In light of the whole LeBron thing, I took a break from Tomahawks or any other such attempt to make the Indians relevant at the end of the work week, but now that we've all had some time to remove the knife from our collective back, placed there by one of "our own" for all of the world to see, let's attempt to move past this. With a quick reminder that it's important to root for the front of the jersey, not the back of it, perhaps we can move past this and right into a Lazy Sunday...

Ah, who am I kidding?
Even though this is the space that you come to read about the Indians and I'm not going to pretend to provide the perfect encapsulation of the past week, I can't help but use this Lazy Sunday platform (which was originally conceived to include all the "news that's fit to link") to link some of the best pieces that were out there on "The Debacle" before riding headlong into the Indians-related portion of our program.

Among MANY of the high points hit on by Bill Simmons in his pre-announcement piece was the astute observation that the way that sports media changed (perhaps forever) with this whole mess:
*The way media people have been speculating in a way that seems like a cross between learned information and opinion, except we're never really sure what's real and what's conjecture. Thanks to Twitter and the 24/7 news cycle, the lines have been blurred completely. Chuck Klosterman thinks the true hero of the LeBron saga is Brian Windhorst, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reporter who cranked out articles and Tweets by the boatload -- never speculation, always facts, always backed up by sources, and there were a couple of times when he made you wonder, "Wait a second, is Windhorst hiding under a table in LeBron's office right now?" Maybe he was.*

Without question, Windhorst really did come off as the "true hero" as everyone else participating seemed to be playing a game to see who could find the lowest road to take. Not only was Windhorst setting the bar high in print (and if you haven't seen his ground-breaking piece today , take some time out for it), he was breaking down the situation as clearly as anyone, evidenced by his appearance on Tony Rizzo's show on WKNR

on the morning of the announcement. In case you haven't heard it and if you think that there's nothing else that can illuminate this whole situation, just take a listen and prepare to have your mind blown.

Post-announcement, probably the best piece of the whole mess came from Yahoo Sports' Adrian Wojnarowski, who justifiably cast the net of blame far and wide in a piece that I have trouble disagreeing with at any point. Taking it further, we have pieces relaying personal perspective from South Euclid native Joe Posnanski (who also throws another log on the fire about something I've been thinking about – the danger of impetuousness in the NBA and how it relates to Dan Gilbert's approach going forward ) and Cleveland native Scott Raab , and in a broader sense from Will Leitch, who brilliantly nails the feeling that every sports fan should have had watching "The Debacle" that was Thursday night:

*We are all pouring our hearts and souls into cheering for men (and women) who do not care about us, who are not like us, who are not the type of people we would ever associate with (or even meet) in real life. We deify them because it is hard to find people to deify in the real world: Sports spans every age group, ethnic group, political persuasion, and all else that serves to divide us, separate us. We cheer for athletes because sports does not matter, not really. We cheer because sports is, ultimately, harmless.*

*And we trust that they will at least pretend. We trust that they will recognize the ultimate ludicrousness of this whole enterprise, that these are grown men wearing tank tops, throwing a ball up and around, running on wood, that this all exists because we allow it to exist, that the illusion must be maintained. We trust that they understand how good they have it, how much we give them, against our own self-interest. We trust that they are not laughing at us.*

*That trust felt broken tonight...*
*--snip--*
*The fear is that we've truly seen the ugly, dark heart of sports, and we won't be able to come back. It feels extremely stupid to be a sports fan. It feels pointless. None of this felt harmless tonight. And we allowed this to happen. Perhaps this is what we deserve. Perhaps this will be good for us, all of us.*

All told, it was…well, it was not a good night to be a Cleveland sports fan. So when I woke up the next morning, just looking for that escape from the abomination of Thursday night, I opened my Friday PD Sports Page and attempted to read the recap of Thursday's loss to the Rays, for a diversion, when I came across this in the "game description" from Paul Hoynes :

*Strange and unexpected things keep happening in the world, but the Indians remain a safe haven. More often than not throughout their history they have consistently produced one thing -- defeat. In an ever-changing landscape, they provide us with a comforting continuity.*

Seriously?
On a morning when the region feels betrayed and vulnerable, Hoynes takes THAT cheap shot

at the Indians?

