Now arriving back from my traditional Game #2, the one historically populated people who go to baseball games because they love baseball and not so they can drink on a random weekday while wondering who Mike Brantley is, it is now time to realize how many people are going to be heading to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario for the 2010 season.

While 10,071 was the announced attendance, it actually represents the amount of tickets given out, because I would put the number of folks down there (who saw The DiaTot correctly answer a question on the Jumbotron to upgrade our seats to behind home plate from the RF Lower Reserved) closer to 3,000 or 4,000.

Thus after spending some time in our new season seats…yes, it's true that we've moved us down from the Mezz for a nominal price increase PLUS (as I don't know if you've heard that the Indians are struggling to sell seats) 4 free Opening Day seats (which went to a friend). We're now in the same section as the Batter's Eye Bar…er…"RIDGID Jobsite" (no, seriously) between where Messrs Sizemore and Choo ply their craft. With that clarification out of the way, get those Tommies in the air…

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As frustrating as the first week of the season has been (and it has been frustrating as the Indians have looked very simply like a bad team), realize that the Indians play 15 of their 22 games in April on the road, so if the Indians can tread water in April (which may be a tall order), they could be setting themselves up well, despite what is likely to be a losing record. While a losing record in April feels inevitable and as these games remain painful to watch, it has to be asked in the early going - is getting a healthy and (more importantly) effective Fausto Carmona back more important than winning these games in April, or really throughout the course of the season?

It goes without saying (though it has been said over and over again), but the most important player on the Indians' roster is Fausto Carmona because he has the potential to fill a hole that no other player on the roster projects to filling – that of a legitimate top-of-the-rotation starter. The roster is flush with talented position players around the diamond, the bullpen is full of young talent (at least it seemed that way), and the arms seem to be there to fill out the back-end-of-the-rotation on the cheap for a couple of years with enough time to separate the wheat from the chaff.

However, there is no player in the Indians' system (above Kinston, at least) who legitimately projects as an arm that could sit at the front end of the rotation and not be miscast in that role. No player, that is…except Carmona.

While Carmona's fall from grace is well-documented and frankly too depressing for me to rehash, his performance in his first two starts of the 2010 season (after a great Spring Training) is the most positive sign thus far in a season in need of positive signs. The walks remain a problem (obviously, though I do think that some of his first start's walks were the result of a tight strike zone), but the HUGE difference in Carmona from 2008 & 2009 to this year has been his "ability" to limit damage done when hitters do put the ball in play.

Not only is he not allowing many hits (he's given up 6 in 14 IP), the hits that he's given up are largely singles. Other than the Konerko HR and the Nellie Cruz 3B, Carmona's given up only 4 singles in 14 IP, meaning that he's limiting the damage that was inflicted on him so horribly for the past two years by not allowing the opposition to tee off on his "get-me-over" offerings, because he's not throwing his "get-me-over" pitches anymore.

Again, this is just in two starts and 14 innings, but opposing hitters have posted a Slugging Percentage of .244 against Carmona, good for 18th best in MLB among starters in the early season, at least after Monday's game.

Why is this an enormous development?

Opponents' Slugging Percentage vs. Carmona

2007 - .352
2008 (pre-DL) - .324
2008 (post-DL) - .437
2009 - .465
2010 - .244

Not only is he limiting hits, but he's limiting the damage done due to those hits. Remember, he's given up 6 hits in 14 innings thus far this year after allowing 1.2 hits PER INNING in 2009 and more than a hit (1.04) an inning in 2008. As a result, even with the walks (which, let's be honest, remain a concern) his WHIP on the season is a sparkling 1.14 (20th in AL among starters) after posting a cumulative WHIP of 1.70 for 2008 and 2009.

Some of this may be due to luck, as his otherworldly BABIP of .127 is the 2nd lowest in the AL and it should be noted vociferously and forcefully that the 6.43 BB/9 is unquestionably still concerning, but Carmona looks like a completely different pitcher than we've seen the last two years. While I wouldn't go as far as to say that he's close to recapturing his 2007 success, he's made strides in that direction and, for this team and for the future of this organization; there can be no brighter spot in the early going, regardless of wins and losses.

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While there is much hand-wringing and gnashing of teeth over the early performance of the

bullpen, I thought it would be interesting to note (for the sake of perspective) how the bullpen compares to the rest of the league, at least after Monday's meltdown:

4.70 ERA – 17th in MLB
.753 OPS against – 18th in MLB
1.57 WHIP – 22nd in MLB
0.84 K/BB – last in MLB, this despite having a 6.26 K/9, "good" for 22nd in MLB

Not dreadful, but it certainly shows that bullpen struggles are not (for once) unique to Cleveland. Coming out of Spring Training, most knew that the bullpen was going to take a while to sort out, particularly with Kerry Wood still shelved, but the issue is much greater here as the performance of past bullpens have shown that the benefit of the doubt is not warranted:

ERA by year (rank in MLB)

2009 – 4.66 ERA (27th in MLB)
2008 – 5.13 ERA (29th in MLB)
2007 – 3.75 ERA (6th in MLB)
2006 – 4.73 ERA (25th in MLB)

Yes, we all know about the excellence of the 2007 bullpen and the 2005 bullpen, which was best in MLB, because that was 5 seasons ago and if anyone's still resting on those laurels…well, they shouldn't be. In the body of work spanning the last 4 years, the track record of the organization has not just an inability to put together a league-average effective bullpen, we're talking about an continued incapability to put a bullpen together that ranks even in the upper ¾ of the league.

