After the Indians finally take one from the Red Sox on the power of the pitching performance of a former Red Sox player and as we all brace for the arrival of Hurricane Stephen on Sunday (that would be Strasburg...and I'll be in the Tribe Social Deck to witness the assumed carnage first-hand), let's get a couple of Tomahawks in the air and send them in Trevor Crowe's direction as we've now seen how he handles objects hurtling towards himself.

After pointing out that the Indians' starters for the first 3 games against the Red Sox have given up 2 ER in 21 IP (0.85 ERA) and while I pat myself on the back for suggesting that Frank Herrmann (or The Hermannator, as he has been dubbed) make his way to the parent club, let's get these going...

_____

While the trade discussions are on in full force and you can't read anything nationally that doesn't include a break-down of which Indians might be going where, I thought that this might be interesting to note:
The Indians are third last in the AL in Extra Base Hit Percentage (at 6.7%), which is basically a measure of how often a plate appearance results in an extra base hit...
The AL Average XBH% for individual players is 7.8%...
The players on the Indians with 100 or more plate appearances that are better than league average in XBH% are:
Austin Kearns – 10.4%
Jhonny Peralta – 9.6%
Rusty Branyan – 9.5%
The BLC – 8.3%

The Indians are tied for second last in the AL in Slugging Percentage at .364...
The AL Average Slugging Percentage for individual players is .409...
The players on the Indians with 100 or more plate appearances that are better than league average in SLG are:
Austin Kearns - .482
The BLC - .466
Rusty Branyan - .463

One Jhonny Peralta is the next highest Indian at .404...
Tell me again, who are those players that the Indians are likely to shop in July from their pop-gun lineup?

The point of this is not to depress anyone further or to throw cold water on any embers of excitement that may still exist out there, but rather to point out how overwhelmingly disappointing the players (both young and old) that were thought to be counted upon to provide some power for this lineup have led us to where we are today. Additionally, the idea that the Indians should look to move the likes of Kearns, Branyan, and Peralta (and they should...don't get me wrong on that point) mean that August and September are actually going to “feature” less offense.

Of course, we all wait with bated breath for the arrival of Carlos Santana, but even his arrival gets to the greater point that there's a possibility that he's simply going to be another young player attempting to make his way in MLB when he arrives. Maybe he has more success than Matt MaTola did (.277 SLG...4 points higher than the since-departed Mark Grudzielanek, who actually did not have an XBH in 119 PA), but inserting him in the lineup is not going to serve as a balm that suddenly solves the offensive offense, particularly when you consider that Kearns, Branyan, and Peralta are likely going to be wearing different uniforms in August.

Some of this can be blamed on the injuries to Sizemore and Cabrera, but even when those two were healthy (and it is still questionable if Grady was), take a look at where the numbers for those two stack up against MLB averages...with the inclusion of another veteran thrown in for good measure:
XBH%
MLB Average – 7.8%
Travis Hafner – 6.9%
Grady Sizemore – 5.7%
Asdrubal Cabrera – 5.4%

SLG
MLB Average - .409
Travis Hafner – .373
Asdrubal Cabrera – .368
Grady Sizemore – .289

Throw in that Matt MaTola had an XBH% of 3.8% (same as Trevor Crowe does right now) and that .277 SLG and you can see pretty clearly why this team is struggling offensively, significantly more than anyone would have thought going into the season. Unfortunately, you also see that the principals that the Indians are depending upon past 2010 as top-to-middle-of-the-lineup presences – Sizemore (assuming health), Cabrera, Hafner (gulp), and MaTola – are each full of question marks and recent struggles to hit for power for each in MLB are very real concerns.

Maybe Carlos Santana comes in and changes the whole dynamic of the offense, with Jason Donald being a spark-plug, with LaPorta and Brantley returning from Columbus with more consistent and better results, and with Cabrera coming off of an injury to re-join Choo in the lineup and to provide some offensive momentum into 2011.
Right now, that's awfully hard to see...

