As the events in Madison last night ensure that 2010 will go down as one of the most disappointing news for sports on the North Coast, and not just in recent memory, we wait for Colt McCoy to be thrown into the fire in the Steel City and await what figures to be a Sunday on par with what we've been experiencing all year. Nevertheless, the weather is beautiful outside and the leaves are various stages of turning and falling, so let's enjoy the best time of the year in Cleveland…regardless of the events in the sporting world that have affected us over the last year. Before we go out to enjoy said weather though, let's get loose on a Lazy One…

With the news that The Atomic Wedgie will be heading out to the Emerald City (where I can't imagine Milton Bradley sticks around), allow me to direct your eyes to a terrific piece from Andrew Humphries of LGT that effectively shines a light on Wedge's shortcomings and oversights as the Indians' manager (Garko in LF, among other topics, brilliantly skewered) under the guise of Wedge's "convincing" nature in an interview.

Other than Wedge being a man-in-demand as teams interviewed for managerial openings, the only real happenings in the Wigwam this week came courtesy of the Choo "story" that he had given an interview to some Korean reporters in LAX, setting off the requisite firestorm of manufactured negativity and outrage locally, as the doom-and-gloom that Choo wanted to leave (and the intellectual leap that he was "right" to leave because the Indians were a minor-league team) became an accepted reaction to this "story".

Of course as you can see in the linked story, the Indians refuted the story came out in Wednesday's print edition, and with the PD waiting until Friday morning to pass along the rebuttal of fact as well as the original reporters "apology" online . However, it is interesting in this timeline that until the PD printed the "apology" piece in Saturday's paper (page D4, no less), despite the fact that another Korean journalist attempted to clear the air in the message below that was picked up both by the

link provided by Castro
and
Calcaterra hours after the PD ran the initial story
:
Choo said, purely out of envy, he wanted to play on a winning team after watching other guys pop champagne for clinching playoff berths. But he didn't say the word "transfer" (should have been translated into 'trade'' It's baseball, not soccer) as far as I know. But he also said he wants to stay with one club for a long time and Cleveland would be his first choice. Then he said his agent would take care of his contract situation and that he hadn't heard anything special from the agent.

This is all pretty fuzzy stuff as it was clearly a he-said-he-said situation made cloudier by translation and the context of the answer (in terms of what question it was in response to) or even what Choo really said remains a mystery. Choo was probably asked if he's been watching the playoffs and responded that it would be nice to be in a position to "pop champagne for clinching playoff berths", which he obviously has not in Cleveland.

Really though, we don't know what he said as we have the original story (passed on by the PD) and the rebuttal (passed along by Castro and Calcaterra...and two days later, by the PD) providing disparate messages. Ultimately, it was a non-story (though it did remain the lead Indians' story on cle.com for a solid two days, garnering all sorts of outrage and inane baseball philosophizing from those who specialize in outrage and inanity) that was refuted quickly after it was published by multiple media outlets.

So, yeah…nothing to see here, please move along…
Regardless, since The BLC is the Tribe's top priority (the way that getting Aerosmith tickets was once the "top priority of the summer" for some high-schoolers in the mid-70s), let's use the Choo story as the segue into what the Indians should be looking to do this off-season since...well, there are no real "stories" to talk about, other than
the miraculous possible return of (knocking firmly on wood) Atom Miller
.

Since all of the "here's what happened" pieces have been written and the 2010 season has been examined by the coroner and the funeral directory and now lies 6 feet deep, the attention has to turn to the future and what the off-season holds (or should hold) for YOUR Cleveland Indians. What they should do, besides obviously making some changes to their uniforms (and from the looks of
the front of the 2011 schedule that was handed out at the last home game
, it looks as if a switch to the white border around the "C" may be in the offing), can be broken down into moves that are going to happen, like re-signing arbitration-eligible players (though the manner in which they happen is up for debate), and the moves that could happen, like acquiring new players via Free Agency or via trades.

Thus, if I may be so bold, allow me to present to you the one man's blueprint for the Indians' off-season. It may not lead to a rush on the Tribe Box Office or jam up the 216-420-HITS line, but it presents a realistic approach to the off-season, acknowledging where this team is (not

simply one or two players away from obvious contention) and what the organization should be using 2011 as in an effort to create a legitimate contender in the AL Central...just not necessarily in 2011.

