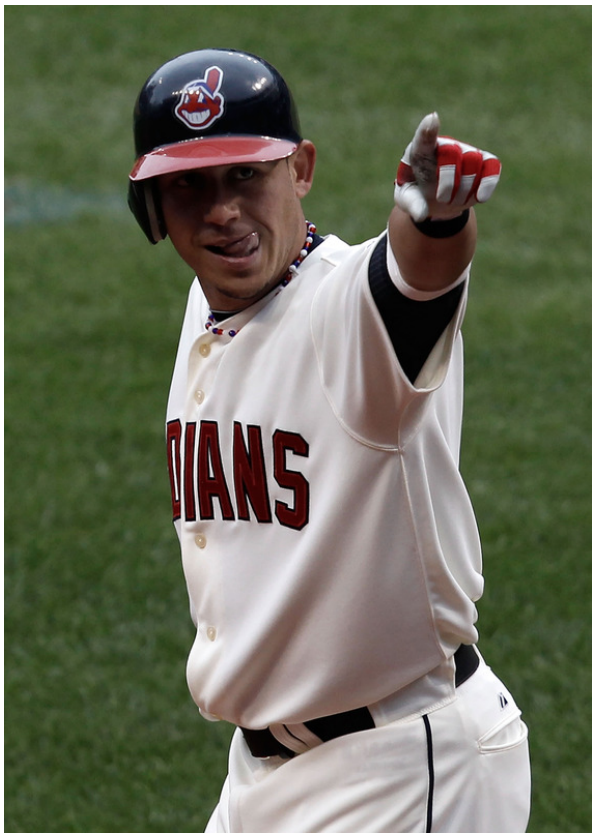

As the North Coast rejoices a Game 1 victory by the Cavaliers, let's take the opportunity to take the walk through the wintry winds over to the other friendly confines in at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario to hit on the suddenly-hot Cleveland Indians. After dropping 5 in a row, the Indians find themselves riding the wave of a 3-game winning streak in a pattern that may not be too unfamiliar this season as the Indians have the early look of a team that will be riding the razor's edge in a number of games, that is assuming that this starting pitching (knocking firmly on wood) holds up.

And with that, let's get going on a Lazy One…

When the season started, if you would have told me that after 11 games, the Indians would be getting solid starts up and down the rotation, I would have declared the first two weeks of the season a rousing success, regardless of won-loss record. Reason being that, without question, the weak link of the 2010 Indians looked to be the rotation and the lack of any sure-fire solid MLB pitcher, going 9-deep in the organization.

Suddenly, the Indians find themselves sitting on a rotation that already boasts 2 complete games, with 4 starting pitchers with ERA below 3.21 and with WHIP's under 1.36 and with positive signs abounding…in the rotation at least. Despite the Indians sitting at 5-6 after 11 games, the fact that the rotation has shown signs of permanence and consistency unquestionably merits some optimism, even if it is wildly early and since things can still turn on a dime on this rotation.

Perhaps I can be accused of taking a Pollyanna outlook, or if you prefer Billy Mumphrey and his cock-eyed optimism

(I've been accused of worse), but the starting rotation has more bright spots than anyone would have predicted just two weeks ago as those bright spots have been surprises both pleasant and surprising.

First and foremost, the performance of Dave Huff in his first MLB complete game lowered his season totals to a 1.80 ERA and a 0.87 WHIP with 6 K, 3 BB in 15 IP. Forget the crazy idea that Huff "won the most games for the Indians" last year as some sort of justification that anyone saw this coming. Just realize that his first two starts might finally be serving notice that Huff is separating himself from the bevy of "soft-tossing LHP" that he's often lumped in with (and that have become the poster boys for where the organization now finds itself) as some thought he would back when he was mowing through hitters in AA & AAA in 2008
?

Anyone feeling a little better about the future of Dave Huff after Thursday, to the point that "the idea is that Dave Huff could realistically project to be what most of us saw Cliff Lee as back in 2004 and 2005 – a middle-of-the-rotation LHP who can contribute (at a low salary for a while) quality innings to a still-maturing club" is not as revolutionary as it may have seemed when it was written just 2 months ago
.

