The 2010 season is officially in the books and while the MLB playoffs will roll on for the next month or so, the eulogies, obituaries, and post-mortems have been rolling in front of our eyes for the better part of a couple of days. While The DiaBride will be happy to catch her “Glee” and “Private Practice” on the nights that they actually air (instead of sitting through a Tribe game, then catching up on the DVR when possible), the end of the season means that most Tribe fans move on to a period in which we miss the pattern of baseball, the regularity of it, and the promise that each game provides. Nevertheless, an off-season awaits (along with my plan to re-watch “The Civil War”...obviously unbeknownst to The DiaBride), and before we tackle all of the issues facing the Tribe, perhaps it would be better to tie up the season in a nice tidy package. Since the highs and the lows, the hits and the misses have been discussed (with an absurd number of words) in this space, I’m going to hold off on doing any full-blown season recaps because…well, if you’ve been paying attention, you know what happened.

That being said, much transpired over the course of the last six months (as it often does) and while it does provide some levity to go back to see what was written in anticipation of the season (and here’s mine , which I am oddly proud of), the more important things to take from the season come in the learned lessons, the questions that remain, and what answers lie out there in the darkness of the off-season.

Thus, without going too deeply (relatively speaking) into stats or “what’s coming next” (as there is plenty of time for that), let’s realize that 2010 has shed some light on particular corners of the organization. While others remain shadowy (at best) going forward, questions were answered and while other answers remain out there in space, let’s take a moment to recap what we learned, what we didn’t, and (for another day and another couple thousand words) what may be coming…

**What We Learned**

First and foremost, we learned that SS Choo is a tremendous player who has provided stability in the ocean of uncertainty that has surrounded this team for the last two years. Looking back at

The BLC and where he came from (and I don't just mean from Seattle for Broussard), does anyone remember when Choo returned from TJ surgery back in 2008 and was out of options and there was some thought that he would a platoon option for Frank the Tank, who was struggling mightily?

In that 2008 season, he did bounce around the OF with Gutierrez and Francisco, for the remainder of the year, the trio flanked around Sizemore in the hopes that the Indians could finally find a suitable corner OF for the future incarnation of the Tribe. Well...Since he's returned from injury in 2008, Choo has posted an OPS of .897 since his return in 2008 and his OPS+ of 144 in that timeframe ranks as the 9th highest mark in MLB over that 3-year stretch , ahead of Holliday, Morneau, and Teixeira, among others whom he's outpaced…no, seriously.
Click on the link ...do it.

Interestingly, his terrific season has given an opening for this groundswell that Choo "needs to be signed right away" sports-talk radio mantra, which is wildly misleading for those who hear or read only headlines and see Choo as the next Indian who will make his way out of Cleveland. While that perception may be ultimately true, what it fails to take into consideration is that, you know... he's under club control THROUGH THE 2013 SEASON!

So yes, he needs to be signed in his first year of arbitration eligibility to avoid the arbitration process (which can turn ugly) and the Indians can approach he and his agent about giving up some of his Free Agency years, but the first of those FA years comes four full seasons from now. If there were any indication that Indians' fans have grown a little paranoid on this whole "players leaving" thing, here it is as most of the city acts as if Choo's time in Cleveland is about to expire when he is, in fact, under club control longer than Travis Hafner...seriously. So as much as everyone moans that the team is "stuck with Hafner for two more years", realize that they control Choo for one more year past that.

For now, let's appreciate Choo and know that he's going to get paid handsomely (and rightfully so) for the next three years, whether the contracts come as three one-year deals or as a three-year deal or even as the first three years of a multi-year deal that buys out some FA year. While that last scenario is unlikely, the first and second still keep him here until he's 31 years old, which does not present such a bad scenario going forward.

As for the player that looks most obviously to be Choo's running mate in the middle of the lineup, Carlos Santana showed why he is one of the top prospects in the game as he put an OPS+ higher than the Rockies' Carlos Gonzalez did and, while it was admittedly in 1/3 of the plate appearances, he did it from behind the plate and not a traditional power position, like the OF. Santana's all-too-brief time in Cleveland this year proved that he was worthy of the hype as he arrived with his bat barrel blazing and looking like he was prepared to stabilize the middle of the lineup from Day 1. While he may move him to 1B from time to time going forward (or even to DH), Santana looks like the best pure hitting rookie (in terms of readiness and immediate impact) the Indians have had since the Baby Bull burst on the scene in the early 90s.