_____

That being said, the roster machinations that are probably going to go full-bore here over the next 6 weeks continued as Mark Grudzielanek found himself off of the roster, opening the door for somebody named Anderson Hernandez. I'm not going to pretend to care about Anderson Hernandez, as I hope that he ultimately becomes a footnote of the 2010 season as the hope that Donald and Valbuena will be given extended looks at 2B and SS until Cabrera returns may actually be taking hold.

As terrifying as that arrangement might be in light of what is written above, this certainly seems to set the table for a pretty standard lineup for a little while with somewhat obvious replacements as we move towards the end of the year:
C – Marson
1B – Branyan
2B – Valbuena
SS – Donald
3B – Peralta
LF – Kearns
CF – Crowe
RF – Choo
DH – Hafner

Throw your boy Shelley Duncan and my boy Andy Marte in there from time to time as a RH bat, but I could see this lineup going forward for a while with the first move being Santana being called up to replace Marson. After that, the trades will begin and LaPorta will presumably replace Branyan, while Brantley re-emerges to take over CF with Crowe sliding over to (shuddering) LF when Kearns gets traded. Additionally, it's likely that Valbuena finds himself without an everyday position when Cabrera gets healthy...unless he's going to 3B for the day when Peralta is presumably moved.

At least that movement and some new faces will generate something of interest to watch because, right now, this team is getting harder to watch by the day and the near future for the once-promising young offense is looking dimmer and dimmer because of it.

_____

As for those trade discussions that are likely starting (regardless of what is being said at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario), here's a little snippet from B-Pro's John Perrotto's "On the Beat", which provides quotes from scouts on various players and this is certainly of interest:
Indians right-hander Fausto Carmona: *"He's made a nice little comeback compared to where he was at last year and he's gotten himself into a lot better shape, but he's not the same guy who won 19 games in 2007. His sinker doesn't have that same bite it did back then and he doesn't strike guys out. If I were the Indians, I'd try to trade him right now since he might not rebuild his value any more than this."*

Since that is the view of a scout, perhaps it is interesting to consider in the context of some digging that Fangraphs recently did into his statistical tendencies that tend to back up the idea "he's not the same guy who won 19 games in 2007", when they

point out the following:
This season, Carmona is having what appears to be a rebirth, as he's running a 3.53 ERA through his first 11 starts. Looking slightly deeper, we see a similar K/BB rate to Carmona's great 2007, but the ground ball rate just isn't there any more. Still, with a ground ball rate as high as Carmona still runs, like his 56.2% rate this season, even a little luck can turn a mediocre season (4.18 FIP, 4.59 xFIP).

These opinions and breakdowns are extremely interesting because of the fact that Fausto is such a unique pitcher, never dependent on high K rates and relying on that sinker to induce groundballs. However, if scouts are saying that his sinker is not what it once was and his stats show that his ground ball rate is falling, what are the Indians to do with Fausto?

Remember, there was that talk of the Blue Jays scouting Fausto and you would think that there would be some serious interest in Carmona, given the…shall we say, flexible nature of his contract with the multiple club options that go all the way to 2014.

However, on a team that is pretty barren of even-mildly accomplished starting pitchers (and that number will shrink when Westbrook goes away), the importance of Carmona – even in the middle of the rotation – cannot be underestimated. I suppose that the argument exists that this team is miles away from contending and they should be selling high on Carmona, but count me as one who thinks that Carmona is on his way to coming back to form.

That form may never return to his v.2007 mastery, but even at a lower level of performance, keeping him around allows the Indians to have at least some semblance of consistency in a very young and inexperienced portion of their team. Additionally, that flexible nature of his contract (with the club options) allows the Indians to have the ability to see what Carmona puts forth from year to year, able to cut the cord if he ever regresses as he did in 2008 and 2009.

_____

With Tony Sipp's season officially coming off of the tracks recently and with Rafael Perez waking up every morning inexplicably still on the 25-man roster, how about this little nugget – the only LHP currently pitching in Columbus' bullpen is a name you might recognize...Jeremy Sowers.