As the Indians' beat writer following a team that has won 90 games in 7 of the last 15 seasons, advancing 4 times to the ALCS of further in that timeframe, Hoynes has no business inserting his little jab in and as I read him twisting the knife a quarter turn for no apparent reason, I couldn't help but think that the manner in which Windhorst handled the whole situation and the way that Hoynes took an absurd cheap shot in the one paragraph in which he "editorialized" on this whole LeBron thing illustrates more clearly than I could ever explain why some writers become necessary and others become ancillary. If you want a shining example of the former, simply look at Anthony Castrovince's post-announcement post that succinctly teaches a lesson and relates it to, you know, the team that he actually covers.

Off the soapbox and moving to the Trading Post, Ken Rosenthal tweeted earlier in the week that there are "multiple teams interested in Indians' Kerry Wood" though "nothing close" as well as that there is "interest in Westbrook, less on Kearns, little on Peralta". Obviously, I can't imagine that the Indians picking up some of those remaining salaries could have a major impact on the attractiveness of a couple of those players (notably Westbrook and Wood) and paying the money remaining on those deals could make the Indians' veterans that much more attractive in the next couple of weeks.

Going further on that, here's B-Pro's John Perrotto on Kerry Wood being an option for contenders for relievers :

*Contending teams do not consider him closer-worthy but are intrigued enough to try to acquire him to help in a set-up role if the Indians eat at least part of the approximately $5 million left on his salary for this season. Among the teams believed to be interested are the Reds, Angels, Tigers, Red Sox, and Yankees.*

Interestingly, Perrotto also relays that "the Indians are leaning toward hanging on to right-hander Jake Westbrook because they want the veteran to serve as anchor for their young rotation" and that may be well and good, but I'd go back to what I wrote last weekend that "perhaps the Indians are serious about approaching Westbrook about re-signing with the team for 2011 and maybe longer, but him pitching in St. Louis (or wherever) for two months isn't going to change that possibility too profoundly."

Want to know why?

Because teams are going to be looking for starting pitching...nearly every team close to contention will be looking for an upgrade in their rotation and once most of the bigger pieces (and more dominoes will fall after CP Lee) are no longer available, the Indians shouldn't hesitate to move Westbrook for the remainder of the 2010 season.

Just as one example, via Craig Calcaterra at HBT (relaying a story from MLB.com ), the Dodgers are looking to add "cheap" pitching, which could play right into the Indians' hand…again, assuming they are willing to pick up some or all of Westbrook's remaining money. Going through the other names in the linked piece, I can't imagine that the D-Backs are willing to assume all of the cash left on Haren's deal ($29M going forward, plus whatever is owed yet this year) or that the Astros will pick up any and all guaranteed remaining money ($18M plus the remainder of his 2010 salary) on Oswalt's deal.

Not to continually play this up, but can we PLEASE pay the rest of Westbrooks contract so we can move him to the Dodgers for another Carlos Santana…or maybe even another Josh Bell, whom the Dodgers inexplicably gave up last year for reliever George Sherrill?

Then again, with Brad Penny experiencing a setback in his recovery , the Cardinals could be just as desperate for starting pitching, pending the results of the tests that Penny will undergo. Plus, if the Cardinals are willing to sign Mike MacDougal to a minor-league deal in an attempt to shore up their bullpen, do you think that they might also have an interest in a certain closer who used to reside in their division?

See what I'm getting at here with Westbrook and Wood?
As unattractive as they may look after a particular start or after a particular appearance, they likely represent an upgrade for some contender at some level of their rotation and bullpen and, for the stretch run, that could be a desired commodity around baseball. Granted, Westbrook and Wood are still not even a Type B Free Agents (meaning the any acquiring team would get no draft pick compensation if either leaves as a Free Agent this off-season), but the interest will come around and the Indians should deal both of them, regardless of what they're saying now.

Of course, the first pitching domino has been felled has CP Lee will make his way to the Rangers in exchange for four prospects with the headliner being 1B Justin Smoak. Almost universally, Smoak has been identified as the "best player to be traded for Cliff Lee", quite a feat considering that Lee's now on his 4th team in less than a calendar year. While that certainly may be the case (that Smoak is the best player to change hands in exchange for Lee), the praise and adulation for him is certainly not universal. B-Pro's Christina Kahrl says that "his track record as a hitting prospect has been something less than excellent, making him more of a deep purple than a true-blue prospect." He's 23 years old and is thought of as a Top 10 or 20 prospect in all of MLB, so there must be some fire with Smoak (see what I did there), but he also has a career .473 OPS against LHP in MiLB, so it's not as if Smoak is the perfect prospect that some have made him out to be in a cursory glance.