Perhaps you feel that the team is closer to making a run at the AL Central in 2011, but this season showed (me, at least) that the Indians are going to be counting on injured players returning to form AND young players taking the a step out of the abyss AND continued the health and maturation of nearly all of their young talent. Maybe one of those things happens and we're all pleasantly surprised as the 2011 begins, but I'm having trouble seeing it all come together for the team next year and figure that 2012 is what the team should realistically shoot for in terms of arrival, instead of deluding themselves that just a few pieces and parts need to be added this off-season.

Thus, without further ado or introduction, here are the moves that I'd like to see the Indians execute in this off-season, getting as specific as possible in most cases:

Money Now, Options Later

This has gotten more "ink" than probably any first-year arbitration-eligible case in recent memory (other than Ryan Howard's) and revisiting this topic is taking the 9-iron to that dead horse on the ground over there as nobody knows what approach Scott Boras is going to bring to the table, nor does anyone know how Boras is going to manipulate the media into painting Choo as a "victim" in this process. Boras could come to the bargaining table with a portfolio that puts Choo on par with the game's elite (and I could probably put that portfolio together for him) in the last three years and could ask for the moon.

It's not likely that Boras gives away a year or two (or more) of FA without some serious dollars being involved and, seeing how Choo will be 31 when the 2013 season ends (the last year he's under Tribe control right now), I'm not sure if committing huge dollars to a player that will be 32 or 33 or 34 in the later years of a guaranteed contract is the path the Indians should be taken given recent contracts to similarly-aged players, positional value or not.

Regardless of all of that, this arbitration process is still a process and the precedents are there for both Boras and the Indians to use as parameters. Jon Steiner at WFNY (the Choo-contract expert) lays out those parameters very well and ultimately sees one of three outcomes this off-season:

- *They go to arbitration. ChooBoras lose their $5.5 million demand. Choo makes $3.9 million.*
- *They sign a one-year deal worth $4.5 million.*
- *They sign a three-year deal: 2011 – $4 million; 2012 – $6.5 million; 2013 – $10.5 million.*

I think that the numbers there are about right (and Scenario #3 pays him $21M over 3 years), but if you're asking me how I approach it, I still think that "front-loading" or "leveling the numbers" in the contract and giving Choo money in 2011 and 2012 that he certainly wouldn't earn in the arbitration process is the only way that the Indians entice Choo to add an extra year, or an option, on the deal past 2013.

What that means would be something along the lines (as I said a while back) of doing something where the Indians give him, "a 3-year deal worth $24M to buy out his arbitration

years...and work the numbers so he's getting paid $8M annually and not on some sort of escalating scale" as these arbitration years usually progress.

If the Indians give Choo $3M to $4M more than he'd likely earn in arbitration for 2011 and a couple million dollars more than he'd likely earn in arbitration for 2012, is it enough of an enticement to have Boras agree to a $12M club option for 2014, with something like a $2M buyout?

Who knows, and the Indians have a history of locking up "key" arbitration-eligible players in the past, but we certainly haven't heard the end of this one...whether we want to or not.

Holding off on Extensions

Speaking of that history of locking up "key" arbitration-eligible players in the past, I realize that I'm probably in the minority on this, but I don't offer either Chris Perez or Asdrubal Cabrera long-term deals, attempting to (as the Indians have done in the past) buy out arbitration years and maybe a year of FA, with a club option on top of that.

As I said, this may not be the popular move among many, but the reality is that Perez is coming off of his best season to date (with the question of whether it is sustainable in the volatile world of relief pitchers being EXTREMELY relevant) and Cabrera is coming off his worst (in terms of performance vs. expectations), so the question is whether the Indians should attempt to parlay more guaranteed money in 2011 and 2012 into gaining club control past 2013.

If I'm making that decision right now, as much as Chris F. Perez asserted himself down the stretch for the Indians in 2010 and looks to have finally stabilized the 9th inning for the Tribe, I still go year-to-year right now with Perez, simply given that volatility of relievers and with the idea that there are no guarantees (Ferd Cabrera v.2005, Jenny Lewis v.2008) for success from one year to waterfall into the next for relievers. Maybe Perez is that exception (and, truthfully, I hope that he is), but I'd exchange numbers with Perez's people and sign him to a one-year deal.