With Laffey in the Clippers' rotation, Scott Lewis out of the organization, and Mike Gosling retiring, the nearest help for the bullpen – in terms of LHP – other than Sowers is in Kinston. In Akron, there are four LHP (Eric Berger, Kelvin De La Cruz, and Nick Hagadone), all of whom have started games exclusively for the Aeros. Kinston boasts 3 LHP (TJ House, TJ McFarland, and Chris Jones) and only one of them (Jones) is not in the K-Tribe's rotation.

There are 3 LH relievers in Lake County, but if you're looking for a reason that the Indians are so hesitant to part ways with Rafael Perez (and I have been), that's as good as any that I've found as their LH bullpen options above High-A ball are Tony Sipp and Jeremy Sowers.

Debate all you like about where Laffey is most valuable to this team (I'm starting to lean towards the bullpen) and that's not to present an argument to keep Perez around, but I wouldn't be

surprised if the Indians start fishing for some LHP that could provide some bullpen depth beyond...you know, Jeremy Sowers and Chris Jones.

_____

Speaking of LHP, how about this from Craig Calcaterra as he discusses the idea that the Mariners are scouting the Yankees' farm system
as the likelihood of the Bombers being interested in CP Lee is high:
Makes sense for the Mariners to at least be prepared in the event the Yankees realize that they can get one of the best pitchers in baseball to help them fight the Rays for the division and, assuming a long-term deal gets done, help anchor the rotation for the next several years.

Given his reasonable price tag, of course, there may be a lot of teams interested in renting Lee for the playoff stretch. The M's would be wise, however, to try and find a partner who could negotiate with Lee on a long term deal, thus bringing back some real value in exchange for their failed experiment at contending.

Am I the only one who's simply bracing for the inevitabilty of Clifton Phifer in pinstripes, be it this August or next April?

_____

It being the week of the MLB Draft, I should probably hit on something draft-related, so...after some premature reporting and back-tracking, there's this from SI.com's Jon Heymann , who has been known to break stories having to do with Scott Boras clients:
The Indians are close to a deal for about $1.55 million for second round pick LeVon Washington, a speedy outfielder at Chipola (Fla.) JC. Washington turned down an estimated $1.1 million from Tampa Bay last year. Since the deal with the Indians will be over slot, it won't be approved or official until August.

Obviously, LeVon (take it Elton) is a Boras client and not even pretending to be an expert on the varied players that the Indians took (that's better left to the experts
), one thing that I do find interesting is the dollar amount being thrown out there for the Indians LeVon Washington, it being (allegedly) a $1.55M signing bonus.

This is relevant because the #55 overall pick last year received a $712,000 signing bonus and Washington's $1.55M bonus is higher than any 2nd Round Pick money that changed hands last year. In fact, there were only 18 1st Round Picks last year that received more money than the Indians just meted out to Washington, who just happens to be a Scott Boras client.

In case you were wondering, the #5 pick last year (which is where Pomeranz got taken) received a $2,420,000 bonus, something the Indians are sure to exceed with Pomeranz. While this is certainly a promising development on the surface, it should not be forgotten that the Indians HAVE spent money on Draft Picks when you look at signing bonuses from years past…the return on those investments (particularly those from 2003 to 2006 who received signing bonuses of $500K or more) have been another story:
2003

Michael Aubrey - $2,010,000
Brad Snyder - $1,525,000
Adam Miller - $1,025,000
Javier Herrera - $710,000

2004
Jeremy Sowers - $2,475,000
Justin Hoyman - $725,000
Chuck Lofgren - $650,000

2005
Trevor Crowe - $1,695,000
John Drennan - $1,000,000
Stephen Head - $605,000

2006
Wes Hodges - $1,000,000
David Huff - $900,000
Steven Wright - $630,000
Josh Rodriguez - $625,000
Ryan Morris - $500,000

The players are drafted and the Indians seem to be willing to spend money to get them into the fold, now it's a matter of seeing if the players that they're willing to take financial risks on can reap them any sort of reward.

_____

Finally, since I know that a number of people are heading down to Sunday's game to see Cy Strasburg, shoot me an e-mail to meet up at some point as I will be down at the Tribe Social Deck (aka "Mom's Basement") and would like to witness Strasburg with as many similarly-minded Tribe fans as I can.