On the heels of the Indians winning three in a row (with Kerry Wood saving all three games) and the team winning games that they've made a habit of losing all season long, let's get the Tomahawks out there so as not to jinx this newfound "success".
And with that, they're in the air as long as a Matt MaTola bomb to CF…

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With Russell Branyan off to re-join the Mariners as M's GM Jack Z is given the benefit of the doubt once again in national coverage (despite the fact that the team he put together to contend in 2010 is not much closer to the top of the AL West than the Indians are in the AL Central), an interesting thought occurred to me – with Branyan gone, who becomes the Whipping Boy and Public Enemy #1 of Indians' fans? That is, Branyan's mere presence on the roster made stomachs turn for some as the feeling that he was blocking Matt LaPorta at 1B and that he represented a unnecessary veteran signing for an organization with a history of such unnecessary veteran signings.

For some, Branyan fell right in line with the likes Dellichaels (David and Jason), Oldberto Hernandez, and Jason Johnson – all of whom spent their time on the whipping post for fans and media alike. Of course, Branyan hit well in his brief time with the Tribe, posting the 3rd highest OPS on the team, but he became a lightning rod for criticism as the poster boy for all that was wrong with the Indians' manner of bringing in veterans to play in front of prospects.

If you'll remember, Casey Blake spent most of his career in Cleveland reviled as "just a guy"

and as Wedge's Wichita State buddy as intimations that he had some sort of incriminating photos of Indians' brass represented the only reason that Blake remained in the lineup. While Blake was largely under-appreciated as an Indian, the feelings about him came not as a result of his play as much as the perception that he represented something disappointing about the organization. The same could be said of Branyan coming to "represent" all that is wrong in the offices of Carnegie and Ontario, as he spent his 3 (most recent) months as an Indian with writers constantly questioning what he was doing on the roster and remaining firmly in the cross-hairs of the fanbase.

That all being said, with Branyan now gone to the Pacific Northwest, who assumes that place on the mantle, as the subject of public derision. Which Indians' player will induce the most profanity or eye-rolls or general contempt?

Will it revert back to Peralta, with the idea that he (like no other) represents that unfulfilled potential that was never realized from 2005 to 2010?

Maybe for a little while, but even if they can't move Peralta via a trade (and other than the Padres, I fail to see a contender for whom Jhonny represents an upgrade at 3B), he's not long for Cleveland. Similarly, Kerry Wood or even Jake Westbrook (who has largely been given the benefit of the doubt in terms of fan reaction to his contract) aren't here for much longer to be pointed to as massive contract mistakes. Sure, Hafner's going to be floating around for a while as a "massive contract mistake", but the feelings for him range closer to pity than anger.

Perhaps it becomes a player like Trevor Crowe or Dave Huff as they become roster reminders of the struggles of the Indians' recent draft history. Or maybe one of the recently acquired young players becomes that whipping boy, as the symbol for the failure to bring in real talent for the likes of Sabathia and Lee (MaTola...I'm looking at you if you need some motivation) or maybe the Indians will give the fans what they "need" this coming off-season in terms of a new sacrificial lamb.

Make no mistake, Cleveland fans do "need" that player upon whom they heap their unhappiness – the player who represents all that is wrong with the team and whose mere presence serves as a reminder of organizational shortcomings. Branyan is gone, as is Derek Anderson, with Mo Williams possibly on their heels out of town.

Whichever Indian assumes the role of whipping boy that is now off of Branyan's shoulders will reveal itself on sports talk radio and online message boards and in the local fishwraps over the coming months, it's a target that's been worn by many before and will be worn by many after.

As a quick aside on the Branyan trade, Ken Rosenthal has this little bit from an MLB GM , which sound about right in terms of evaluating the trade:
"They aren't real good prospects, but they aren't nothing, either," one rival GM said. Other executives shared that opinion, and one said that his team viewed Diaz as a decent prospect.

Regardless of whether those two are just organizational fodder and depth or something more

(and I tend to think the former), does anyone else love the fact that the AAA OF that the Indians acquired has a first name of "Ezequial"?

Making the assumption that it's pronounced like "Ezekial", how does this guy (assuming he ever makes it to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario) not use some sort of reference to the Samuel L. Jackson monologue from "Pulp Fiction", during which he recites Ezekial 25:17?

Is it premature to simply refer to him as "Zeke" Carrera?
Yes, these are the things that clutter my head...

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With the small sample size sirens ringing as loudly as possible and me attempting to rein in my excitement for The Axe Man, it bears mentioning of where Santana's performance to date at the plate puts him in the context of MLB leaders with at least 60 PA.
Why 60...because Santana had 64 going into Tuesday's game:
OPS+: 221 (1st)
OPS: 1.179 (1st)
OBP: .453 (3rd)
SLG: .725 (1st)
XBH%: 18.8% (1st)
K/BB: 0.50 (1st)
AB/HR: 12.8 (3rd)

Too soon...too much hype?
Probably, but let me point this out:
Jason Heyward – Through First 63 PA in 2010
.269 BA / .397 OBP / .558 SLG / .955 OPS with 3 2B, 4 HR, 16 RBI, 10 BB and 19 K

Carlos Santana – Through First 64 PA in 2010
.333 BA / .453 OBP / .725 SLG / 1.179 OPS with 8 2B, 4 HR, 14 RBI, 12 BB and 6 K

Remember the hype that surrounded Heyward's start, dubbing him the "J-Hey Kid" and proclaiming him as the next superstar in baseball?

Yes, Heyward is 20 and Santana is 24 but Heyward is also an OF while Santana is a C, meaning that the positional value of The Axe Man's weapon at the plate makes him infinitely more valuable than a slugging OF. Whether he can keep up this absurd pace (or anything close to it) remains to be seen, but in a lost season, it's certainly become a fun development to follow.