Sure it's still early and maybe this all shakes out with positive results, but what's most frustrating is that the Indians put this ENORMOUS emphasis on getting out of the gate quickly. When Acta was hired and throughout Spring Training, he continually stated that he would set his 25-man roster with some time left in camp so the team would be ready, with semi-defined roles, once the games started to count.

Despite that, bullpen usage and roles has been…well, muddled so far. If you were to ask me which pitcher would come in for a particular hitter or in a particular situation, odds are that I'd be wrong. That's not to project that I am this all-knowing bullpen expert, but rather to point out that each and every pitcher on the staff has been used in different roles and in different situations already in the early season.

Obviously, specific situations dictate who comes in when and Acta is still trying to figure out who he can trust in which situation (though I thought that Spring Training was supposed to answer some of that); but just take a look at the irregularity in which these pitchers (with the exception of Chris Perez, whose role has been only in the 9th inning…or the last inning of a game) are being used, in terms of pitching with a lead or with the team behind as well as when in the game they're throwing, up to an including Wednesday's game:

Laffey – 4 games, 5 IP, 6 H, 2 BB, 2 ER, 1 K

Came on in a mop-up role to get out of a starter-induced jam, came on to start the 7th in a game with a lead, came on to face one LH batter in the middle of the 7th, and finally came in to start the 7th inning for a multiple inning relief appearance with the team behind

Lewis – 4 games, 4 2/3 IP, 2 H, 3 BB, 1 ER, 5 K

Pitched the 7th inning with the team losing, pitched the 9th and 10th innings of a tie game, pitched the 8th inning with the team behind, and pitched the 6th inning with a lead.

Wright – 3 games, 4 1/3 IP, 3 H, 2 BB, 3 ER, 2 K

Began the 6th inning with a lead, threw two innings (7th & 8th) with the team behind, and pitched his way out of a jam in the 9th inning in a tie game then gave up the scoring run in the 10th inning.

Sipp – 5 games, 3 2/3 IP, 2 H, 4 BB, 2 ER, 6 K

Began the 8th inning with the team losing, was the second reliever to throw in the 6th inning of a game with the lead, pitched the 6th inning with the team losing, entered a tie game in the 9th inning to get out of a jam created by another reliever, and pitched the 9th inning of a game with the team behind

Smith – 5 games, 3 1/3 IP, 1 H, 3 BB, 1 ER, 3 K

Came in with the lead in the 8th inning, then the 7th inning (losing the lead), pitched with the team behind in the 7th inning, came in with with a lead in the 7th inning, and finally came in for one batter in the 8th with the team behind

R. Perez – 2 games, 2 IP, 5 H, 1 BB, 2 ER, 2 K

Began the 8th inning with the team behind, then threw the 8th inning with a lead

What can be gleaned from the usage patterns so far?

Not much…other than that the Indians don't have any idea which relievers can be counted on to protect leads or that project into defined roles in the early season. That, above all else, is what strikes terror into my heart when thinking about the early going of this season, particularly given the…um, uncertainty of so much of the starting pitching staff, performance to date considered.

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While trying to figure out how these relievers are going to shake out and bemoaning the fact that the Indians have been unable to put together an effective bullpen (save the troika of Betancourt, R. Perez, and Lewis in 2007) in the past five years, I was struck by this little bit from Ken Rosenthal

as he explained how big RHP Tyson Ross (1.69 ERA, 0.94 WHIP, 1 save in 5 1/3 IP) found his way into the Oakland bullpen:

Ross, a second-round pick out of Cal in 2008, cracked the A's Opening Day roster after making only nine appearances at Class AA last season. Most club officials opposed the move, but general manager Billy Beane basically asked, "Why not?" Ross throws 91-95 mph, occasionally touching 97, and his slider is tough on right-handed hitters.

The A's still view Ross, 23, as a starter, and likely will return him to the minors after Wuertz and Devine return. Then again, as a shutdown long man, he could amount to yet another weapon for a bullpen that already is quite deep.

Realizing that the season is terribly young and that the bullpen needs some time to shake itself out, after reading this, the question at least needs to be uttered – is it time to change the philosophy on how the Indians construct their bullpen from Day 1?

Is it time to start setting up more of an open competition in Spring Training where the guys who are throwing the best in Goodyear have a legitimate shot at making the team out of Arizona?