There's no question that he comes with a pedigree that can't be matched by any player that has previously been traded for Lee and, as a quick aside, it is interesting that Fangraphs notes that "Smoak is probably better than Matt LaPorta was at the time of the Brewers acquisition of CC Sabathia in 2008, the gold standard of pitcher rental deals" which is the first time that I've heard the term "gold standard of pitcher rental deals" associated with a trade that was deemed a bust until…well, until Matt LaPorta started hitting upon his return from Columbus a couple of weeks back.

Back to this Lee situation and seeing the "centerpiece" being a 1B, I'm reminded of something that Ken Rosenthal recently wrote about the Diamondbacks possibly trading Dan Haren . He wrote that "a team that moves an ace under long-term control would need young starting pitching back, and such deals rarely materialize" which certainly holds some legitimacy if you look at how infrequently young starting pitching is dealt. If the Indians were targeting pitching in

last year's "Trading Season" – and they were in an attempt to create that "Layer Cake of Arms" that we've been talking about, even if
a mid-season review of their pitching prospects is less than encouraging
– perhaps it speaks to the idea that Smoak is the highest-rated prospect dealt for Lee.

Smoak certainly seems to be the key part in this deal (and color me surprised that the Mariners allegedly passed on Yankees' prospect Jesus Montero in favor of Smoak…which only delays the inevitability of Lee going to the Bronx), but remember that the Indians did receive two arms in the Lee deal, one a perennial Top-100 prospect in Carlos Carrasco and the "key to the deal" in Jason Knapp. While Knapp still hasn't thrown a pitch in 2010, Carrasco remains the piece that can make the Lee deal a marginal success in the next year or so, if what Jon Steiner at WFNY comes to pass :
*If he can keep his MLB strikeouts and walks close to his AAA rates, and slightly cut his home run rates, he can be a sub-3.50 ERA pitcher. This was the sort of upside that the Indians' front office likely saw when they asked that Carrasco be included in the Cliff Lee deal.*

Interestingly, one of the "big names" that was supposedly on the table from the Twins was their AAA catcher Wilson Ramos and, while he was somehow universally regarded as a bona-fide top catching prospect in all of this hullabaloo, let me drop this knowledge on you…

Ramos is currently a 22-year-old backstop in AAA who was rated as the #58 prospect by Baseball America heading into the season. He's struggled mightily at AAA this year, posting only a .208 BA / .244 OBP / .319 SLG / .563 OPS in 218 plate appearances there, but he's still very highly regarded as a catcher (remember, he's only 22) whose eventual chance in MLB almost certainly isn't going to come in the Twin Cities.

Why is this relevant?
Last year, a 22-year-old catcher was traded for the services of Clifton Phifer...you may know him as Tofu Lou or simply as Lou Marson. Going into the 2009 season, the 23-year-old Marson was ranked as the #66 prospect by Baseball America and struggled somewhat in AAA while still in the Phillies' organization, posting a line of .294 BA / .382 OBP / .370 SLG / .751 OPS in the 241 PA that he accumulated prior to getting traded.

Let me put this in clearer terms:
**Wilson Ramos - #58 Prospect in MLB heading into 2010**
.563 OPS in AAA (218 PA) as a 22-year-old in 2010

**Lou Marson - #66 Prospect in MLB heading into 2009**
.751 OPS in AAA (241 PA) as a 23-year-old in 2009 prior to trade

That year makes a difference though with Ramos in AAA as a 22-year-old is more impressive than Marson being there as a 23-year-old, right?
Sure, age plays a factor in any prospect's development...but Marson turned 23 on June 26th of 2009 while Ramos will turn 23 on August 10th of 2010. So yes, there is an age difference between the two but it's about 6 weeks, not the full year that you may think. Certainly, Marson's performance in MLB in 2010 has colored our view of him and his capability to be an everyday

MLB catcher, but Ramos is seen as what could be the centerpiece of a deal that would bring Lee to Minnesota. Obviously, I'm not attempting to pass off Lou Marson as a player that should be deemed as the centerpiece of any trade involving CP Lee, I'm only trying to provide some perspective in terms of players that were acquired by the Indians for Lee and how they relate to these names (like Ramos') that have been bandied about as "top prospects".

