertile imagination:

April 5th vs. Chicago White Sox

Setting the tone for the 2010 season for the White Sox' rotation, Mark Buehrle throws a complete game for the South Siders in a 3-2 victory over the Indians on Opening Day. Jake Westbrook, in his first appearance since 2008, allows only one run in 6 innings, leaving with a 2-1 lead after the 6th. However, in what will become a familiar theme for the early portion of the season, the pitchers meant to serve as the bridge to Chris Perez in the 9th inning struggle as Tony Sipp and Joe Smith give up 2 runs in the 7th inning, leading to the first Indians loss of the season.

April 14th vs. Texas Rangers

Matt LaPorta hits two HR to key a 10-8 victory over the Rangers as the Indians are able to overcome a rough outing from Justin Masterson and are saved by 3 scoreless relief innings from Aaron Laffey. LaPorta, settling in at 1B over the first two weeks, will continue to impress at the plate throughout the season, eventually moving up to the 4th spot in the order by the end of the season, breaking up some of the LH bats that populate the Indians lineup and firmly establishing himself as a "core" player for the Indians with 1B being his position of both the present and the future.

April 28th vs. The Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim within Orange County

Fausto Carmona pitches a complete game with 85 pitches against the Angels as the Indians win the day by a 6-1 margin, avoiding a series sweep. Angels' CF Torii Hunter attempts to wave away reporters assembled at his locker after the game saying, "I thought that guy was gone…man, I hoped that guy was gone forever. I don't want to see that sinker ever again. With Reddy (Indians' catcher Mike Redmond, a former Minnesota teammate of Hunter) in my ear all

game, I'm telling Skipper to forget my name when he's filling up the lineup card if we're scheduled to face him later in the season…I want none of what he's dealing again."

April 30th vs. Minnesota Twins

Travis Hafner and Jhonny Peralta launch back-to-back 9th inning HR in a walk-off win for Tribe against Twins' closer Jon Rauch in what will be Rauch's final game as the Twins' 9-inning reliever. The victory allows the Indians to finish the first month of the season with a 9-13 record, in 3rd place in the Central ahead of the similarly bullpen-challenged Minnesota club and the hapless Royals.

May 7th vs. Detroit Tigers

After some "minor setbacks" that push his return back about a month, Russell Branyan is activated off of the DL as Mike Brantley (struggling to get his sea legs under him in the first month) is optioned to Columbus to make room for Branyan as the original plan of Branyan at 1B-LaPorta in LF looks closer to becoming a reality. That "reality" is short-lived however when Branyan "tweaks his back" swinging (and missing) at a Max Scherzer fastball. While Branyan and the Indians insist that rest and therapy will return Branyan to the lineup in short order, he will be placed on the DL once again on Monday's off day as Brantley returns without ever having unpacked his bags in Columbus to assume the LF duties once again, duties he will not relinquish.

May 19th vs. Kansas City Royals

The Indians return to town after a road trip and are joined by Kerry Wood, who returns from the DL to fortify the bullpen, responsible for the club's recent 5-game losing streak and still struggling as roles and uses were never truly sorted out in Wood's absence. To make room for Wood, Tony Sipp is sent to Columbus as his struggles to find the strike zone have moved him out of any thought of contributing past the 5th inning. The bullpen makeover goes further when Jensen Lewis, having given up 5 HR in 8 appearances, accompanies Sipp on the trip to AAA as Saul Rivera is called up to take his spot. With Wood back in the bullpen, the Indians use the progression of Rafael Perez in the 7th, Chris Perez in the 8th, and Wood in the 9th to finally provide some semblance of consistency at the back end of the bullpen as the Indians top the Royals by a 6-5 margin, giving Mitch Talbot his first victory as an Indian.

