As the Indians enjoy an off day before heading through the gauntlet that is a 3-game set with the Rays and a 4-game series with the Yankees, let's get the Tomahawks going before all of these nice, clean numbers that are about to be used get some mud thrown at them from facing the best two teams in the AL over the next week.

And with that, they're in the air…

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While the Indians' recent winning streak has gotten the lions' share of attention locally, does everyone realize that this team is 22-24 since June 1st (including a 1-11 stretch in mid-June) and is actually 10-8 since July 1st? While that's not going to win anything more than a "Best Sportsmanship" ribbon at the year-end awards ceremony, it is promising to examine the improvements that this team has made as the season has made by month:
April: 9-13
May: 9-18
June: 12-16
July: 10-8

As much as I hate those arbitrary "this is what they did in this imaginary timeframe" statistics, it is…well frankly, it's easier to quantify and find statistics when you use those arbitrary timeframes. Anywho, while the (relative) success can be chalked up to a fair number of positive

factors – Santana, MaTola, Talbot, Carmona, etc. – the biggest change, particularly over the past month, has been the performance of the bullpen.

Don't believe me?
Bullpen Performance – July
Joe Smith – 0.00 ERA, 0.83 WHIP with 5 K, 3 BB in 6 IP over 9 games
Chris Perez – 0.00 ERA, 1.26 WHIP with 6 K, 7 BB in 6 1/3 IP over 7 games
Tony Sipp – 1.08 ERA, 0.96 WHIP with 10 K, 5 BB in 8 1/3 IP over 7 games
Rafael Perez – 2.08 ERA, 1.50 WHIP with 5 K, 4 BB in 8 2/3 IP over 9 games
Frank Herrmann – 2.57 ERA, 1.43 WHIP with 6 K, 1 BB in 7 IP over 7 games

Sure, there are guys like Heck Ambriz, Jenny Lewis, and Jess Todd that I'm omitting (in addition to a certain "former" closer who I'm not including here), but while optimism abounds in the lineup as the 2011 pieces are starting to assert themselves, the same can be said in the bullpen as those five names could constitute the foundation of a solid, young, (relatively speaking) "homegrown" bullpen with arms that are under club control for the foreseeable future.

Of course, it's folly to assume that any or all of those guys (or the layer below them like Todd, Stowell, Pestano, Putnam, etc.) can be counted on from game to game, much less year to year. However, the Indians finally seem to be developing young arms that are excelling in MLB and could FINALLY settle what has been the Achilles' heel of the organization for far too long.

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As long as we're dealing with those "arbitrary timeframe" statistics for a particular group of players, how about taking a quick look at the performances for the stalwarts in the rotation since June 1st:
Carmona – 3.60 ERA, 1.30 WHIP, .666 OPS Against
Talbot – 4.05 ERA, 1.54 WHIP, .720 OPS Against
Masterson – 4.68 ERA, 1.42 WHIP, .701 OPS Against
Westbrook – 4.70 ERA, 1.37 WHIP, .773 OPS Against

Why do the Indians have to hang on to Jake Westbrook again?
Sure, you could say that the compelling reason would be to NOT allow the likes of Dave Huff and Aaron Laffey from toeing the rubber again (although it looks like Twitter and a "dead arm" may take care of that) as each has struggled mightily in their time in the Tribe rotation.

However, two months of Jake Westbrook in this rotation is not going to make or break the 2010 season. If you want to make the case that the Indians should sign him this off-season, I'll probably line up next to you to make that argument; but if Wednesday night's start for the Clippers was "the best that (Carlos Carrasco) has thrown all year", as Farm Director Ross Atkins asserted (as he is wont to do) or would like to see if Jeanmar Gomez's start on Sunday was an aberration (and I tend to think that it was), the only way to find those things out this year is to clear some spots in the rotation.

While an argument can be made that plenty of starts will be there as the Indians monitor innings

pitched for Masterson and Talbot and Laffey's probably headed for the DL, it's something that's been discussed before, but facing MLB hitters (or pitchers) prior to September call-ups, instead of after them, allows a better chance to evaluate players against MLB players and not simply against their fellow September call-ups.

If the idea is to find out what Carrasco and Huff (most obviously) and Tomlin and Gomez (less obviously) are able to bring to the table before just opening a rotation spot up next Spring in Goodyear with very little known about any or most of them, then the moves need to be made to accommodate those players with those chances.

