As the heat has finally loosened its grip on the North Coast and with the Trading Deadline (at least the July 31st one) coming up quickly, let's get going on a Lazy Sunday as the Indians attempt to take a series from the Tampa Bay Rays. While there have certainly been some positive developments in the Indians' lineup over the last month, one constant seems to be hanging around…and I don't mean that in a good way, I mean more in the sense of the albatross hanging around the Ancient Mariner's neck kind of way.

Now that you have a pretty good idea of where this thing is going, we're off…
For starters on that albatross, let's go to Castro's Inbox from this week, in which he answers a question on Hafner and starts to get into the real issue at hand, which is a current problem and one that doesn't look to be going away any time soon:

He has made significant changes to his swing, shortening it up and becoming more top-hand dominant. As a result, he's more prone to line drives than deep fly balls. He's had some nice stretches this season, but he's not the feared, game-changing threat in the middle of the order that he once was.

Furthermore, Hafner can't really be classified as an everyday player. Manager Manny Acta doesn't use Pronk against certain lefties.

--snip--

With Hafner, the Indians are on the hook for $13 million in 2011, $13 million in '12 and another $2.75 million when they buy out his '13 option. Hafner signed the largest contract in club history,

and barring a dramatic change, it will go down as the worst. The Indians can't trade him, because nobody would take that on. The Tribe's only options are to pay Pronk and keep hoping for adequate production, or eat the contract. That would be an outrageous sum to ingest at this stage, so Hafner will remain on the roster, even if it's not at the capacity he or the Indians envisioned.

This is a tremendous starting point and Hafner performance being "not at the capacity he or the Indians envisioned" is an artful way to assert the frustration from both sides. Outside of that, the money quote comes from the idea that eating his contract would be an "outrageous sum to ingest at this stage", with the key words being "at this stage", so let's get into this in two parts – Hafner's performance and Hafner's contract.

For the first aspect, Hafner's performance, over 306 PA this year (and he only had 383 last year and 233 in 2008), he's put up this hitting line:

.251 BA / .356 OBP / .405 SLG / .762 OPS

With that "output", Hafner currently has the 5th highest OPS among current Indians, ahead of Kearns, Donald, MaTola, Peralta, Asdrubal, Crowe, and Sizemore, but a closer look at Hafner's splits gets to the crux of the reason why "Acta doesn't use (The Hitter Formerly Known as) Pronk against certain lefties". Reason being these splits for Hafner and, in full disclosure, if you have a squeamish stomach this Sunday morning, you might want to ready yourself for this:

Against LHP – 2010
.226 BA / .298 OBP / .298 SLG / .596 OPS

Against RHP – 2010
.263 BA / .382 OBP / .457 SLG / .839 OPS

Yikes…among the 96 AL players with more than 75 PA against LHP, Hafner ranks 83rd in OPS, 70th in OBP, and (realizing that we're talking about a DH here) 85th in SLG. He has 4 extra base hits against LHP (3 2B and 1 HR) in his 84 PA against LHP and, unfortunately for the Indians, his performance against RHP no longer justifies his automatic inclusion in an every day lineup.

The problem with all of this is that these disparate (and ugly) splits are nothing new for Hafner, if you just go back to last year, you start to see why Hafner can no longer "really be classified as an everyday player":

Against LHP – 2009
.210 BA / .289 OBP / .407 SLG / .696 OPS

Against RHP – 2009
.292 BA / .375 OBP / .490 SLG / .865 OPS

And therein lies the main problem with Hafner (among many), in that he simply cannot hit LHP,

particularly for power. With his numbers against RHP even dropping from last year's levels and seeing the two-year body of work, this devolution or degeneration of Hafner has left the Indians with a $13M a year platoon DH for the next two years AFTER this year.

The issue becomes not only how infrequently Hafner may find himself in the lineup but how the top of this lineup suddenly looks dynamic with Cabrera, Choo, and Santana with LaPorta starting to enter that realm

This question of what to do with Hafner is not a new one (he was the "Elephant in the Room" two years ago) and it may be coming to a breaking point soon where the realization arrives that this team may simply be a better team without Hafner in the lineup and if not right now, in the very near future.

Seeing as how that contract precludes a straight omission of Hafner, the Indians are left trying to put Hafner in situations where he can contribute while trying to avoid matchups that clearly overmatch him. To that end, one thought would be to platoon the RH hitting Duncan and Hafner at DH this year and maybe next, but Duncan's splits in 2010 show that he's hitting better against RHP (.893 OPS) than he is against LHP (.812 OPS). His career splits show that he has historically hit LHP a little better than RHP in MLB (career .733 OPS vs. RHP, career .794 OPS vs. LHP), but a platoon of Duncan and Hafner doesn't exactly quicken any pulses.