Just to keep it on this topic, Jason Donald currently has a 112 OPS+ and (not sure if you're ready for this) but among middle infielders in the AL with more than 150 plate appearances, that would put Donald as the player with the 4th highest OPS+ behind Robbie Cano, Dustin PEDroia, and Ian Kinsler. It puts him ahead of Derek Jeter, Orlando Hudson, Howie Kendrick, Marco Scutaro on that list. The only other player that is 25 years old (other than Donald) is the Rays' Sean Rodriguez.

His defense has been shaky at best (to be kind) and 29 K to 10 BB in 44 games is not all that encouraging, but the Indians are not quite a year removed from the Lee deal and are about to promote Carrasco to the big-league rotation (something that should have been done when Huff was sent down), Donald has shown that he should be in the mix as a middle infielder for the foreseeable future and Lou Marson remains in AAA attempting to resurrect his trade value (did you notice that he was passed over by Gimenez to replace Mike Redmond as the back-up catcher), something he's struggled with as he's sitting on a .618 OPS currently in Columbus.

How is that haul going to compare to the one that Seattle just received for Lee, or even the trio that made their way to Philly for Lee? Ask me in a couple of years, as Smoak comes with the highest prospect ranking attached to his name, but realizing that Andy Marte was ranked as the #11 Prospect in all of MiLB prior to 2004, as the #4 Prospect in MiLB prior to 2005, and the #14 Prospect in all of MiLB prior to 2006

Back to Jason Donald in terms of the Lee deal, the recent (and inexplicable) success of Sonny Nix begs the question of what do the Indians should do at 2B when Asdrubal Cabrera returns with Donald and Nix both playing relatively well. Terry Pluto asserts on Donald that "he will see action (along with Nix) at second base when Asdrubal Cabrera returns from his broken arm to play short in a few weeks", but I think an easier solution exists.

While Nix is certainly a nice story and has earned playing time, let's remember that Nix's MLB OPS was .658 coming into the season and that his offense on the South Side was bad enough (.513 OPS) that the offensively-challenged White Sox actually cut him. Certainly, he's benefited from everyday plate appearances in Cleveland and has earned the chance to show that he's closer to the player he's been in Cleveland (with his .953 OPS) than he was in years prior. However, seeing as how Nix's career OPS in AAA is .748 and in AA is .642, one would think that a GIANT regression is somewhere on the horizon for him at the plate.

That being said, even with a offensive drop-off, I wouldn't simply dismiss Nix out of hand and remove him from the discussion going forward as he's earned more than that, even in his limited time. Thus, if you want the solution as to what the team could do with Nix and Donald after Cabrera returns, I think that Nix is the "bridge" who could play 3B once Peralta gets dealt (he's played 28 of his career 139 MLB games there) or even who plays RF once Kearns gets

dealt (he's played 5 games in RF in MLB) as Nix could turn into a jack-of-all-trades very quickly for the Tribe.

Who knows where Peralta's going to go, as AC points out , Peralta's ".245 batting average is second-lowest among qualifying AL third basemen, while his slugging percentage (.383) and on-base percentage (.307) are third-lowest. Jayson Nix has been here two weeks and has the same number of home runs for the Tribe as Peralta does. Hard to imagine there being much of a market for Peralta's services this summer, unless he gets extremely hot."

While the interest may not be great in Peralta, I could see the Indians essentially pulling a Paul Byrd-for-Mickey Hall dump with him.
"A Paul Byrd-for-who"?
Exactly…

Regardless of where Jhonny goes (and it may just be to the bench if the Indians really can't find a taker for him), if the Indians want to give Jared Goedert a shot at 3B when Peralta disappears, perhaps Nix can become that late-blooming Casey Blake-type player who fills in the gaps around the young talent while providing a solid glove, some RH pop in the lineup, and the flexibility to do exactly what Lacey Cake did (to little critical acclaim) when he established himself in the early stages of the mid-2000s rebuild/reload.

Debating Sonny Nix's eventual role with the team going forward is where we find ourselves in mid-July as the Indians' transformation into the young team that many thought they would look like out of Spring Training is finally gaining traction. Of course, compared to the developments across Gateway Plaza over the last week, "deciding" upon the landing spot for a 27-year-old middle infielder that was cut by a divisional rival, it actually provides a needed respite from the fallout of "The Decision".