Only two starts…I know and the likelihood of Huff hitting some road bumps along the way this season is all but guaranteed, but let's do a quick comparison of the arsenal of pitches and the speed of those pitches that have been thrown by Huff in the early season against the pitches (and applicable speeds) for CP Lee back in 2004:

Dave Huff – 67% strike percentage (140 strikes in 208 pitches)

Pitch Type – Percentage of Overall Pitches – Average Speed
Fastball - 71.6%, average speed - 90.7 MPH
Slider - 9.8%, average speed - 83.0 MPH
Cutter - N/A
Curveball - 1.0%, average speed - 81.0 MPH
Changeup – 17.6%, average speed – 82.4 MPH

Cliff Lee 2004 – 62% strike percentage (1,985 strikes in 3,171 pitches)

Pitch Type – Percentage of Overall Pitches – Average Speed
Fastball - 70.3%, average speed - 89.4 MPH
Slider - 7.9%, average speed - 84.1 MPH
Cutter - 5.2%, average speed - 86.3 MPH
Curveball - 9.1%, average speed - 74.1 MPH
Changeup - 7.4%, average speed - 82.4 MPH

While there's an obvious difference is repertoire as Huff does not throw the cutter that Lee throws about 5% of the time, the speeds of the fastballs and the changeups (that account for

83% to 89% of each pitchers' offerings) are very similar and (most importantly) the strike percentage is very similar. Huff, like Lee before him, relies on the command of his pitches and, most notably, his fastball to locate his pitches and set up his change-up and slider just as Lee uses his fastball to set up his change-up, cutter, and curve. As Terry Pluto writes in his "Terry's Talkin'" column
, Huff's success in the Minors was largely attributable to him "getting ahead (often inside) with his fastball, then getting the lefties out with sliders away. It's something that he struggled with last season, but has regained in 2010", which sounds eerily similar to Lee's approach to pitching, spotting his fastball early in the count to set up his off-speed offerings and his cutter.

Perhaps it is an unfair comparison to burden Huff with after two starts in light of the as-yet-unexplained happened to Lee after the 2007 season that vaulted him into the upper echelon of MLB pitchers, but it has been asserted that Huff may (pitching optimally, as he did on Thursday) represent a "Poor Man's Cliff Lee". With that in mind, I would venture to say that what we're looking at is the evolution and maturation of a pitcher not all that dissimilar from what many people thought Cliff Lee would evolve after the 2004 season.

It is worth noting that Lee did not throw his first MLB Complete Game until his 63rd MLB start in July of 2005 (Huff's on Thursday was in his 25th start) and that Lee was still largely a work-in-progress up to and including the 2007 season. That being said, if Dave Huff can use 2010 to assert himself as a legitimate starting option for this team for the next 4-5 years (at least) in the middle-of-the-rotation the way that Lee did in 2004 and 2005, the questions become fewer for this team past 2010.

That (to me at least) is the most important trend of the young season as the formerly preposterous expectation that two to (gasp) three of the Indians' starters in 2010 would find enough success to cement their spot (relatively speaking) in the rotations past this year seems to be finding some positive answers, even if it is premature. Coming into the season, if you had to rank the starting pitchers that the Indians would have liked to have seen succeed in 2010, it probably would have gone Carmona (obviously), Huff, Masterson (with Huff ahead of him because of the fall-back option of Justin going to the bullpen), Mitch Talbot, and finally Jake Westbrook because of 2010 being Westbrook's final year under contract with the club.

With Mitch Talbot suddenly and quite unexpectedly unleashing the fury on an unsuspecting (and, quite frankly, bad) White Sox lineup on Friday night, it is not a stretch to say that those hopes are coming to fruition to some degree as the Indians' best four starters to date are all 26 or younger and are all potentially under club control through the 2014 season. While early-season numbers should be taken as just that, Huff, Carmona, Masterson, and Talbot are pitching favorably not just compared to expectations, but also in the context of AL starters (of which the different sites use different criteria) when you consider where they rank in some important categories:

ERA+
Huff – 217 (13th of 70)
Masterson – 160 (21st of 70)
Carmona – 121 (36th of 70)

Talbot – 121 (37th of 70)
That's 80% of the rotation among the top half of starters in the AL in the early going, according to ERA+ at least…

VORP
Carmona - 3.3 (25th of 61)
Huff - 2.9 (27th of 61)
Talbot – 2.4 (33rd of 61)
Masterson - 1.6 (40th of 61)

OPS Against
Huff - .487 (6th of 71)
Carmona - .543 (13th of 71)
Talbot - .704 (30th of 71)
Masterson - .756 (41st of 71)

Interestingly, want to know which pitcher had the highest ERA+ for the Indians last year (excluding Lee) among pitchers who started more than 20 games?