May 22nd vs. Cincinnati Reds

The widespread roster machinations continue as Luis Valbuena, being used increasingly in recent weeks in a platoon with Mark Grudzielanek at 2B, is sent to Columbus after failing to get to three groundballs induced by Jake Westbrook in a 7-4 loss to the Reds. After the game, manager Manny Acta proclaims that, "with as many groundball pitchers as we have on this staff, failing to get to those balls is inexcusable and Luis knows better than that". To replace him at 2B, Jason Donald is called up as he is scorching AAA pitching for Columbus while providing stellar infield defense for the Clippers. Donald begins to play everyday for the Indians at 2B after his call-up, posting average numbers at the plate but combining with Asdrubal Cabrera to

provide an airtight middle of the infield defense that improves the “luck” of the groundball starters dramatically. The move of Valbuena to AAA and Donald to MLB is one that will remain in place until Valbuena ascends after rosters expand in September as he prepares to assume his role as Future Utility Infielder with Donald using the opportunity in 2010 to cement his place as the Indians’ 2B.

May 29th vs. New York Yankees

After a particularly demoralizing outing in a Tribe loss against the best lineup money can buy to drop the Wahoos to 19-29, Dave Huff is demoted to Columbus as the beating that he takes at the hands of the Yankee hitters is representative of the way that his 2010 season has started. Huff is replaced in the rotation by Carlos Carrasco, who is dominating AAA hitters while striking out nearly 13 hitters every 9 innings in Columbus. Carrasco uses the momentum gained in Columbus to assert himself the rotation behind a still-blazing Carmona and steady-as-she-goes Westbrook. With Talbot and Laffey thriving (relatively speaking) in their new roles as back-of-the-rotation starter and long man, and Masterson’s wild inconsistency from start to start, Carrasco establishes himself as the 3rd best starter on the team as the season progresses by avoiding the big innings that had previously plagued him and by using his superb change-up to keep MLB hitters off-balance.

June 3rd vs. Chicago White Sox

On the same day when he finishes just a triple shy of the cycle, Shin-Soo Choo (with Scott Boras singing his praises and perhaps pulling the strings to get the story in the magazine) is featured in a Sports Illustrated story on Choo being “Baseball’s Best-Kept Secret.” The headline rings true as, pacing the Indians’ potent offense from the #3 hole, Choo enters June with little fanfare despite leading the league in doubles and in the Top 5 in the AL in OPS, where he will stay consistently throughout the course of the season. In the SI piece, Boras declares, “if you don’t know about Chewie yet, you’re going to get to know him soon and someday he’s going to get paid like the elite player that he is”.
The groans from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario are audible.

June 17th vs. New York Mets

Mere days after being called up from Columbus, Carlos Santana hits 2 doubles and a HR off of Johan Santana and Mets’ relievers, as he sets the pace for a 10-8 victory. Santana’s extra-base hit total for the 6 games that he’s spent with the parent club (7) match the total put forth by the now-Columbus-bound Lou Marson in the first 2 months of the season. Santana will continue to rake offensively, though opposing teams run wild on the young catcher, stealing bases at a Hendersonian clip with few Caught Stealings to prevent them from continuing to run on Santana.

June 24th vs. Philadelphia Phillies

Rafael Perez enters the 7th inning with the bases loaded and nobody out preparing to face the middle of the Phillies’ lineup. After striking out Chase Utley, Perez induces a weak grounder to

2B from Ryan Howard, which is turned into the inning-ending twin killing. Perez bounds off of the mound, pumping his fist, looking like the Rafael Perez of old, as he has for the better part of the season, solidifying the 7th inning. Chris Perez and Kerry Wood mow down the Phillies in the 8th and the 9th, preserving the victory for former Phillies' farmhand Carlos Carrasco, who strikes out 9 in 6 innings while walking none on his way to getting the win in a 4-2 game in favor of the Tribe, now sitting in 4th in the Central with a 31-40 record.

July 9th vs. Tampa Bay Rays

After a loss at the hands of the AL East leading Rays, the Indians' top-of-the-order is rightfully recognized as Asdrubal Cabrera and Grady Sizemore are named reserves to All-Star team on the strength of their contributions to a top 3 offense in the AL. While Choo is universally listed as the biggest "All-Star snub" (presumably at Scott Boras' urging), each player occupying the top of the Indians' lineup prove themselves to be elite players at their position. Cabrera's OPS leads all AL Shortstops throughout the season and his defense at SS (with Jason Donald as his running mate) makes him a highlight-reel fixture. Fully healthy, Sizemore shows that 2009 proves to be the aberration in his body of work as he adjusts seamlessly into the #2 spot in the lineup and finds himself on pace for a 30 HR/30SB season at the All-Star break. By the end of the season, he will continue to go long and go hard, finishing the season with 36 HR and 34 SB.

