As the rain falls on the North Coast and spirits are high for Larry Asante and Clifton Geathers in a town that loves the “potential of prospects” in all sports, let’s get headed off on a Lazy Sunday as the Indians roll on in their West Coast trip and somehow miraculously find themselves just a game under .500 despite competing with a non-existent offense with multiple black holes in the lineup and a bullpen still being sorted out.

As was stated above, the team is back to within one game of .500 after Saturday’s victory in an April in which they’ll play 15 of their 22 games on the road. While most of those road games are forthcoming, there’s no question that the Indians, warts and all, are playing a style of baseball that not many foresaw when the season began. The team is 8-9 and while for some teams an early “good start” is a fallacy (the Pirates are 7-10 despite being outscored by their opponents by a total of 61 runs in those 17 games), the Indians have allowed 13 more runs than they’ve scored for the 3rd best run differential in the division.

With the Twins looking like the class of the division (and I just didn’t see their collection of what looked liked fringy starters coming out of the gate like this or the bullpen making up for the loss of Nathan and others), the Indians find themselves in an interesting spot as it’s likely that Minnesota will start to run away and hide with this division as the weeks and months drag on. However, the rest of the division looks on par with what the Indians have put forth and with the idea that Carmona may be back to some degree (more on that in a bit) and with the offensive stalwarts looking more like warts, the Indians could have an interesting summer in front of them.

For the early part of the season, all expectations have been blown out of the water (other than the bullpen being a…well, a work in progress) as the offense has fizzled while the starting

pitching has sizzled.

How long that may last, however, is where we'll set our sights for a Lazy One…

Going into Sunday's game, the Indians have 4 starters with ERA's at or under 3.00 with the most promising performance coming from the man who once brushed the midges aside as merely a nuisance to the task at hand. After Saturday's win, Fausto Carmona finds himself with a 2.96 ERA, a 1.13 WHIP having given up 3 extra-base hits in 27 1/3 innings pitched…yes, 3 extra-base hits allowed in the equivalent of 3 full games.

On the topic of Carmona, Jayson Stark has a little bit in his Rumblings and Grumblings piece from a scout who had some thoughts on the player we all hope will be ¡Fausto! once again:

Much better rhythm, much better balance. Throwing way more strikes than at any time last year. I don't see quite the same hard sinker as before. He's got less movement than he used to. But of the 12 balls I saw get put in play, eight were ground balls. So he's getting the same results.

The words of that scout have certainly rung true for anyone who's watched Carmona this year as his pace is more measured and his avoidance of the "big hit" has been tantamount to his success. That success that he's experience thus far is due partly to the influence of a certain $850K veteran catcher who was used to seeing Carmona (both Good Fausto and Bad Fausto) as an opposing hitter, Redmond explains thusly :

"I think I faced him every time he pitched against Minnesota last year," Redmond said. "You could see the things he was doing, not that it did me much good when I came to the plate. But at times, I would see him lose his aggressiveness. He would throw too many breaking balls. That's doing the hitter a favor."

--snip--

"Maybe now I'm calling the game the way I thought he should be pitching when I was with the Twins," Redmond said.

Perhaps too much is being made of this "personal catcher" thing (and I should note that there are already rumblings in Beantown to move Fausto's former "personal catcher" out from behind the dish because of his arm

If it feels like Carmona is taking up much of my time and keystrokes this early in the season and that the hope that Fausto is coming back has been beaten to death, it's simply because it has. However, the reason is justified (in my mind, at least) by the fact that even if Fausto v.2007 doesn't come back (and he might be), a top-to-middle-of-the-rotation starter under club control for the foreseeable future is still the most valuable commodity in baseball, particularly to the Indians, who will likely bid Jake Westbrook farewell at some point and are left to sort through

the young arms behind Fausto as they attempt to cobble together a starting rotation.

Lest anyone forget, the guaranteed years of Carmona's contract expire at the end of next year (during which he'll be paid $6.1M) with the Indians holding club options for 2012 (for $7M), 2013 (for $9M) and for 2014 (for $12M). None of that money is guaranteed past the end of next year, meaning that the Indians are only tied to Carmona from year to year after the 2011 season through the 2014 season, if they choose to be. If Carmona is back to being the dominant pitcher that he was in 2007 (or is even in the same area code as that pitcher) those options, which not so long ago looked laughably expensive, suddenly become bargains for the pitcher who inarguably possesses the most talented arm in the organization.