Whether they sink or swim is on them, but they need to get into the pool to find out first…

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Since the subject of moving Westbrook to open up opportunities for young pitchers has been broached, let's get the Rumor Mill spinning. Starting off with Jayson Stark as he hits on some of the high points on Carmona and Westbrook (in a roundabout way) in a piece analyzing the trade market for starters :

Teams that have talked to the Indians say they're taking a much different approach this summer than they did when they were selling off Cy Sabathia and Cy Lee the previous two years. They've consistently told everyone who has called they don't have to move dollars and they don't have to move either Carmona or Jake Westbrook. So neither is going anywhere unless it's a deal the Indians consider

Of the two of them, the Indians appear much more amenable to trading Westbrook, if only because he's about to become a free agent.

--snip--

It's conceivable the Indians could drop their poker face by sometime next week. But what's a lock is this: They won't move both Carmona and Westbrook. They've made it clear it will be one or the other.

If I had to read between the lines there, it looks like the Indians are looking to move Westbrook and are using Carmona as bait to get people to look at Jake. I think that Stark's right in that they're keeping that "poker face" up in an attempt to not only dispel the notion that they're under a directive from ownership that they HAVE to move payroll and attempt to net a haul that they really have no business asking for in terms of Westbrook, particularly because of the money that would be owed to him.

Of course, if they are willing to pay that money remaining on the contracts of Westbrook and maybe Wood, perhaps they could once again play the role of predator to the Dodgers as prey, as according to Buster Olney , via Craig Calcaterra :

The Dodgers think they will be able to add both a starting pitcher and a relief pitcher before the July 31 deadline, making trades similar to those they've made in recent years when they surrendered a high-caliber prospect while asking their trade partner to pay the salary of the player involved.

That money that they'd have to eat to pay the salary of Westbrook would be close to $6M on Westbrook and a little under $5M on Wood, so if they make that deal with the Dodgers, for a

"high-caliber prospect", the guy's last name better be Broxton or Ethier.

Obviously, that's in jest but it speaks to the conundrum that the Tribe's in with both Westbrook and Wood as they owe them a significant enough amount of money that they have to balance whether getting a "high-caliber prospect" (who is still a prospect) is worth eating all of that money or if the organization is better served moving them and their contracts and using the money saved to throw into their 2010 Draft Class or the International Market.

Nevertheless, staying on the topic of Westbrook, here's a little bit on St. Louis via AOL Fanhouse's Ed Price
:
St. Louis, meanwhile, was also believed to be trying to get a starter, with its focus on Cleveland's Jake Westbrook and Arizona's Dan Haren.

With Brad Penny and Kyle Lohse on the disabled list, the Cardinals over the past two months have gotten just two quality starts from a pitcher other than Adam Wainwright, Chris Carpenter or Jaime Garcia.

As an addendum to this, I'm not sure if you knew this, but Cardinals' 3B David Freese may not be back until late-August because he dropped a weight on his toe while he was rehabbing from his ankle injury, so perhaps the Indians could package Westbrook AND Peralta to St. Louis. If the Indians threw a raft of money down the Mississippi headed towards St. Louis along with them, do you think that they could pry away Eduardo Sanchez or buy (relatively) low on Lance Lynn
?

Regardless of what they do on the Trade Market, it will be interesting to see how they balance the remaining money on these deals with the caliber of prospect that they eventually receive as covering the amount of money owed to players like Westbrook and Wood to net a better return doesn't exactly mean that it's the best use of money.

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Finally, since the start of the season, there has been an attempt by many (present company included) to equate the stage of development that this 2010 Indians' team finds itself in during this latest "rebuild/reload/whatever" phase. Particularly interesting is to attempt to compare it to the development curve of the 2002-2009 team that was broken down from the "Era of Champions" and built with young talent via trade and development.

Now nearly 2/3 of the way through the season, the apt comparison (in terms of years) may be emerging as the 2003 Tribe was 41-54 at this point in the season, while the 2010 version is 40-55 after this recent hot streak. Just to finish that comparison, that 2003 team finished with 94 losses, finishing ahead of the Tigers who lost 119 that year (which allowed them to select Verlander in the Draft the next year 2nd overall, by the way) and a year removed from the 2004 season, in which they were 1 game out of 1st place in mid-August.

Whether this current incarnation can follow that same arc remains to be seen, but the pieces for

the future are starting to fall into place and should continue to do so as the 2010 season rolls on…