The intent is not to screw Perez out of guaranteed money or to intimate that I don't think that 2010 is him just scratching the surface, but in Cleveland we've become so USED to the idea that we HAVE to lock all of these guys up because that's what has been done. In reality, with positions like relievers and with players who are still relatively unproven (sorry, as great as that post-All-Star break ERA is, it is still less than 30 innings of MLB), the idea to go year-to-year (or simply delay a decision on a long-term deal) is a luxury that the Indians have, and in the case of Perez, they should use it.

Similarly, with Cabrera coming off of his worst season (in terms of what we thought we would see from him), the arbitration process should be used by the Indians to not only determine whether Cabrera will fulfill the potential that seemed to high in 2007 and 2009 and even potentially motivate Cabrera to prove his worth to the team.

While it may not have been widely reported, the fact is that Cabrera has come into the last few years out of shape, certainly affecting his range in the field and perhaps affecting his

performance at the plate. If he's coming into Spring Training out of shape and has not shown the commitment to conditioning to maximize his talent (particularly defensively), is that the type of player that you'd like to "reward" with a long-term deal?

The sentiment may exist that the Indians should be "buying low" on Cabrera, with the opportunity to lock up his services at a discounted rate, but motivation may be a factor and, after seeing Fausto Carmona sprout a spare tire after signing his long-term deal, I'd be more inclined to use 2011 as a proving ground for Cabrera, for him to utilize it to show that he is worthy of receiving a long-term deal and that he should be thought of as a "core" player for the Tribe.

Memories of Jhonny Peralta's decline from 2005 to 2009 are too fresh to not let it serve as a lesson as to how a promising player can get stuck in neutral (or worse) and the decreasing range and the expanding waistline of Cabrera in the past two years play too much into my fear that Peralta's career arc is the one that Asdrubal is following. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'd use 2011 to find out instead of simply rewarding Cabrera for past performance instead of future production.

All told with these two, just because it has always been the Tribe's MO to lock up arbitration years and buy a couple of years of FA doesn't mean that it's unequivocally a great idea for every player as soon as they hit arbitration. Look at Rafael Perez, who righted the ship in 2010 (his first arbitration-eligible year) but certainly isn't looked at as a candidate for a long-term deal because sometimes you just don't know. Sometimes, going year-to-year with players isn't a horrible strategy and with Perez (let's see if he can sustain it) and Cabrera (let's see if he can arise from his ashes), the Indians shouldn't be too eager to sign either...even from a PR standpoint.

Jettison the Flotsam and Jetsam

In terms of keeping it with players currently on the 40-man roster, this one should be fairly easy and won't get a lot of fanfare, but the Indians used 2009 and 2010 to "clear the decks" of their veteran players who didn't obviously fit in past this year, and now it's time to do the same with the young players that don't obviously fit in past this year. My short list includes Crowe, Hodges, Marte, and Brown...and those are just the position players.

To all, I would wish the best of luck, but point out that if you were unable to seize the opportunity presented to you in 2010 (Crowe, who cannot field or hit) or were so far down the organizational pecking order given how much opportunity was out there in 2010 (Hodges, Marte, Brown), it would appear that your services are no longer required by the organization.

Perhaps you want to make the case for Crowe and Brown (most notably) to stick around, given their remaining options and the question marks that remain around 1B and LF, but I would counter that this team should be focusing on developing players that have the potential to be difference-makers (or at least better than replacement level) and these former prospects, now a little long in the tooth, have become redundancies in the organization and should be replaced by players, either internally (Ezequiel Carrera, for one, in the 4th OF mix) or from outside the organization (getting a RH bat to play 1B and/or LF usurps Brown's usefulness) in an effort to

truly upgrade the roster.