Perhaps the answer past this year falls in line with this idea that the Indians start to move Santana and LaPorta around to take some AB away from Hafner against LHP, with Lou Marson filling in at C (Marson posted an OPS of .883 vs. LHP in a tiny sample size this year in MLB) and Santana and LaPorta filling the 1B and DH spots (remember, the Indians have toyed with the idea of Santana playing 1B some next year) to replace Hafner.

Of course, a convoluted platoon of Hafner and Marson isn't going to elicit much confidence either, but at this point, the Indians are stuck trying to make the best out of a bad situation and a dreadful contract.

This brings us to the second part of the initial equation…that contract, and the way that it figures to handcuff the Indians with Hafner for the foreseeable future. If you'll remember, last week I linked Choo and Santana being among the players with the highest trade value and, lest you think that I was just going to focus on the positive and the optimistic portions of the team, I would be remiss if I didn't point out which Indian appears in the players with the LEAST trade value.

If you're confused by this concept, here's the quick description as to how the players with the least trade value were quantified:

These guys have contracts that far outstrip their actual value, and if their current organizations wanted to ship them out, they would have to pick up a significant portion of the money they're still owed in order to facilitate a trade. They are liabilities, not assets.

With that description, you know where this is going...but here's the write-up and the link :

#7 – Travis Hafner, DH, Cleveland

Remaining Commitment: 2 years, $29 million

Once one of the game's premier first baseman, Hafner is now a mediocre DH. He still has a decent approach at the plate, but his power is mostly gone, and injuries have taken a toll on his body. He's not a bad hitter, but he's not appreciably better than what most teams could get from picking through the scraps at Triple-A, where at least they might find a guy with some upside. Hafner comes with none, but he does carry a nearly $15 million per year salary for the next two years.

"One of the game's premier first baseman" falls in line with what qualifies as "analysis" at Fangraphs, but, sometimes they come out with these little lists that are interesting to look at in the context of Indians against all of MLB. Regardless, how the Indians handle this whole Hafner situation (and the "nearly a $15M per year salary for the next two years" is overstated by $2M per year...but that's just semantics and more sloppy "analysis") is going to be interesting as the Indians are unquestionably tied to Hafner as the DH, perhaps only as the DH to face RHP.

The interesting new wrinkle in play here is the recent performance of one Nick Weglarz, a LH bat who could project as a LF/1B type, but who more obviously projects as a DH…except for the fact that the Indians have their current DH signed through the 2012 season. To get things going on Wegz, we go to his biggest fan, Andrew Humphries of the LGT to provide the latest and greatest :

Since his promotion to AAA, Weglarz has thrown together a triple slash of .289/.388/.491 with fifteen 2Bs, one 3B, and five HRs. Those are very good numbers for a young man of 22 (he'll be 23 on December 16) just a heartbeat away from the major leagues (yes I'm implying he would be promoted in the event of an assassination). However, as is always the case, the numbers are even more intriguing when we start to manipulate them.

--snip--

Now, his feet soaked through, Weglarz has claimed July as his own: .386/.462/.702, eight walks and ten strikeouts.

Andrew goes on with some compelling XBH numbers for Weglarz, and since the impetus for the piece is Weglarz's success in July, it is worth mentioning that Weglarz has actually IMPROVED his July numbers since this piece was written on Thursday. Today, Weglarz's July totals are a line of .371 BA / .466 OBP / .710 SLG / 1.176 OPS with 11 XBH in 62 PA.

Just to go a little further on this, there is some justified enthusiasm about the youth of players like Mike Brantley because of his on-base ability, mixed with a dollop of patience as Brantley just turned 23 in May. Consider now that Weglarz is 7 months younger than Brantley and, if we're talking on-base ability, has actually kept pace with Brantley in OBP for the past couple of years:

Weglarz 2010
Akron - .383 OBP
Columbus - .393 OBP
Cumulative - .388 OBP

Brantley 2010
Columbus - .391 OBP

Weglarz 2009
Akron - .376 OBP

Brantley 2009
Columbus - .350 OBP

While the question of whether power will ever arrive for Brantley to augment that on-base ability as his numbers in the Minors have never pointed in that direction, Weglarz's July (in AAA of all places as a 22-year-old) show that the power that everyone has been waiting on for Weglarz to augment HIS on-base ability may have just arrived in force.