While Santana provided some stability to the middle of the order, Chris F. Perez did what no Indians' reliever has been able to do for the better part of the last decade as he took complete

control of the 9th inning, dominating at a clip that hasn't been seen since the halcyon days of the mid-1990s. Perez was given the opportunity to be the full-time closer after Wood was dealt and ran with it, posting the lowest ERA (0.63) in the second half of the season among all MLB pitchers with more than 20 IP after the All-Star Break. In that timeframe, Perez whiffed 32 and walked just 10 in his last 28 1/3 IP and limited opposing batters to a .445 OPS, proof to the dominance that Perez brought to the mound in the 9th. Even more compelling than that dominance was the air of invincibility that accompanied Perez as he strode out to record the final three outs as the Indians seem to have finally found that bad-ass at the back-end of the bullpen, capable of shortening the game to 8 innings for opposing teams, something that has been sorely missed for far too long.

After the three obvious bright spots (The BLC, The Axe Man, and Chris F. Perez) that provided clarity, the other rays of light come with some remaining questions as Carmona (3.77 ERA) has returned from the abyss…but to what degree not being known, and while Carrasco utilized his September opportunity (unlike last season), his ability to pitch like he did in 2010 for an extended period of time remains to be seen. The pitching staff posted a 3.89 ERA after the All-Star Break (5th best in the AL), but many members of that staff still face serious obstacles before they become definitively "known" assets.
But I'm getting ahead of myself as those questions fall into the next section…

Back to what we definitively learned, the idea was always out there that injuries can crush a season for any team, but for a team like the Indians, losing their four best position players (Sizemore, Cabrera, Choo, and Santana) for extended periods of time were simply too much for the lineup to bear. If the injuries revealed anything about the team, it shone the light on the thinness of the roster as the team was forced to rely on players who were thought to either be nothing more than organizational fodder or not even on the organizations' radar when the season started.

Through all of these injuries, we learned that this team is willing to exercise a good deal of patience with their young players. While a good deal of that "patience" came as a result of the aforementioned injures, some of it was rewarded as players (R. Perez, Masterson, and Brantley...somewhat) showed steady (or even drastic) improvement as the season progressed, while some of it looks foolish in hindsight (most notably Crowe and Valbuena...who had 310 PA, by the way) and likely represents the last bit of "patience" that some of these players are going to see at the MLB-level.

To that end, a number of players who were thought to be part of that organizational cavalry, who should have arrived back between 2006 and 2008, are ostensibly at the end of their (limited) usefulness – Marte, Crowe, Jenny Lewis, Laffey...just to name a few, and that's not even including Aubrey, Sowers, Garko, Snyder, etc., who have already been relegated to a perpetuity of minor-league detritus.

Those "waves of arms", much less talent?
Yeah, most never hit the shore and the ones that did make landfall will never be mistaken for whitecaps. Perhaps there are more out on the distance or closer to the shore, but that particular group of players (aged 26 to 28 or so) who have struggled to adjust to MLB seems to have hit

its expiration date.

Past the injuries and the “patience”, we saw that the internal bullpen arms are starting to arrive, and while the relievers (past Perez y Perez) are still question marks, some optimism abounds that the days of Jose Jimenez, Scott Stewart, Oldberto Hernandez, and Danny Graves have given way to Vinnie Pestano, Tony Sipp, Frank Herrmann, and (eventually) guys like Bryce Stowell, Zach Putnam, Josh Judy, Rob Bryson, and Bryan Price. Hard-throwing, bat-missing relievers that can be plugged into the bullpen in a manner that has been the status quo in the Twin Cities but has remained elusive for the Tribe may be on its way to being remedied from within, which provides optimism on two fronts – that they’ll have an effective bullpen AND that they’ll do it with homegrown players.

Finally (and with the names of Oldberto and Graves invoked), we learned that the Indians’ use of the FA scrap heap is not as abhorrent as some make it out to be, as the team gave Minor League deals to Kearns and Duncan and saw them contributing positive attributes (Kearns OPS+ of 117, Duncan OPS+ of 106) to a team in need of some stop-gaps as injuries hit around the same time that some of the youngsters revealed themselves to be “not ready for prime-time players”. Even the much-maligned Rusty Branyan would end the 2010 campaign with 25 HR on the season, one of only 19 players to do so in the AL and while he may not have been much by way of a “scintillating” player (or even all that necessary) while in Cleveland, the Indians paid him $1.5M for 10 HR in 52 games played. Realizing that this “scrap heap” stuff is nails on a chalkboard for some, as long as the usage for those ancillary players does not take away from young players that obviously are part of the future of the team, I’m OK with these forays into the land of Kearns, Branyan, Pavano, and others as the Indians have actually shown to be surprisingly effective in finding some players on the cheap in the last two years.