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On the topic of Santana, allow me to put on my rose-colored glasses here, but is anyone else seeing a top-to-middle-of-the-order that genuinely elicits excitement built around Santana and Choo? Throw in a healthy Cabrera above them, and you can start to see how the pieces could start to come together among the assumed top 5 in the lineup for 2011. Sizemore and his health are still a HUGE wild card here and Hafner's going to be in the mix somewhere (here are the

numbers for Hafner's last 41 games....272 BA / .387 OBP / .456 SLG / .843 OPS with 8 2B and 5 HR), but the Indians actually have the makings of a potent lineup somewhere in there.

Of course, much still has to go right for those projected contributors to form a dynamic, run-scoring offense and when you look at those presumed 5 (Santana, Choo, Cabrera, Sizemore, and Hafner), there is one obvious missing element – a RH bat. Sure, Santana is a switch-hitter as is Cabrera, but looking at those 5, you start to realize how important the development of Matt LaPorta is to augment those 5 in the lineup to not only break up the LH bats, but also to provide the power that he was supposed to arrive with from Milwaukee.

Obviously, this is wildly premature, but the 6 players likely figure into the top 6 slots of the lineup for 2010 (Santana, LaPorta, Cabrera, Sizemore, Choo, and Hafner) could go a long way by the end of the season (well…except Sizemore) to establishing some stability in the lineup going forward into 2011. If those 6 can gain some momentum, the final three positions of 2B, 3B, and LF/CF (depending upon where Sizemore ends up playing) can involve breaking in the likes of Donald/Valbuena, Goedert (and eventually The Chiz), and Brantley/Crowe/Carrera in the bottom third of the order in an attempt to flesh out the whole lineup.

Given what we've seen all season, does that seem wildly optimistic?
Sure, but as I said, that glimmer of positivity was something that was awfully hard to see in the first half of 2010…

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As for the future and those positions that could still be up in the air, there was suddenly a lot of conjecture about that LF/CF position with the idea that Mike Brantley will follow Matt LaPorta up to Cleveland, with AC laying out Brantley's case for a promotion thusly :
Brantley has hit and scored in each of his last six games, batting .464 (13-for-28) with three doubles, a homer, eight RBIs and eight runs. In 21 June games, Brantley is batting .352 (31-for-88) with four doubles, a triple, two homers, 13 RBIs and 14 runs scored while walking 10 times against just eight strikeouts. Consider that before June, Brantley had just six extra-base hits in about a month and a half of action with the Clippers. That lack of power was the biggest knock against him, and he's addressing it.

It remains to be seen if Brantley can sustain that clip and calling him up after a good month can be taken as either counter-productive to his development (as he's finally hitting the ball for power in AAA and could fall into bad habits against MLB pitching) or as rewarding him for working on improving a particular aspect of his approach.

As for who's going to be moving out to make room for Brantley, a case can be made that Trevor Crowe could be sent back to Columbus although the remainder of this season seems tailor-made to see if Crowe can stick as a cheap, 4th OF option for the next couple of years.

Thus, the only other logical step would be that Austin Kearns is not too far behind Branyan heading out of Cleveland. Much of the talk has surrounded Kearns heading to Boston, but given the fact that Kearns can play all 3 OF positions, that he's cheap, and that he's had a successful 2010 season (even if he's struggled recently), there should be a market that might be a step

below where it was for Mark DeRosa at this time last year. Plenty of teams could use a versatile OF and a teams like the Padres (cumulative OPS of their LF - .572) and Braves (cumulative OPS of their LF - .636) could use a major improvement in LF, just as the Phillies could likely benefit from giving Raul Ibanez a break in LF (and with their 3B, Placido Polanco, heading to the DL, can anyone say “package deal”?); so the suitors out there for Kearns shouldn’t be lacking.

What he brings back is another story as Kearns looks like a natural fit for the Red Sox (and wouldn’t it be interesting if Lou Marson is involved in a deal like that with Victor hitting the DL, although this idea that Santana could see some time at 1B next year could be a signal that the Indians aren’t done with Tofu Lou just yet), but the Indians can move Kearns now to maximize their return without salary remaining on his contract being an issue the way that it is for players like Westbrook, Wood, and Peralta.

Regardless of when it happens, it’s likely that Kearns is not long for the North Coast and Mike Brantley will ascend to replace him, looking to improve on the .416 OPS he compiled in his brief time with the Indians to start the season. While it is encouraging that the Indians feel that Brantley is ready for the everyday lineup in Cleveland, it is worth mentioning that his career line in AAA is .282 BA / .362 OBP / .376 SLG / .738 OPS over what has now been 790 plate appearances a step away from MLB.

Perhaps the “light has gone on” for Brantley (now 23 years old) and maybe the Indians are right to promote him while he’s going good, but Brantley still has a .231 BA / .278 OBP / .231 SLG / .509 OPS against LHP this year in AAA and June represents the first month all season that he’s had an OPS over .740 (his June OPS is .914) after doing so only in July (.764) and August (.783) of last year.

The Indians are certainly not flush with other options for LF, so it remains to be seen if Brantley’s recent hot streak in AAA is just that (a hot streak) or a decided shift in his approach. When he does return to Cleveland and when Jason Donald’s wrist allows him to get back into the game, the lineup will look closer to what most thought it would look like this year. The return of Asdrubal Cabrera will only make that “projected” lineup closer to reality as the Indians attempt to finally work in this talented youth en masse to a lineup that is showing signs of life.

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The page is starting to turn at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario and, after reading the words on the previous pages that made up the first half of 2010, the page turn was certainly needed.