While the attention of most of the North Coast is locked into some games up in the Windy City or a now-three-day affair in Gotham, the Indians' season rolls on in earnest. The hills and valleys of following a...um…"maturing" have revealed themselves as the highs feel pretty good but the lows take much out of the fun of watching an "evolving" team. For the most part, the offense has remained MIA in the early going while the pitching has come back to Earth to some degree, so while I place an order for my custom Mitch Talbot jersey that simply says "THE FURY" on the back , now would be as good a time as any to get some Tomahawks in the air…

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Remember that whole 7-game tear that The BLC went on to earn him AL Player of the Week honors?

The absurdly productive week included 7 games, 29 plate appearances, 12 hits, 3 doubles, 4 HR, 12 RBI, and 7 BB as Choo took the listing Indians' offense on his back for a week or so. Needless to say, that stretch has been the lone bright spot on the offense…but do you want some context as to how dark has the offense been?

If you take the offensive numbers for the first 15 games (so this includes the offensive "outburst" from Thursday's game) and exclude that 7-game stretch from just Choo, here's the line for the rest of Indians' team on the season:

.206 BA / .286 OBP / .303 SLG / .589 OPS with 29 extra-base hits in 15 games

Again, that's taking out the numbers for Choo in that 7-game tear (which is massaging the numbers a little, I know), but that's over nearly 10% of the games of the season for 8 ½ players in the lineup. The cumulative numbers don't get much better even if you throw Choo's 7-game numbers back in there, but without Choo's little burst against the Tigers, Rangers, and White Sox (which resulted in 4 of the 7 wins to date), the Indians' offense has been historically bad.

I'm not going to rehash the numbers for each individual player, frankly because they're nauseating. Everybody on the team is struggling, with Hafner being the only player (other than the aforementioned Choo) with an OPS over .700 heading into Thursday's tilt and he was sitting on a .734 OPS. Going into Thursday's game, the team had 4 of the 9 players with the most plate appearances on the team posting an OPS of .552 or lower and only three players had slugging percentages over .400 with those same three players (Choo, Kearns, and Hafner) being the only hitters with OBP over .315.

While following this team in the early going has felt like watching a baby attempt to walk, where even the falls are met with encouragement and the moderate successes are met with wild enthusiasm, seeing the struggles of the offense to date have been disappointing and more than frustrating.

Simply put, nobody on the team is hitting with any consistency and while Acta is trying to juggle the lineup in an attempt to jostle something (or someone) into production, it will certainly be interesting to see how this all shakes out once (or is it "if") these April doldrums are overcome. Peralta has moved all around the lineup (and sometimes out of it), all while remaining seemingly oblivious to the fact that he's become the poster boy for the struggles of the team in the early going (and not just in the eyes of the fans, I would guess), without sniffing success despite the statistical oddity that he leads the AL in pitches per plate appearance . Meanwhile, as young players like Tofu Lou, LaPorta – or, as some have taken to call him, "Matt MaTola" (taking the lead from Ozzie Guillen who couldn't remember Gator4God's name), a name that could stick…at least until his OPS touches .700 – and the recently demoted Mike Brantley have experienced more than just a difficult time adjusting to regular (or even semi-regular) AB in MLB, the offense has been painful to watch.

The famine is widespread and growing as the Indians' offense, thought to be the strength of the team, has been scuffling…to put it charitably. Now that Rusty Branyan has returned, the amalgamations of the lineup look to vary even more as Austin Kearns and MaTola (and perhaps Hafner) will start moving around and sitting to accommodate Rusty's "presence" in the lineup four days a week. Truthfully, as for the whole ingratiation of Rusty Branyan into the mix and how it affect Kearns and MaTola, I'm not even that concerned with it other than wanting to see MaTola in the lineup as frequently as his body (hip and toe, notably) allows because if you're looking for that RH hitter that even has a ounce of a chance to be the homegrown

middle-of-the-order hitter that's going to break up the LH monotony that resides in the Indians' lineup, it's Matty MaTola…not to be confused with Mariah Carey's record producer ex-hushand .

Maybe Carlos Santana (who is thankfully merely day-to-day after fouling a ball off his leg) comes up to the parent club in June and is able to balance out the handedness lineup a little bit as he is a switch-hitter, but the assumption that Santana is not going to go through his growing pains is what led some (OK…me) to believe that this young(ish) Indians' offense would race out of the gates, based on talent and not experience. If you'll remember, Matt Wieters was similarly lauded as a top prospect (and probably more so than Santana) and was called up on May 29th (and do you notice that date) and proceeded to post a line of .288 BA / .340 OBP / .412 SLG / .753 OPS with 15 doubles and 9 HR in 96 games. A fantastic line for a 23-year-old catcher, but not exactly a player ready to carry a baseball team or even reside in the middle of an MLB lineup.

Thus, while expectations for Santana will unquestionably be high right out of the gate (in late May or early June), just remember that success is not immediate for most young players – something the Indians are finding out while they attempt ascertain what's wrong with their older players. Maybe Santana is the exception to that rule, but it's more likely that he follows that rule. So while he may be viewed as the savior to a floundering offense, it's much more likely that the offense will continue to flounder (Santana or not) until the likes of Sizemore and Cabrera attain some success with the hope that Hafner, Branyan, and Peralta (the latter two for trade value) can contribute something close to what they have in the past. If MaTola, Valbuena (or Donald), and eventually Santana can begin to adjust to MLB pitching and perform at a level even close to league-average, the future begins to look brighter for the team, but that remains in the future.