Certainly roster fodder like Drew Sutton and Luke Carlin fall into this category, so the Indians should thank them for their contributions while receiving thanks from the players for the opportunity and move on. If either wants to see how beautiful Columbus can be in the summertime next year, fine...but these players should have seen their last of the home locker room at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

Lest you think I'm ready to simply throw everyone under the bus, Jensen Lewis does not get included here on the strength of the manner in which he closed out the season. Maybe that's foolhardy (as Lewis has closed out seasons strong before) and maybe Lewis being out of options will prevent him from sticking around for too long. But maybe...just maybe, Lewis has finally figured out his role on this team – not as a 9th inning option, but rather as an organizational arm that bounces around the bullpen depending his effectiveness – and can at least settle into a 6th or 7th inning option while the arms in AAA sort themselves out. Additionally, for whatever reason and against my better judgment, I'm not including Chris Giminez on this list, mainly because of his status as the designated "pile-jumper" on the team and because his versatility (particularly as a C) holds some value, even if his bat does not.

At the end of the day, the time to move past some of the high draft picks (or, in the case of Marte, players traded for) who were supposed to represent the talent infusion that took place between 2008 and now. That "infusion" didn't happen and the Indians should cut their losses with these guys and move on.

An Old Face for a Troubled Place

Moving onto the portion of the program that involves the acquisition of talent, the most obvious hole that will be filled (to some degree) this off-season is at the Hot Corner. As has been stated numerous times, given the Indians' gaping hole at 3B and their lack of an obvious internal candidate at 3B (sorry, Nix is a miscast utility player who was forced into 3B and looked incapable of handling it defensively), the Indians will add to the MLB roster with a player that they hope can serve as a bridge to top prospect Lonnie Chisenhall, who figures to start the 2011 season in AAA.

Given what we saw from Indians' 3B in 2010, it has been (correctly) asserted that the Indians should be looking after a 3B capable of settling their infield defense and the name on the FA market that continually comes up is...no, not Adrian Beltre...one Brandon Inge. Truth be told, the pickings are very slim among FA 3B and maybe you're in the "Brandon Inge would be a great fit"camp, but realize that Inge's offense from last year was not that far above what Jayson Nix put forth in Cleveland:
Inge 2010
.247 BA / .321 OBP / .397 SLG / .718 OPS in 580 PA

Nix 2010 (with Cleveland)
.234 BA / .283 OBP / .422 SLG / .705 OPS in 306 PA
I know...I know, defense is the thing and I've been the one touting that, but Inge is probably going to sign with Tigers for too many years and for too much money

, based on his age and his production and for the Indians to lure Inge away from Detroit (which probably isn't a great idea anyways) is going to involve multiple years and too much money for a 3B in his 30's fresh off a .718 OPS season. Yes, his defense is fantastic, but not for the years and the money that would predicate that defense arriving on the North Coast.

Looking at the list of what could be available , if defense is the focus (and it should be), guys like Edwin Encarnacion (who will possibly be non-tendered) need not apply, which brings us to an intriguing name to watch as other teams decide who they non-tender. The name is a familiar one as it belongs to former Tribe 3B Kevin Kouzmanoff, who could get non-tendered by Oakland, making him available on the FA market.

If K2 is, in fact, non-tendered, by the Athletics, the Indians should attempt to add him to the mix as he's a solid, if unspectacular defensive 3B (who has never played a defensive position other than 3B...unlike one Jayson Nix), who would be a RH addition to a LH-heavy lineup. He earned $3.1M last year in Oakland and while his offensive numbers were far from good (.247 BA / .283 OBP / .396 SLG / .679 OPS), he wouldn't be too expensive, nor would it take a multi-year deal to lock him up and to add his glove to the defensive infield. If the A's tender Kouzmanoff, the Indians will have to go in another direction (which could involve attempting to acquire Kouzmanoff) and that idea that they could replicate the approach that they used in 2003 – sign a bunch of older guys who are still looking for their first MLB opportunity to battle with Nix to see if a Casey Blake can emerge – could be the path of least resistance, mainly because the other MLB options aren't really all that compelling.

As AC says in his "Inbox" , Joe Crede could also be had, but that would be the same Crede that didn't play in 2010, so none of these alternatives come without red flags or major issues. If you want to extend the interest out to the likes of Miggy Tejada and Mel Mora, that's fine, but defensive liabilities like Edwin Encarnacion and Jorge Cantu shouldn't be considered, nor should Felipe Lopez who the Cardinals were so eager to get out of their clubhouse. You could make a case for a failed prospect like Andy LaRoche benefiting from a change in scenery, but improving the infield defense should be the primary objective here.