Since he's been on the North Coast for such a long time and has gone through the peaks and valleys as a pitcher since he arrived, it's easy to forget that Carmona is still 26 and won't be 27 until December of 2010, meaning that he's actually 2 months younger than the pitcher that has been Unleashing his own brand of Fury on the AL, Mr. Mitch Talbot.

Speaking of Mitch-A-Palooza, Fangraphs had a piece earlier in the week on The Fury called "Mr. Never Misses a Bat", intimating that Talbot's early success was a mirage and that his inability to…well, miss bats foretold of Talbot coming back down to earth (perhaps with a thud) at some point. While the piece felt a little premature at the time (given that it was after two starts and was written before he went 6 1/3 innings in Minnesota giving up only 1 run), it does bring up some salient points on Talbot, who's only getting swings and misses on 2.3% of his pitches and has an unusually low BABIP of .192, 2nd lowest in the AL, meaning that Talbot could be certainly walking that fine line between success and blow-ups.

While it is fun to run numbers and say that, in the last 17 innings that Talbot has thrown, from the 5th inning in his season debut in Detroit through Thursday's start, his cumulative numbers are a 0.53 ERA and a 0.64 WHIP, it does also fall into the "if you take out the 4 runs he let up in 4 random innings, he's a GREAT pitcher" trap of statistical illusion.

Regardless of that being the case or not, Talbot's early success has been the great revelation on the Indians and (while I muscle down this crow that's on my plate) if the Indians are able to get that production from the player that is ostensibly their 5th starter in a rebuilding year, Talbot's performance ranks as the most pleasant surprise of the early going. As Terry Pluto points out, "Mitch Talbot doesn't get rattled when he has a bad inning. He throws strikes, pitches out of jams and the right-hander has done a nice job vs. lefties (.4-of-27, .148)" and while the proof is in the pudding thus far as evidenced by his total line, there are some red flags with Talbot.

To that end, the piece from Fangraphs lingers, not because the analysis in their piece is so insightful or hard-hitting (it isn't), but rather because it causes an unflattering light to be cast upon the strong start of the Indians' rotation in the early going. Since I mentioned that Mitch Talbot had posted an unusually low BABIP of .192, I might as well air all of the dirty laundry all at once:

BABIP – 2010
Huff - .174
Talbot - .192
Carmona - .219

If you're not familiar with BABIP (or Batting Average on Balls in Play), here's a great primer on BABIP from Big League Stew at Yahoo!
, with the thrust of the metric being explained very well (and very simply) thusly:

Why BABIP works*: A well-known sabermetrician named Voros McCracken has demonstrated that pitchers have relatively high control over strikeouts, homers, and walks, but have relatively little control over balls in play. If a ball stays in play, the only things determining whether it will fall for a hit or turn into an out are the defense and random chance. This implies that the "pitching to contact" approach is either a myth or a byproduct of a stellar defense.*

How BABIP works for pitchers*: For pitchers, BABIP tends to converge around .290 or .300. A pitcher whose BABIP is significantly higher than .300 will either wash out of the league or see it come down. Meanwhile, a pitcher whose BABIP is significantly lower than .300 will see it rise. There's generally not that much variance: Greg Maddux's career BABIP against was .286 while Jose Lima's was .301* .

The point is that whether a pitcher is Greg Maddux or Jose Lima, the Batting Average for Balls in Play ends up around .300 over the course of a season or multiple seasons. Take a look again at the BABIP numbers for the three Indians' starters who have experienced the most success to date on the season and realize that Huff's is the lowest among starters in the AL, while Talbot's is second lowest, with Carmona coming in as the 7th lowest in the AL among starters.

Just for some context here, I will point out that the lowest BABIP among starters in the AL last year was enjoyed by Jarrod Washburn at .257, the same Jarrod Washburn who remains a Free Agent today because many teams see his "success" in the 2009 season as a mirage, partly because of his…wait for it…unsustainably low BABIP last season.