July 20th vs. Minnesota Twins

After giving up 6 runs in only 2/3 of an inning against the LH-laden lineup of the Twins in a loss that will keep the Indians tethered to 4th place in the Central with a 48-58 record, the Indians announce that Justin Masterson will be moved from the rotation to the bullpen. The question of which pitcher will be leaving the bullpen to make room for Masterson finds its answer when Kerry Wood is traded to the St. Louis Cardinals late that night for RHP Lance Lynn, giving Cubs' fans fits and giving the Indians another arm to sort through in their future rotational mix. Wood's exit and Masterson's move to the bullpen shakes up the back-end-of-the-bullpen as Chris Perez ascends once again to the closer role while Masterson is handed the keys to the 8th inning. To replace Masterson in the rotation, Dave Huff is recalled from Columbus, where he has been striking out hitters at a clip above his 8.5 K/9 rate from 2008 in AA/AAA. Huff will remain in the rotation through the end of the season as his performance evens out to the point that he is seen as a viable 4th starter going into the 2011 season.

July 28th vs. New York Yankees

After a 4-1 win against the Bronx Bombers in which Fausto Carmona, Rafael Perez, and Chris Perez combine for a three-hitter, the Indians trade Jake Westbrook to the Colorado Rockies for LHP Rex Brothers. After some early rust is shaken off, Westbrook has proven to be the workhorse that he was from 2004 to 2006, capable of eating innings in a rotation in need of just that. While conventional wisdom presupposes that this trade opens the door for Aaron Laffey to rejoin the rotation, the Indians decide to keep Laffey in the bullpen, where he has been performing (to some critical acclaim) as the long man and 2nd LHP since Tony Sipp's demotion. Instead, they promote Hector Rondon to the MLB rotation as Rondon has shown himself to be

above AAA competition in his time as a Clipper.

July 30th vs. Toronto Blue Jays

After blasting his 14th HR of the year in a 12-9 victory over the Jays, Jhonny Peralta is dealt to the San Francisco Giants for MLB LH reliever Dan Runzler, who immediately takes a spot in the Indians' bullpen at the expense of warm body Saul Rivera. Andy Marte, still miraculously existing on the fringes of the 25-man roster because of Rusty Branyan's extended DL "stint" takes over at 3B where he proves to be the 26-year-old former prospect that has trouble going the opposite way that all in Cleveland have come to know and…just know. Despite his struggles at the plate, Marte's defense sparkles at 3B as he combines with Cabrera and Donald to back a rotation that is starting to show some semblance of settling in.

August 4th vs. Boston Red Sox

In his first start of the season, Hector Rondon goes 7 shutout innings against Red Sox hitters, contributing mightily to a 3-1 victory for the Indians. With Rondon in place in the rotation, the rotation of Carmona, Huff, Carrasco, Rondon, and Talbot settles in for the remainder of the season, with few exceptions. While Rondon will prove to still be wet-behind-the-ears as the season closes out and Talbot will ultimately reveal himself to be a fringy 5th starter, the 2010 does provide some answers in the rotation. Carmona proves to be close to his 2007 form (if not quite as dominant) while Carrasco starts to fulfill some of the promise predicted for him all those years on the "Top Prospect" lists as he limits his meltdown innings and strikes out batters at a clip well above the rest of the rotation. Beyond Carmona and Carrasco asserting themselves as a top-of-the-rotation horse and a #3 starter for 2011 and beyond, Huff's consistency after his mid-July call-up lends credence to the idea that he can legitimately be penciled in as a fringe #3 or solid #4 starter going forward.