Jeremy Sowers, with an ERA+ of 80…

Want to know which pitcher had the highest VORP for the Indians last year (again, excluding Lee) among pitchers who started more than 20 games?

Sowers again, who complied a full-season total of 8.1…

How about OPS Against with the same criteria?

Sowers one more time, at .773…

Even with the small sample size considered and the knowledge that those numbers are going to fluctuate all season, there's room for optimism here in the starting rotation (and more here from Adam Van Arsdale of LGT in a larger organizational sense if you need a pick-me-up), which is particularly encouraging in spots on the roster that were thought to be the major concern for 2010 and beyond.

One of those reasons for optimism in the early going (and keeping it in the rotation) has been the performance of Justin Masterson, but the optimism for Masterson is tempered for me when examining a little more closely what he has done this year in his first two starts.

He's been a hot topic around these Interwebs, as Fangraphs initially heaped praise onto Masterson for his overall line to date, then came back with a much more rational look at his season by bringing the disparate split issue (that Jon Steiner dissected in a great piece at WFNY

) into the equation.

Not that this is breaking any new ground, but that split issue (which has been his weakness throughout his MLB career) is the one to watch and, in case you were wondering, after Wednesday's start (and with the small sample size alert triggered), here's what Masterson's splits look like for 2010:

Against RHP
.194 BA / .242 OBP / .290 SLG / .533 OPS with 14 K, 1 BB in 33 plate appearances

Against LHP
.500 BA / .533 OBP / .714 SLG / 1.248 OPS with 0 K, 1 BB in 16 plate appearances

This was all covered in Thursday's B-List (along with much more on Masterson), when my cohort Steve Buffum stated that "this is a pitcher who can survive in the majors, and it's not impossible for Masterson to develop something that is more effective against left-handed hitters" believing that "he's really more of a mid-rotation innings guy than anything else" which "for a 25-year-old guy in his second year of real major-league starting, that's a pretty valuable commodity".

That's entirely believable and true that Masterson is very much a "valuable commodity" and if there was ever a season to give Masterson that long leash to develop into "something that is more effective against left-handed hitters" in the starting rotation. That being said, I'm more inclined to fall in line with what Ryan Richards of "Let's Go Tribe" wrote about the disparate splits following Masterson's start on Wednesday:

MLB managers can read the splits as well as a blogger can, and you better believe they'll be throwing as many left-handed hitters as they have available against Masterson until he can prove he can get them out.

It's true that not many teams can simply throw an entire lineup of LH hitters out there (except for the Indians, that is), but Masterson has faced the White Sox with their LH hitters (AJ, Teahen, Pierre, and Kotsay) not exactly evoking memories of Murderer's Row and the Rangers, who have Hamilton, Borbon, and Davis as LH hitters…all of whom torched Masterson. If and when he runs into some teams that can "throw as many left-handed hitters as they have available", it will be interesting to see how his performance is affected and how opinions of him change or are strengthened. Just to name a few teams that would be sure to give Masterson fits, the Twins boast Mauer, Morneau, Span, Hudson, Thome and Kubel (that's 6 guys) who can all bat LH just as the Yankees can throw LH hitters like Teixeira, Granderson, Swisher, Posada, Johnson, Gardner and Cano (that's 7 guys) at Masterson.

While some teams are RH-heavy (falling into Masterson's wheelhouse), if opposing managers start stacking their lineups against Masterson, it's going to be interesting to see how he performs when he faces a LH-heavy lineup with no respite from a RH bat and how the Indians react in terms of perhaps managing his usage against particular teams so as to protect him against said LH-heavy lineups. The first test of that very notion figures to come on Tuesday

against the LH-heavy Twins, so Masterson's performance in that game may be more telling, in terms of his future, than how he has pitched in his first 2 games.

Regardless of where Masterson ends up, suffice it to say that the three pitchers (I'm holding off on lumping Talbot here, though if the Indians can get a Quality Start from him as their 5th starter even once every three games, he'll creep into the discussion) in the current rotation that figure into this pitching staff most obviously going forward have been the ones that have been doing the heavy lifting for the team in the early going and if anything positive can be said about the first week-and-a-half of the season (outside of praising The BLC), it is that the young(ish) arms in the rotation have been a pleasant surprise to date.

With those arms inexplicably leading the charge in the early going, the Indians enter today's game with a chance to sweep a division rival, get to .500, and create some momentum for their next series against the division-leading Twins, whose issues in the bullpen (with Mijares hitting the DL and with Neshek perhaps right behind him to join Nathan) may only be just beginning.