Since I'm not too keen on delving into the black hole that I see in attempting to parse through defensive metrics (as they contradict each other and I'm not smart enough to tell you what metric is the definitive one to look at), the Indians should simply be looking for a place-holder that plays good defense. I know that the approach to simply find a place-holder is not going to sell more tickets, but unless you see that one special player on the FA market that I do not, I think that the glove-first 3B is the way to go until The Chiz is ready.

Of course, the Indians have internal options in Nix and Phelps, but I'm more inclined to let Nix evolve into the super-utility role in which he is most valuable and allow Phelps some time at 3B in AAA before handing the keys over to him. As I've said before, I'm not including Jared Goedert in this "internal options" list as his main liability (defense) is what the Indians are looking to improve.

If The Chiz is truly waiting in the wings, then the Indians should not over-commit to any one player and look for that place-holder and, among the many unappealing options, the Indians

should go after a guy like Kouzmanoff (assuming availability), relegate Nix to the super-utility role and wait for The Chiz to arrive to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario (hopefully by mid-season) to theoretically settle what has been an unsettled position.

Pitching Tiers...or Tears

If adding a 3B to the mix is viewed as a necessity, inserting another arm into the rotation could perhaps be viewed as a luxury. That is said not because an arm is not needed, but rather because of what "another arm" that would be an upgrade over the current rotation is going to cost and whether spending that kind of money is what this team should be doing NOW, at this stage of the "cycle".

To wit, Fangraphs (who actually provided an article worthy of mention here) conducted an exercise called "Crowdsourcing" for Carl Pavano, attempting to predict what Hot Carl would receive on the open market as a Free Agent. The result of the Pavano Crowdsourcing was a 2-to-3 year deal at about $9M to $10M per year
...um, so there's that.

Anybody want to commit those years and that type of money to an arm like Hot Carl Pavano, given where the Indians currently stand as an organization?

As much as I want to believe that it isn't the case, as I said earlier, this team isn't one pitcher away from obviously contending...they're a couple of position players rebounding from major injury and a few pitchers continuing their maturation away from legitimately looking like a contender for 2011. Maybe that happens in 2011 and the Indians look at add an arm as the season progresses, but throwing money and years at marginal-to-good starting pitchers shouldn't interest the Indians this off-season.

For one, you have to remember how expensive even marginal starting pitching is on the FA market. On top of that, as much as 2010 gave us a glimpse at what COULD be with some of the starters, they are far from known quantities and adding a top-shelf veteran arm makes the rotation deeper and stronger, but to what end?

Yes, perhaps Jake Westbrook comes back to take care of "unfinished business" in Cleveland after "earning" $33M from the Tribe over the last 3 years and, if he does so for less money...well, then he's my favorite Indian ever. The reality of the Westbrook situation is that Jake posted a 3.38 ERA with a 1.25 WHIP after going to St. Louis and some NL team (maybe St. Louis) is going to give Jake more than a couple of years on a deal for money that will probably be closer to $10M than it will be to $5M per year. Should the Indians be in on that?

As I said, maybe Jake defies the logic of all professional sports and returns to Cleveland for fewer years and less money because of what happened in the last three years, but I'll believe it when I see it.

Outside of Pavano and Westbrook, the FA pitcher that interests me is Hiroki Kuroda...but again, it comes back to how expensive starting pitching is on the FA market, particularly for players that thrived in 2010, as Pavano, Westbrook, and Kuroda (3.39 ERA, 1.16 WHIP in 2010 with the

Dodgers) did.

So if the Indians aren't going to be willing to offer multiple years to second-tier guys like Pavano, Westbrook, and Kuroda (and perhaps rightfully so), they move onto the third-tier of FA pitcher – the scratch and dent section. Included in this tier are the likes of Bruce Chen, Brandon Webb, Javier Vazquez, Chris Young, Ben Sheets, Justin Duchscherer, Jeremy Bonderman, all of whom come with injury or performance concerns and all who are likely to be available on a shorter, incentive-laden deal...but with good reason.