**What Remains a Mystery**

While some questions found answers (some good, some not so good), too many remain unresolved after a full season to count 2010 as too much of a success in terms of overall development. That is to say, while Choo, Santana, and Perez look to be pillars to build upon, questions surround nearly every other position and player on this roster and deeper into the organization. While some of those questions are to be expected given the youth and inexperience on the Indians, enough intriguing mysteries remain to fill a bookshelf.

First and foremost is the multitude of questions in the rotation, as the starting pitching was a surprise, but whether it is sustainable is another story as (nearly) every pitcher in the rotation has presented reason for optimism, but a reason that comes with a caveat. Each question leads to another question with these players and this is worthy of probably a whole series of pieces, but the crux of issues for each pitcher that figures into the 2011 rotation can be quickly summarized by wondering…

Can Carmona continue to improve, armed with a new weapon in his change-up, or is his “recovery” complete and is what you see now what you get...

Was Carrasco’s September a harbinger of things to come or is it simply a mirage against post-September-call-up competition…

Did Masterson really “figure it out” as the season wore on or is the bullpen still his landing spot because of his disparate splits…

Which Mitch Talbot (still out of options) will appear in 2011, as his first 15 starts (3.88 ERA, 1.35 WHIP) run in sharp contrast to his last 13 starts (5.23 ERA, 1.71 WHIP)…

Are Tomlin and/or Gomez viable options for the 2011 rotation or simply organizational depth/fodder for next year and beyond…

Will Dave Huff, now 26 years old with a 5.84 ERA (70 ERA+) with 208 MLB IP in 38 career starts and on the outs after an ill-timed Tweet, even be a member of the organization when 2011 starts...

How close/far away are the likes of Alex White and the rest of the recent draftees (Joe Gardner, Matt Packer, Drew Pomeranz) from legitimately being considered as even depth options…

As much as you’d like to say that a season and 162 starts (well…161 if you don’t count Germano’s start) would give a clearer idea of what the Indians have in their stable of starting pitchers and while some optimism exists for many (and not all) of these pitchers going forward, 2011 figures to be a continued look at all of these arms to glean what the team truly has in each and where each pitcher ultimately figures into the short-term and long-term future of the organization.

If the rotation looks to be wrought with questions but some possible answers, the biggest obvious “hole” on the team remains 3B, which is still a “work in progress”, to be kind. With Andy Marte likely on his way out of the organization and the underwhelming/unproven internal options of Jayson Nix and Cord Phelps (sorry, I’m not buying Jared Goedert as a legit option after his offense fell apart in the 2nd half and because of his defensive…um, “issues”) looking underwhelming and unproven, the Indians have to determine how to approach their 3B issue and weigh the importance of improving their infield defense (important) with solidifying 3B with a multi-year deal for a veteran (not important) and act accordingly this off-season.

Outside of 3B, the Indians appear to have logical options at every other position and, while uncertainty still surrounds how 2B plays out next year for some (Donald will start the season with Kipnis pushing him mid-season), 8 of the 9 positions seem to have players that are likely starters for 2011. That being said, most of those players disappointed in 2010 for various reasons and while the Indians have to wade through how to separate “development/maturation” curve from a “this is who this player is” flatline, and few of the young players are immune from having to separate themselves by excelling in 2011.

The topic has been dissected from all angles (in multiple overviews and specifically) to no end, particularly in this second half of the season . However, it is obvious that major steps need to be taken in 2010 by young offensive players – LaPorta chief among them – and while all figure to be on a long leash in 2011, this year showed that they are either young players struggling to adjust to MLB or are simply players ill-equipped to adjust to MLB. The answer may come in 2011 for some of those young players, because 2010 just cast more doubt on too many of

them.