Of course, the question with Weglarz becomes where he plays if he continues this torrid pace as 1B seems to belong to LaPorta, DH unfortunately belongs to another LH hitter, and LF has become the "proving ground" for the likes of Crowe and Brantley. If he keeps hitting like he has the Indians will find a spot for him (likely in LF), with the idea that he'll eventually replace Hafner at DH as Hafner's contract slowly winds down in the 2012 season…or perhaps before it.

Moving onto the Trading Post (it being 6 days away from July 31st), here's a bit from Ken Rosenthal
that reiterates what was intimated by Buster Olney earlier in the week:

... And the Divorce Court Dodgers, whose $95.3 million Opening Day payroll ranked 11th in the majors, likely will have their hands out again, offering better prospects in exchange for cash from their trading partners.

That was the kind of deal the Dodgers made with the Indians for third baseman Casey Blake at the non-waiver deadline in 2008 — well before Frank and Jamie McCourt embarked upon their messy little split.

That's right, none of this is exactly new.

Blake proved a worthy pickup, helping the Dodgers to back-to-back appearances in the NLCS. But if the Dodgers had not needed the Indians to cover his salary, perhaps they could have made the deal without including catcher Carlos Santana, who is now emerging as one of the best young hitters in the majors.

Rosenthal's right that "none of this is exactly new" and I don't know why I keep coming back to the Dodgers on this (although as LGT's Jay Levin told me when he was the guest co-host for

this week's "Smoke Signals" , the reason I keep coming back to the Dodgers IS Carlos Santana), but I keep picturing Westbrook in Dodger Blue at the end of this week and Wood in Chavez Ravine sometime in the month of August, with lots of money changing hands and some of the Dodgers' young talent coming to Cleveland as the Indians (as Levin put it during the show) "don't dump salary, but instead BUY prospects" from the team that always seems to be selling them.

If you're looking for proof right from the horse's mouth, in terms of what the Dodgers are (and are not) looking to do, here's Dodgers' GM Ned Colletti :

"I'm not inclined to take on a huge salary and unload a bunch of top-end prospects at the same time," he said. "For good or for bad, there's always a balance in every deal."

So let's take that "take on a huge salary" part out of the equation while leaving the "unload a bunch of top-end prospects" part in the arrangement…everyone's OK with that, right?

Of course, the Cardinals keep hanging around in rumors about Westbrook (and Carmona) as Bernie Miklasz points out
:

If the Cardinals are indeed interested acquiring one of two Cleveland starters, Jake Westbrook or Fausto Carmona, they'd fit the Dave Duncan profile. Why? High ground-ball rate. Both pitchers are getting ground-ball rates of 69 percent this season; both have GB rates of 72 percent in their careers. I still think the idea of Dan Haren to the Cardinals is a long shot. By the way: Westbrook's contract expires after this season; he's making $11 million this year and less than half of that remains due. Carmona has a year left; his salary in 2011 will be $6.1 million, which is reasonable. But because Carmona has that year remaining, the Indians would probably be less inclined to deal him. Or would want more for him in return.

If you want an explanation as to why I think that it's Westbrook and not Carmona that gets dealt, here's Miklasz's rationale again that sums it up in two sentences:

Westbrook's contract expires after this season; he's making $11 million this year and less than half of that remains due. Carmona has a year left; his salary in 2011 will be $6.1 million, which is reasonable. But because Carmona has that year remaining, the Indians would probably be less inclined to deal him.

Wash away all the other rumors and hearsay on this and realize that Carmona is 26 and that the Indians can control him through the 2014 season for a total outlay of $34.1M over the next 4 seasons and, while that total number may look large, it doesn't when you consider what FA pitching (even "inning-eaters" earn on the open market) and when you realize that the dollars past 2011 aren't guaranteed, giving the club protection through the ability of simply declining any of the three club options from 2012 through 2014.

Just to put a cherry on this, it should be noted where Carmona ranks in the AL among starting pitchers after his outing on Friday night, during which he flummoxed Rays' hitters:

3.51 ERA (15th in AL)
1.28 WHIP (24th in AL)
15 Quality Starts (4th in AL)
.647 OPS Against (10th in AL)
57.5% Groundball Percentage (2nd in AL)
1.99 Groundball/Flyball Ratio (3rd in AL)
13.7% Line Drive Percentage (2nd Lowest in AL)
6% HR/Flyball Ration (8th Lowest in AL)

Elsewhere in Trading Deadline news, injuries to David DeJesus and Ben Sheets could move the Indians and their trade chips (Kearns and Westbrook, most notably) up in the pecking order but all of that could play out this week as the Trading Deadline (the July 31st one, that is) will arrive just after the Yankees leave town later this week.