For now, the Indians will attempt to bring some semblance of an offensive "attack" with them as they continue their road trip (though the Athletics boast the lowest ERA in the AL) and hope that the players whose track record suggests that they should be better than this start performing. Maybe Thursday's balanced output where every player on the team reached base is the first step in the right direction (and did you notice how Peralta's "planned off day" turned into a XX), but until the Indians can put together a string of even moderately successful efforts at the plate, the struggles will continue.

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If you missed the Jeff Passan piece on "Unalignment" at Yahoo! , it's an interesting take on attempting to find a middle ground between the current divisional situation and the "floating realignment" that was suggested a while back. Passan's proposal essentially boils down to eliminating the divisions within the leagues and to simply create two leagues in which all 14 to 16 teams compete for the top 4 spots to make the playoffs:

Short of a salary cap, to which the players' union will never agree, bringing socialism to alignment is the clearest way. Treat every team as equally as possible when it comes to scheduling, travel and pathway to the postseason.

--snip--

AL teams would play everyone in the league 11 times a year, with 19 interleague games. Those in the NL would play eight teams 10 games each and seven teams nine games each, plus the 19 interleague contests. If a team goes somewhere twice one year, it would host that team twice the next season. The interleague games would rotate yearly. And if baseball prefers 15 teams in each league, it could move Milwaukee (or another willing participant) to the AL and use a schedule with at least one interleague game every day instead of confining them to two blocks a year.

This proposal has some interesting aspects, though it doesn't really address the growing chasm in revenue that is widening in MLB. I like the idea of every team in the AL playing everyone in the league 11 times a year, etc. and always thought that the unbalanced schedule was contrived and the Interleague "rivalries" felt artificial. Playing a balanced schedule and eliminating Interleague Play does go a long way in determining which teams are the best in the league, but is the point of the proposal really just to fix the "Tampa Bay problem" as Passan calls it?

Whether the "little engine that could" is from Tampa or Cleveland or Baltimore in any given year, eliminating divisions doesn't amend the overarching problem and more likely just opens up the two divisions to become even more top heavy than they already are. After reading this and other proposals on "floating realignment", why does it always just feel like the league is content to re-arrange the deck chairs on the Titanic?

Perhaps there is no stopping this runaway freight train that is the growing disparity in revenue streams in MLB (and that is the issue here, regardless of how SI.com's Joe Sheehan says that the 162-game schedule evens things out
), but these ideas that seem to acknowledge that there is no better solution than to just live with the current arrangement and give 25 or so of the teams in MLB a chance every couple years to make the playoffs is not an endearing trend.

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As long as all of Northeast Ohio is talking draft, I thought it would be interesting to pass along a piece wherein The Hardball Times had a little Q & A with Andy Seiler of MLB Bonus Baby on the upcoming June draft. While I'm not going to pretend to know anything about these guys, Seiler has the Indians (picking 5th) taking Chris Sale in his mock draft.

This is brought up not to determine who Chris Sale is or if he's going to be a #5 pick well-spent or even to initiate that discussion, but rather to segue into a fascinating piece that was recently written for the print version of SI on the Braves' Jason Heyward. While you may not be aware of this, the now-20-year-old Heyward was chosen with the #14 pick in the 2007 MLB Draft, one spot after the Indians chose Akron 1B/DH Beau Mills. While the issue with Heyward wasn't signing bonus demands (Mills' signing bonus was $1.575M, Heyward's was $1.7M), there were other factors at play regarding the scouting and handling of Heyward, as

Tom Verducci relays the story
up to and including draft day:

There was still one more team to pick before Atlanta: Cleveland. The Braves weren't too worried about the Indians because they had not seen much of the Cleveland scouts around Heyward. "We just didn't see him swing the bat enough to feel comfortable taking him that high," says one Indians official. "When we saw him, he walked a lot."
The Indians took Beau Mills, a college corner infielder and son of current Astros manager Brad Mills. Atlanta's subterfuge campaign had worked.

While you attempt to keep down whatever you've eaten last, if you're wondering what Verducci meant when he wrote that "Atlanta's subterfuge campaign had worked", here's how the handlers for Heyward, an Atlanta native, limited his workouts for all teams not named the Braves:

Eugene Heyward believes he knows why other teams were not as high on his son as the Braves: Baldwin and the team quietly downplayed his ability and visibility. They sandbagged the competition. "Roy Clark was a very shrewd man," Eugene says. "They wouldn't update his size information. I believe Jason went to a [showcase event] and was listed at 6'1", 198. Jason was 6'1", 198 maybe two months in his life. The Braves did an excellent job. They lowballed his size.

--snip--

Says Goetz, "He wouldn't hit on the field before a game. He usually hit in the cage. Most teams in that [high school] league were not going to pitch to him. So big league teams would send their scouting directors to see him, and he'd hit in the cage, walk three times and ground out in the game, and they'd walk away with a lot of questions."

With Beau Mills struggling (again) out of the gate in Akron , slipping closer to non-prospect status (if he isn't already there), and Heyward now sitting on an OPS of .999 after his first 14 games with 4 HR, I find it interesting to look at the whole story in an attempt to understand how Mills finds himself scuffling in Akron as a 23-year-old while Heyward blisters his way through MLB as a 20-year-old.

This is not an attempt to exonerate the Indians' Front Office from what looks like a mistake (that would be the drafting of Mills, not necessarily passing on Heyward), but…now you know…the rest of the story…

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Now, if you will excuse me for a moment…I'm going to go find out who Joe Haden is.