We've seen the names that could factor into the bullpen at some point through the course of the year - Josh Tomlin (Columbus), Jess Todd (Columbus), Josh Judy (to join Columbus soon), Steven Wright (Columbus), Erik Stiller (Akron), Zach Putnam (Akron), and CC Lee (Akron), among others – but is it time to develop a new strategy for allowing this bullpen to come out of the gate quick that actually presents guys like this an opportunity out of Goodyear if they're the most impressive arms in camp?

Maybe I'm just unnecessarily throwing things out there (and Judy was prominently covered this Spring after a solid stint in the Arizona Fall League) and need to exhibit some patience with the guys in the MLB bullpen who have been touted as back-end options throughout their Minor League career (like CF Perez or Toné Sipp or Joe Smiff), but watching these guys go in and out of these games with no confidence and no cadence leads me to believe that Spring Training presented an opportunity that was missed to define some roles and to put the best relievers in the position to contribute early on.

I know that Axl has always told me that I just need a little patience (and I was the one extolling the virtues of one Jamey Wright), but this inability to present an even moderately effective and settled bullpen has gone past the point of lunacy. Again, maybe this is just an overreaction and perhaps the bullpen settles into some semblance of an effective order soon; but right now, the bullpen looks to be an Achilles' heel…again.

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Hating to be the bearer of bad news like I do (and realizing that it's not even technically the middle of April yet), I'm loathe to point out that Mike Brantley has 29 plate appearances with 5 hits (one of them for extra bases), 2 walks, and 7 strikeouts in the young season. Yes, he LOOKS good up there and he's giving the team some "professional" at-bats (whatever that means), but after Monday's game, the guy had an OPS+ of 8…remember 100 means league

average, meaning he's 92% worse than that of the average Big Leaguer to this point in the season. Of the 217 players in MLB with 25 or more plate appearance through Monday, Brantley's performance at the plate puts him 206th.

At this point, one of two things is true – Mike Brantley simply needs more time to adjust to MLB pitching, or Mike Brantley needs more time in AAA to get ready for MLB pitching. With Rusty Branyan coming back in a couple of weeks and realizing that the seriousness of the Grady back injury could affect all of this, the obvious odd man out if Branyan comes back (still an "if" in my book) is Brantley.

Not that I don't want to see Brantley fight through this adjustment period, just that I don't think he'll be given the chance to do so…at least not yet.

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Since much of the focus in the early going has been on when uber-prospect Carlos Santana will be replacing Lou Marson (1 for 16 with 4 strikeouts and some passed balls, as you may have heard), I thought I would direct you to a piece from Jeff Passan of Yahoo! Sports on service time management :

The thrust is simple: If a team parks a player in the minor leagues for at least 20 days to begin the season, it can delay his free agency by one year. Teams looking to save money go a step further and keep players down for about two months, which prevents them from gaining the Super 2 status that gives the top 17 percent of any service class an extra year of salary arbitration.

--snip--

To burn a year of service time – to pull a Lincecum – is practically a fireable offense for a GM.

--snip--

Because right now baseball's rules force the players to earn less money and the owners to field sub-optimal teams. General managers make excuses to fans, players act like it's OK and the vacuum inside which teams should operate – keep the best 25 players for that clubhouse – doesn't exist.

"If we were in that vacuum, it would be a no-brainer," Braves GM Frank Wren said. "All of them would be up."

While I expect Santana to spend more than 20 days in AAA (the two month stint in Columbus seems more likely), here's hoping that Passan is right in that this suppression of service time for monetary savings and player control down the road is something that is an easy decision in the next Collective Bargaining negotiations after 2011.

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Remember when Manny Acta said of Luis Valbuena's intended usage for 2010 that "we're not in

the business of developing 24-year-old platoon players”?

Through 7 games, Valbuena has 2 plate appearances against LHP, resulting in one K and one BB. Mark Grudzielanek has 3 plate appearances against LHP and 4 plate appearances against RHP. Valbuena has 25 plate appearances against RHP.

This situation…this bears some watching.

How about Jason Donald?

Through the first 5 games, Donald has gone 9 for 20 with 3 doubles and it is worth noting that the RH Donald has gone 8 for 17 against RHP. Donald’s career Minor League OPS vs. RHP is .796, and his career Minor League OPS against LHP is .821, meaning that the pronounced platoon split that Valbuena has shown in his Minor League career (.808 OPS vs. RHP, .630 OPS vs. LHP) is not an issue for Donald, who has split time between 2B and SS thus far in Columbus.

This has been written here before, but don’t be surprised if Jason Donald is the Indians’ everyday 2B at some point in 2010 with a possible short-term landing spot for Luis Valbuena possibly being a fill-in at 3B (he played 3B in 5 of his 23 games in Columbus last year) for the day when Jhonny Peralta is no longer a member of the Cleveland Indians.

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The Indians attempt to avoid their second straight series sweep in an afternoon tilt against the Rangers in a season that feels like it could be a long one…in mid-April.