Certainly there are explanations as to how a particular pitcher can "enjoy" a preternaturally low BABIP, but much of it has to do with either playing in front of an elite defense (as Washburn did last year in Seattle)…which doesn't apply to the Indians, or by limiting the amount of hard-hit balls. If you want to use the idea that line drives are hard-hit balls, the assumption translates nicely for the future success of Carmona, but not so much for the other two:

Line-Drive Percentage (ranking among AL starters)
Carmona – 9.5% (4th lowest in AL)
Talbot – 16.9% (20th lowest in AL)
Huff – 19.7% (30th lowest in AL)

Of course, limiting damage done or minimizing the balls that are put into play to singles has helped all three as they rank in the top 20 in SLG against , but it comes back to that BABIP for me as the idea that these percentages average themselves out over the course of the season

leads me to believe that the same balls that are being put in play that are becoming outs for these pitchers will eventually become “seeing-eye singles” or worse. If this was the Modus Operandi for any of these guys throughout their career (that they’ve always had low BABIP), some hope might be held up that they represent an exception to the rule, but looking at the numbers for these guys in their past does not bear that out:

Huff – 2009 BABIP in MLB - .325
Huff – Career BABIP in MiLB - .276

Talbot – Career BABIP in MiLB - .330

With those two, it gives off the idea that Huff likely isn’t as bad as he his numbers for last year would indicate, but also that his early success is going to be balanced out by some rough outings, if only by virtue of more of that BABIP creeping up over the course of the season. The same can be said of Talbot, whose Minor League BABIP is actually extraordinarily high, meaning that his underwhelming MiLB numbers probably left him a tad underrated. However, that idea that his 2010 is likely going to suffer the same pitfalls as Huff’s as more of these hits fall will begin to play out at some point. Regardless, for both of these pitchers in their mid-20s getting their first (or second) exposure to MLB hitting, the results are still largely positive.

Which brings us back to Carmona and why his 2010 feels different than the other two as in 2007, Carmona’s BABIP was .281 (it was .297 in 2008 and .330 in 2009), meaning that his “stuff” was never simply immune to nearly 30% of the balls that were put into play that year turning into hits. After Saturday’s gem, Carmona’s BABIP sits at .219 (and it actually went up after the brilliant start in Oakland) and is sure to rise, but his low line-drive percentage and low SLG against show that hitters are not squaring up Carmona’s offerings, much in the same way that they were unable to in 2007.

Baseball Prospectus’ John Perrotto passes along word from a scout that Carmona’s “sinker isn’t quite as good as it was when he won 19 games (in 2007), but he’s throwing the ball a lot better than the last couple of years”, so perhaps there is something to Carmona simply being the beneficiary of luck in the early going more than putting his success on the shoulders of any catcher or coach, but the way that his recent outings have gone suggest that he’s keeping hitters off-balance, which results in the weak grounders and pop-ups that we’ve seen in the early going.

As a quick aside, is there just one scout who feeds guys like Stark and Perrotto these one sentence blurbs or can do different scouts see the same exact thing and word it nearly identically to two different national writers?

Back to the rotation and the idea that there’s going to be some regression coming, this is not meant to rain on anyone’s parade regarding the early success of the Indians’ rotation as I’m not saying that the BABIP is unsustainable (well, I kind of am…), but these pitchers, who are being told to pitch to contact, are simply finding fortune in terms of having the balls hit against them being hit at a defender. The rest of the numbers on Carmona foretell a different story than Huff and Talbot, who may simply be the beneficiaries of “luck” (or whatever you want to call it) in the

first month of the season.

Whether there is something deeper at play here or if the Indians have figured out a way to circumvent what looks to be an irrefutable truth in the laws of pitching remains to be seen. If they haven't, I would expect Huff and Talbot to come back to Earth a little bit as their BABIP figures to rise while Carmona is much less likely to see his performance change radically because of his ability to induce soft contact.

Regardless of how they've done it, the Indians' starters have led the charge toward .500 as the offense has scuffled and, since the assumption remains that some of the members of the rotation may regress in the coming weeks which makes it all the more important for the lineup to find some offensive spark and for the bullpen to settle into some semblance of a progression of usage if the Indians have any inclination of hanging around the AL Central race this summer.