The Indians can mine this group to see if they can find another diamond in the rough, like they did with Kevin Millwood – who is also available and may be able to impart on the current young staff the same "lessons" that he did on a young staff back in 2005 – and later with Carl Pavano. Who among that group of Webb, Sheets, Bonderman, etc. fits that profile is above my pay grade, and the Indians' track record of picking the guy about to rebound has earned them the benefit of the doubt in this department.

However, it is important to allow past to be our prologue as it has been noted that the 2010 season and the 2003 season could be similar in terms of placement on the developmental cycle of the team being built up. That being said, let's all remember that the additions made to a young starting rotation in the off-season between the 2003 and 2004 seasons were...wait for it...Jeff D'Amico and Jeriome Robertson

D'Amico was an instance of dumpster diving, but the ill-fated acquistion of Robertson is perhaps an interesting precedent. As bad as the Robertson deal looks in hindsight (the Indians gave up Luke Scott for Robertson, who would throw all of 14 1/3 innings for them in 2004 and never make it back to MLB), perhaps the 2010 fill their rotational need by exploring a trade for a starting pitcher.

The instant corollary to that would be who the Indians would have to offer in a trade in as much as we'd all like to say, "go out and get a young starter" on the Trade Market like Jair Juerrjens (who one AJC columnist thinks should be moved), the question becomes which players on the Indians are that compelling to make and whether trading our young players is, again, what the Indians should be doing now. If it takes trading guys like Kipnis or Chisenhall, I don't think that they make that move, unless a team is high on a Tribe prospect whose place in the future lineup or staff isn't obvious.

If we're talking trade, the likely avenue would be to buy low on a guy like Zach Duke (if the infield defense is truly going to be improved) or someone of his ilk, with the Indians asking Neal Huntington which of the failed Indians' prospects he would like in the Steel City and taking on Duke in exchange in the hopes that some semblance of an MLB pitcher still resides in his body or that a change of scenery would benefit him. Similarly, always-suggestive reader John Mast floated the name of Homer Bailey out there as a player who could also benefit from a change of scenery.

Regardless of how they add an arm, I have the feeling that an arm will be added…and maybe even two. Those arms, however, will come either with major recent injury and the risk that

comes with it (Webb, Sheets, etc.), major recent performance issues (Duke, Brian Bannister, etc.) or with the obvious warts that accompany forays into the lower tiers of available starting pitching. To me, I think that you go out and buy a lottery ticket like Webb in the hopes that he can re-gain his stature with the Tribe (who have a history of being the springboard for players looking to increase value) and go out and get another arm from another organization, like Duke, to lengthen out the starting rotation and to allow Tomlin and Gomez start the season in AAA, if only until the newly acquired arms reveal themselves.

Mighty Righty

Going back to the position player side of things, an obvious need of the team (past 3B) is to add a RH bat that factors into the OF/DH/1B mix as Travis Hafner's shoulder is likely to prevent him from playing every day in 2011 and his disparate splits from 2010 (.863 vs. RHP, .706 vs. LHP) necessitate the Indians bringing someone in to take some AB away from him, particularly when facing LHP. Additionally, given that the three presumed OF for 2010 are all LH, the ability of that RH bat to play OF would assist in filling a couple of holes all at once.

While that wish for a RH bat that plays the OF may be the ideal set up, I'll bang the drum again for a player like Mike Napoli (although he doesn't play the OF, obviously), as his name the one that keeps jumping out to me. Of course, he would need to be traded for and will earn some cash because of arbitration, but Napoli could probably be had from the Angels and he posted a .966 OPS vs. LHP in 2010. On a team that is largely LH, Napoli could prove his mettle by being a big RH bat against LHP and could ostensibly operate in a 3-way platoon at C, 1B, and DH with the various incarnations looking like this:
Against RHP
DH – Hafner
C – Santana
1B – LaPorta

Against LHP
DH – Santana/LaPorta
C – Napoli
1B – LaPorta/Santana

If they followed through with that, it gives Santana a bit of a break from behind the plate, although it does leave Lou Marson out of the equation. While leaving Marson out of the equation may be just fine for some, realize that Marson had a .759 OPS vs. LHP in 2010 and, while that pales in comparison to what Napoli puts up against LHP, maybe the Indians use a similar utilization against RHP and LHP, with internal options, looking something like this:
Against RHP
DH – Hafner
C – Santana
1B – LaPorta