If a long leash exists for many of the young position players that struggled, the (relative) success of bullpen in the second half didn't answer too many questions as bullpen consisted of players with varying degrees of an obvious future with the team. Though the past has taught us not to look too closely at periods of the season for relievers (and I'm excluding C. Perez here), the second half of the season represented a bullpen that showed signs of life, if from some unlikely sources:
C. Perez – 0.63 ERA, 0.87 WHIP, .445 OPS against
Jenny Lewis – 1.76 ERA, 0.85 WHIP, .497 OPS against
R. Perez – 2.40 ERA, 1.40 WHIP, .701 OPS against
Tony Sipp – 2.81 ERA, 1.06 WHIP, .654 OPS against
Joe Smith – 2.96 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, .534 OPS against
Justin Germano – 3.31 ERA, 0.99 WHIP, .664 OPS against
Vinnie Pestano – 3.60 ERA, 1.80 WHIP, .614 OPS against
Frank Herrmann – 4.71 ERA, 1.40 WHIP, .795 OPS against

How does everyone feel about the 2011 bullpen looking like this?
That may be overly dismissive of players that DID perform down the stretch in 2010, but Jensen Lewis and Justin Germano represent those kind of "stop-gap" players that the Indians are hopefully getting away from in the bullpen. That being said, each thrived in the second half of the season and while Perez y Perez and (the still-inconsistent) Tony Sipp look like they should be part of the bullpen in 2011, do you see any of these names and immediately recognize who should be pitching the 7th or 8th inning as a RH reliever?

Maybe that name is there and will simply emerge over time (as relievers are wont to do, as Rocky Betancourt did), but going into 2011 with that group of RH relievers (outside of C. Perez) does not evoke confidence. While it is true that more compelling options exist down the road, the trajectory of Frank Herrman's season should serve as a warning against getting overly excited about AAA numbers (Herrmann in Columbus – 0.31 ERA, 0.81 WHIP in 28 2/3 IP) or a small-sample (Herrmann's first 19 appearances in Cleveland – 2.37 ERA, 1.15 WHIP) with these young relievers.

While all of the questions about the rotation, the infield, and the bullpen have to do with players still trying to establish their value in MLB, the bigger questions exist with players who have established themselves in previous years (or in a brief stint this year), but who now find themselves returning from injury – be it a recent injury or a lingering one.

All of the team's five best offensive players (Choo, Hafner, Sizemore, Cabrera, and Santana) missed significant time due to injury in 2010 and perhaps the biggest question facing the Indians (after which members of the rotation are legitimate MLB starters, and to what degree) is how those players return from those injuries. While the answer already exists for Choo (who did miss time this year, though not as much as initially thought) and the hope that Cabrera will rebound in 2011 from his struggles in 2010 (whether those struggles were caused by injury or not), how Sizemore and Santana (most notably) return from their injuries will go a long way in determining the direction of the 2011 season.

This season for both players could be marked as “incomplete” and while Sizemore’s performance prior to the injury call into question what can be expected of him (as well as wondering when the injury occurred) and Santana’s performance gave a glimpse as to what is possible, you want a crazy stat?

Austin Kearns, the player signed to a Minor-League deal with no 40-man guarantee, traded on July 30th, had more Plate Appearances than Santana and Sizemore combined this year...

While the idea that Hafner is getting healthier and healthier will be floated out there all off-season, the realization that Hafner’s is what it is at this point (incapable to playing prolonged effective stretches without rest), which will likely lead to the Indians adding a RH bat to complement him, Sizemore and Santana remain wild cards. If Sizemore can return to the form that saw him posting a cumulative OPS+ of 128 from 2005 to 2008, the offense could find some traction, particularly in terms of lengthening out. Additionally, if Santana can pick up where he left off last year (before Ryan Kalish unceremoniously ended his season), the offense comes into clearer focus and becomes more than just The BLC.

Health has, unfortunately, become a topic that Indians’ fans have grown all too aware of in the past three years and how important players on the team (both young, “youngish”, and old) recover from those injuries could stabilize the lineup in a way that an emerging group of young position players may simply not be ready for.

All told, 2010 was a painful year to live through and, while the hope that the pain was a result of the team building up in the way that a muscle aches as it grows, the fear that it is simply a gaping wound cannot be escaped. Much was learned, but more needs to be surmised in terms of particular players and groups of players as the season wore on.

So, if this is what we learned in 2010, what can be done leading up to 2011 to put the Indians closer to contention or at least to seeing that “window of contention” crack open, even a few more inches?
Stay tuned...