The dominoes have started to fall in the Indians' rotation as Dave Huff is on his way to Columbus with Joe Smith on his way to the Indians to replace him on the 25-man roster in the short term before Aaron Laffey will re-emerge from Columbus on Friday to take Huff's spot in the rotation. With Laffey's Friday start, it will represent the first time that the Indians will start a pitcher that was not in their Opening Day rotation, a surprising development given the uncertain nature of the rotation all Winter and through Spring Training. Before getting into the roster machinations, how about a quick aside, where we count how many pitchers started a game by mid-June of 2009:
CP Lee
Fausto Carmona
Carl Pavano
Scott Lewis
Anthony Reyes
Aaron Laffey
Jeremy Sowers
Dave Huff
Zach Jackson
Tomo Ohka

That's 10 pitchers that had started games for the Tribe before mid-June of last year and the fact that only 2 of those guys have started games for the Indians (Laffey hasn't yet) as they near the halfway point means something in the long haul, but I digress…

Back to the matter at hand as it seems that Aaron Laffey gets the nod over Carlos Carrasco for the first shot to break back into the rotation. While some consideration may have been given to the likes of Pino and Tomlin, the only real candidates really were Laffey and Carrasco, with Laffey finally getting the nod, likely on the basis of his relative success as a starter in MLB and because of his left-handedness (the other 4 remaining starters are all RH, as is Carrasco). The move is unsurprising as Laffey's put together a decent resume as a starter, compiling a 4.42 ERA (102 ERA+) in 252 1/3 IP over 44 starts as an Indian. His peripheral numbers always look shaky, in terms of not striking many guys out and having a tendency to nibble when starting games in the last few years for the parent club.

Laffey's success comes when he's throwing strikes and the puzzling thing to me about Laffey's ascension to the Indians' rotation is that throwing strikes is precisely what Laffey did NOT do after his demotion to Columbus, as he walked 15 batters in only 20 1/3 IP. Yes, I'm the same guy who said to give Laffey a long rope in the rotation to start the year…just like I did for Huff (ahem), but after seeing Laffey thrive (for a while at least) in the bullpen to start the season, I'm not so sure that Laffey's aggressiveness when he's coming out of the bullpen isn't the best spot for him. Lest anyone forget, Laffey was one of the only reliable relievers out of the bullpen to start the season, despite the variety of roles he was used in (long man, LOOGY, set-up man, mop-up duty) and was sitting on an ERA of 2.37 in mid-May after 15 games, relying on a high groundball rate (60%) to get himself, and usually the Indians, out of trouble.

Seemingly out of the money for now is Carrasco, whose uneven year in AAA has shown a somewhat muted ability to post solid strikeout-to-walk numbers (65 K to 27 BB in 79 IP), and a year that has been undermined by Carrasco's inability to avoid giving up the longball, now a whopping 12 HR allowed in 79 IP and 13 games, which is nearly an HR allowed per game. Carrasco has now thrown 273 1/3 innings in AAA and you would have thought that Huff's demotion certainly merited a chance to see if Carrasco could benefit from a change of scenery or even just to see what he could do in an extended stay in the Indians' rotation because…well, because Carrasco is SUPPOSED to figure into the Indians' rotation past 2010 and bringing him up in mid-to-late June allows the Indians the opportunity to legitimately see what he can do against competition that doesn't include September call-ups.

Maybe Carrasco hasn't necessarily "earned" that chance, but if we're talking about 2010 performance in AAA, neither has Laffey.

That all being said and being very aware that Huff was in an obvious need of a break from MLB hitters – and how he returns from AAA is going to be telling as to whether he can locate his fastball against MLB hitters the way that CP Lee eventually did or if his command will relegate him to the land of Sowersia…and, believe it or not, I'm still inclined to believe that he's not destined to live on a AAAA island with Jeremy – have you noticed that there's another LHP that could use a similar break on the Indians?