August 13th vs. Seattle Mariners

Facing off against their former ace, the Indians beat up on Cliff Lee to the tune of 5 runs in the first 2 innings. The victory is not assured in the least however, as the punchless Mariners beat up on Mitch Talbot to tie the score at 7-7 in the 4th inning. The game is essentially won when Mike Brantley and Asdrubal Cabrera start with the pitch on a hit-and-run in the 8th inning, with Grady Sizemore poking the ball into shallow RF at the plate. Both Brantley and Cabrera score as the Indians take a 9-7 lead, en route to a 9-8 victory. The game is ostensibly saved when Aaron Laffey and the recently-promoted Josh Judy lock down the Mariners for 4 innings, allowing the Indians to take the win. Judy will continue to pitch well as he joins the burgeoning mix of 6th and 7th inning relievers (Laffey now included, along with Jess Todd who has made his way topside) that are currently serving as the bridge to the now-effective back-end of the bullpen progression of Perez-Masterson-Perez.

August 30th vs. Chicago White Sox

In a victory over the division-leading White Sox that will bring the Indians into 3rd place in the Central with a 62-69 record, Travis Hafner deposits a Jake Peavy fastball into Pronkville for his

24th HR of the season in what is, most importantly, his 110th game of the season with 30 games left to play. Attempting to resurrect himself as Pronk, Hafner has made leaps and bounds throughout the course of the season as his OPS puts him at the top of AL DH list. After some days off early in the season, Hafner has played without prolonged absences since the beginning of June as his shoulder issues in the past look to be just that…in the past.

September 10th vs. Minnesota Twins

Facing off against a 2nd place Twins' team trying to catch the White Sox in the Central, the Indians provide a vision of their future as Carlos Carrasco goes 7 strong inning in shutting down the Minnesota lineup in a 8-1 victory. The offense is paced by Mike Brantley, red-hot since the All-Star break with his OBP approaching .375 after struggling early on, Carlos Santana, who is garnering Rookie of the Year attention despite spending the first two and half months in Columbus, and Matt LaPorta, whose emergence as a RH bat provides the Indians' lineup the balance that it has lacked against certain pitchers.

September 17th vs. Kansas City Royals

Fausto Carmona puts finishing touches on a remarkable turnaround season as he records 27 outs while throwing only 79 pitches against a completely overmatched Royals' team headed to the AL Central cellar for another year. The offense provides more than enough firepower as both Sizemore and Choo hit HR in the first inning as the Indians coast to a 9-0 victory as they run their overall record to 68-79 with two weeks left in the season.

September 28th vs. Detroit Tigers

In the final homestand of the season, the Indians defeat a Detroit team that has been undone by injuries and burdened by overpaid veterans and underperforming rookies as the Indians cement a 3rd place finish in the Central. The 5-4 victory is sealed when Justin Masterson strikes out all 6 Tiger hitters that he faces in the 8th and 9th innings to close out the game for the Indians.

October 3rd vs. Chicago White Sox

Playing against a White Sox team that is resting the majority of their regulars after capturing the AL Central the night before, the Indians close out their 2010 season with a victory keyed by 3 doubles by Asdrubal Cabrera and Dave Huff continuing his second-half consistency that will earn him a 2011 rotation spot as he shuts down the White Sox "B" lineup. The 7-1 victory puts the Indians' final won-loss total at 78-84, placing them in third place in the division, 5 games behind the 2nd place Twins and 2 games ahead of the 4th place Tigers.

In the locker room after the game, Manny Acta has nothing but positive things to say about the team (as he has all year) despite the club's losing record and despite the staggering turnover in the pitching staff. Acta says, "we knew when we started this season that we were looking for some things to build on for the future and I think we did. Nearly every position is firmed up for next year and the one spot that isn't has a kid down in AAA in Lonnie Chisenhall that could have been up here this September if we wanted him to be. The pitching was a roller-coaster and

made me lose enough hair that I didn't have to shave my head nearly as much as I should have, but I think we made some progress. Fausto came back like a monster and Carrasco and Huff showed that they belong in a good team's rotation. Once we got through some of those growing pains in the bullpen, I felt good about almost everybody I had out there…those boys that we have out there can miss some bats, I'll tell you that."

When he is asked to put the season that has just finished into some perspective, Acta winks and tells the assembled media, "we're growing a garden here, we didn't expect this thing to bear fruit as soon as the seeds were planted. This year provided some of the rain and the sunlight that we need to continue to grow. Trust me when I tell you that we'll get there, to that point when this thing is in full bloom, and that day is not far away."

Enjoy the season…