Against LHP
DH – Santana/LaPorta
C – Marson

1B – LaPorta/Santana

If that becomes the arrangement (though it wouldn't necessarily be hard and fast as Marson and Hafner probably wouldn't be in a straight platoon), it would give Hafner some days off WHILE allowing Santana to come out from behind the plate every once in a while to limit the wear and tear on his body. If that is the case, the question becomes how the Indians still add that RH bat, with the focus moving almost completely to the OF. Perusing through the list of potential FA, playoff hero Cody Ross would be an option (.883 OPS vs. LHP in 2010), as would Matt Diaz (.830 OPS vs. LHP in 2010) and while neither of those players is going to set the world afire, each can play a competent OF and provide some security against Sizemore not being able to play every day or right out of the chute. Truthfully, we're talking about upgrading Trevor Crowe's spot here and...those are not the biggest shoes to fill.

Of course, they could stick with Shelley Duncan (.857 OPS vs. LHP) in the role that he played to some critical acclaim but, as I said, they really could be looking to replace Crowe with a RH bat that could provide some pop against LHP. If they're simply replacing Crowe, they keep Duncan around and add a player like Ross or Diaz to be a legitimate RH OF (sorry, Duncan's not a legit OF...as hard as he may try) and give the lineup multiple looks with Marson, Duncan, Ross/Diaz, and Nix all coming off of the bench as RH options.

Given Ross' recent playoff heroics and the cost that may be associated with his new stature, the choice here would be Matt Diaz, who can play all 3 OF positions and is RH so he can sub for any and all of the LH OF and can spell Hafner, when needed, as the DH or allow one of the OF to slide over to DH when Hafner needs a break.

Stabilizing the Back-End

While 3B, the rotation, and a RH bat have been well-publicized "needs" of the team, the final one that I see to be just as glaring involves adding an experienced RHP to the back-end of the bullpen. Though the Indians are touting the performance of the bullpen in the second half, let's realize that the RHP that figure into the 2011 bullpen past Chris F. Perez are Joe Smith, Jensen Lewis, Justin Germano and a bunch of promising AAA pitchers, like Vinnie Pestano and Zach Putnam.

Do you really feel comfortable that one of those guys can assume that 7th or 8th inning RH role for 2011?

Maybe this is from the experience of watching the bullpen deep-six the 2006 and 2008 seasons (among other reasons), but I don't and I think that a priority this off-season would be to add a RH reliever to the late-inning mix to assist Rafael Perez and Tony Sipp in serving as the bridge from the 6th to the 9th innings, when necessary. However, dealing in the FA market for relievers is a dicey proposition because of the Elias Rankings of Type A and Type B players and the fact that signing a Type A player means that the Indians would have to give up their 2nd Round Pick in next year's draft (our 1st Round Pick would be protected because it is top 15) to sign a reliever that would ostensibly be a set-up man. Maybe you think that a set-up man is that important, but seeing as how Jason Kipnis was the 2nd Round Pick in 2009, I'm staying away from the Type A Free Agent relievers.

For a quick look at Type A and Type B Free Agents, here's the exhaustive list and just parsing through the relievers, you can quickly scratch off your Type A Free Agents, which would be Rafael Soriano, Mariano Rivera, Matt Thornton, Matt Guerrier, Scott Downs, Dan Wheeler, Jason Frasor, Grant Balfour, Frank Francisco, Arthur Rhodes, and Takishi Saito.