I speak, of course, of Tony Sipp.
Since Sipp's Waterloo in the Bronx (nearly a month ago now), he's allowed 16 H, 15 ER, and 7 BB in only 3 2/3 IP while giving up 5 HR (!) and striking out only 5 hitters among the 35 that he faced. Since that game, opposing hitters have posted an astonishing 2.066 OPS and while one can say that the small sample size rule applies here, realize that he's thrown in 9 games and has allowed at least a baserunner in every game. Prior to that meltdown that caused Sipp's precipitous decline, he had posted an ERA of 1.40, striking out more than a batter an inning, while posting a WHIP of 1.03 and limiting opposing hitters to a .510 OPS. He's also the same guy with a career Minor League ERA of 2.80, with a career Minor League WHIP of 1.08 while posting a 11.7 K/9 rate on the farm. So, Tony Sipp (not unlike Dave Huff…though there is

compelling evidence otherwise) is not a lost cause – just maybe a lost sheep.

The last month has revealed that Huff and Sipp need to go to Columbus to re-discover what made them prospects in the first place – namely their command and their ability to locate their fastballs and throw strikes. Of course, Sipp's demotion may be the corresponding move to get Laffey on the 25-man roster, which would keep Joe Smith around, but if you want a novel idea – bring both Laffey and Carrasco up…

No, I'm serious. If you're asking me to make a decision as to who should replace Huff, I'm going with Carrasco even if it means 5 RHP as the Indians are strictly in development phase and giving Carrasco an opportunity could answer some questions about him that aren't going to come in AAA. Additionally, I'd like to see the Indians promote Laffey to return to the place that he experienced the most success in 2010 – as a reliever on the parent club. If you haven't noticed, the LHP in the Indians' bullpen are vying to see which can bring the bigger gasoline can with them out to the mound and if Sipp is the guy that's going to be going down to make room for Laffey, that would mean that the only LHP coming out of the bullpen is one Rafael Perez.

It is worth noting that, in his last 14 games, Perez has posted an ERA of 1.46, struck out 7 and walked only 2 (although he has given up 12 hits in that stretch) and has given up 2 extra-base hits since the beginning of May over 20 games and 75 batters faced. However, Perez is still the guy that's given up more earned runs (51) over the last two years than struck batters out (47). He's given up more than a hit an inning over the last two years and has posted a WHIP of 1.91 since the beginning of 2009.

Yes, I understand how starters are more valuable than relievers and "wasting" Laffey in a bullpen role when he could be starting games may not be the best utilization of a limited talent base. However, I still don't think that Perez is going anywhere soon, as the fact that he's being used in semi-meaningful situations is more telling than you might think. Not sure if you remember this, but the Indians' first LHP that is currently pitching out of the bullpen in the Minors (other than Jeremy Sowers…and he doesn't count) is in A-ball.

Does Laffey deserve a shot at starting in Cleveland, given his overall body of work as a starting pitcher for the Indians? That case can certainly be made (and, again, I was the one that made it ), but the aggressiveness that Laffey brings out of the bullpen may be the determining factor in where he ends up helping this team in the long haul.

Perhaps he eventually ends up there and Carrasco will find himself in the Indians' rotation once Jake Westbrook is moved meaning that there will be plenty of opportunities for these players in the rotation. Just as possible is the idea that I'm at the point where I want to see an Indians' rotation and bullpen that's going to be closer to the way it COULD be constructed in 2011 and beyond (a season like this will do that), but promoting Carrasco to take Huff's spot in the rotation and sliding Laffey into Sipp's spot in the bullpen (and don't ask me who would go down to accommodate all these moves…maybe Joe Smith goes back down) could answer substantial questions about where both Carrasco and Laffey fit. The case can be made that answering

whether Laffey fits into the rotational mix past this year also remains unanswered, but the Indians need to start cycling through some of these arms that project past 2010 in the second half of the season and finding out if Carlos Carrasco is anywhere close to being ready for a MLB rotation spot and seeing if Aaron Laffey can thrive out of the bullpen, as he did to start 2010, could represent a nice start.