Sure, Matt Guerrier or Scott Downs would look great in that 8th inning role, but the crazy Elias rankings and the cost of a top draft pick would preclude much interest for me in those players as Type A FA. Much more interesting is the list of Type B Free Agents, whose signing would not result in the Indians giving up a draft pick for 2011. That Type B List is as follows, in terms of Relief Pitchers that are RH, with each player's ERA+ for 2010 indicated after the name:
Joaquin Benoit – 295 ERA+
JJ Putz – 154 ERA+
Koji Uehara – 149 ERA+
Trevor Hoffman – 141 ERA+
Jesse Crain – 137 ERA+
Jon Rauch – 134 ERA+
Kerry Wood – 133 ERA+
Kevin Gregg – 119 ERA+
Chad Durbin – 106 ERA+
Octavio Dotel – 101 ERA+
Randy Choate – 94 ERA+
Aaron Heilman – 94 ERA+
Chad Qualls – 57 ERA+

A couple of those guys are going to be signed to closer money next year with the idea that they will be closing – I'd put Benoit, Putz, Rauch, Gregg, and probably Wood on that list – meaning that you're talking about guys like Jesse Crain and Chad Durbin who might be on the Indians' radar. If the Indians could pull off a guy like Benoit or even Kevin Gregg (who saved 37 games last year in Toronto) to further solidify the back-end of the bullpen, I'm all for it. But my guess is that some team (or teams) is going to look at Benoit, Putz, Rauch, Gregg, and (again) probably Wood as legitimate closing options and offer them more years and money than the Indians should be looking to commit for a set-up guy.

If you're asking me to put one name out there, I'd say Jesse Crain in that he would strengthen the back end of that bullpen with a legitimate RH option to slot in front of Perez. Adding a Jesse Crain suddenly gives the 7th and 8th innings a more fleshed out feel with Crain, R. Perez, and Sipp serving as the set-up men, allowing the likes of Joe Smith, Jenny Lewis, Justin Germano and the gaggle of MiLB arms to sort themselves out and force themselves into that late-inning mix instead of simply being handed the keys to the 7th or 8th innings.

Pulling it All Together
In sum, what are we looking at here?
Other than the internal machinations of arbitration and 40-man housecleaning, I'd like to see the Indians add Kouzmanoff, an injury reclamation project like Brandon Webb, a performance reclamation project like Zach Duke, a RH OF like Matt Diaz, and a RH set-up man like Jesse Crain. While I'm not smart enough to know what the FA market or the trade market will dictate in

terms of acquiring those players, it would seem that the Indians should be able to add those ancillary pieces and parts (without breaking the bank) so you go into the 2011 season looking something like this:
C – Santana
1B – LaPorta
2B – Donald
SS – Cabrera
3B – Kouzmanoff
RF – Choo
CF – Brantley
LF – Sizemore
DH – Hafner

Bench – Marson
Bench – Nix
Bench – Diaz
Bench – Duncan

SP – Carmona
SP – Masterson
SP – Carrasco
SP – Duke and, later, Webb
SP – Talbot

Closer – C. Perez
RP – Crain
RP – R. Perez
RP – Sipp
RP – Smith
RP – Lewis
RP – Germano/Laffey/name a MiLB reliever

You may look at that and say that the roster is not all that dissimilar from the 2010 roster and wonder what improvement would be expected by simply adding those auxiliary pieces like Kouzmanoff or Diaz or Crain, but let's be honest about – this in that the major improvement that the Indians have to see is not from pieces they add from the FA market or through minor trades, but from the development of their own players.

The recoveries of Sizemore and Santana and the improvement from guys like LaPorta, Brantley, Masterson, and Carrasco are MUCH more important to the long-term health of the team than adding one or two players from outside the organization. Thus, you pick and choose where you add those players and how you add them in an effort to augment what will hopefully be the burgeoning "core" of players already in place.

At first glance, this off-season list doesn't look like a blueprint necessarily for instant success, but the Indians shouldn't necessarily be looking for instant success (as much as it pains me to

acknowledge that) and should be looking to continue building the foundation for something more special than simply a .500 season and a shot at the AL Central. If recent history has shown us anything, the ability to compete with the elite of the AL is what the Indians should be looking towards and adding a piece or two to the current group of players doesn't accomplish that.

That may not be the popular approach, given where the Indians currently sit in terms of attendance and PR, but the "popular" approach doesn't always mean the same thing as the "prudent" approach and the "prudent" approach for the Indians should be the continued development of their internal talent and augmenting that talent in specific places while not deluding themselves to go further than they should in terms of adding talent from the outside.

Some day soon (hopefully), the Indians should be active in attempting to add that one piece to flesh out a roster that looks to be on the cusp of being special…that day just hasn't arrived yet for these Indians.