At this point, I'd like to take a break from a solo harangue and check in with readers. Some nice comments have come across the blog recently, and I'd really like to encourage that. In addition, I'd like to recognize a column that used my columns as a jumping-off point to make a very interesting suggestion.

"rrhunter" has made two salient points:

Why not bring back Casey or do you figure he'll end up in Seattle with his buddy?

Why not indeed? I just said in the body of that post that Blake was likely to outperform anyone we had in the slot, and although he's on the wrong side of the aging curve, I stand by the assessment. My guess is that Blake does not want to relive his formative years with a rebuilding squad (one on which he was, in fact, one of the rebuilding blocks, as it were). And there is something to the idea of Blake playing in Seattle, given that Jose Lopez is likely to leave and this would allow Chone Figgins to move back to 2B, where he appears to have been more comfortable. But let's hold onto the thought for a moment.

Hunter also notes:

I still believe that [Andy Marte] could have succeeded if he had been brought along differently. To me, he still has more upside than Nix.

Here, I have to disagree. Well, not necessarily with the first part: I think that with the aid of sodium pentothal or something similar, people in the Tribe's front office would admit that Andy Marte was not handled particularly well. He got sporadic playing time, and somehow managed to fall lower on the Wedge Unease Scale than even Jhonny Peralta. On the other hand, there is nothing that I actually SAW from Andy Marte with my own eyes that suggests he is anything more than, say, Juan Uribe. He can hit a fastball. He can hit a hanging curve. If you throw him something else, he will not hit it. That is not a very useful player. I just don't see a major-league hitter when I watch Andy Marte. I may have passed the point of no return in terms of objectivity with Andy Marte. The point remains.

Both Hunter and Cam from Maine make the point that looking for Andies Marte in other teams' minor-league systems, but this steps on the next umpteen postings I plan on making, so I won't go into it further.
"CWK" brings up a name I hadn't thought of, though:

If Joe Crede can still play an effective 3B despite the back issues someone like him would be ideal.

First off, let me go on the record with the opinion that Joe Crede's back will prevent him from being even a 300-PA player ever again. I am not a back specialist, do not personally know Joe Crede, and couldn't find an article about his readiness in a cursory five-minute search that wasn't from before Opening Day. But I'm pretty sure that if Crede had been able to play at a major-league level, he would have for SOMEONE last season. Maybe not. Maybe the year off will make all the difference. I can be convinced ... but I would need someone to actually do some *convincing*.

But second, this is a place where recent Indians history can actually pay off a bit: since 2005, Cleveland has given any number of veteran players a chance to come in, play, and either compete with the Indians, have a shot at a one-year "prove it" opportunity, or be moved (by trade or otherwise) to a contending team. Examples include Kevin Millwood, Mark DeRosa, and Mark Grudzielanek. Even guys like Grood and Mike Oldmond got released to look for their own opportunities instead of asking them to toil in the minors. I think the Indians have established themselves as a player-friendly franchise.

How does this apply to Crede? Well, I assume that any player, all other factors being equal, would rather play meaningful baseball than slogging, hopeless baseball. I mean, if Crede has two offers: $10M from the Pirates and $750K from the Red Sox, I'd bet he'd sign with Pittsburgh. But if several teams offer him $1M, he'll lean toward one with a shot at the playoffs.

But if Cleveland offers him the only guaranteed money, I think Crede would go ahead and sign,

secure in the knowledge that if the wheels come off and the Indians are terrible, he'll get shopped *and moved* in June or July. That is, signing with a lousier team wouldn't faze him, because Cleveland has established that he wouldn't HAVE to stay through thick and thin (mostly thin).

Anyway, Crede's an interesting suggestion. I'd certainly ASK ... but I'd definitely get the medical staff involved.

Finally, Paul Cousineau waxes poetic on third-base options. I'll let you read the article yourself, but I thought I would say a few words about his ultimate suggestion, Kevin Kouzmanoff.

First, I was surprised that Kouzmanoff was considered a Top Ten defender at 3B. When he first came up, he was not a good third baseman. I think there is little argument that Kouzmanoff would be a better *defensive* option than anyone else we're talked about in the system.

Of course, Kouzmanoff has turned out to be a much bigger offensive schmoe than anyone thought: he has one season with an OBP over .302. One! Career-high: .329 ... in 2007. It has been quite a while since Kevin Kouzmanoff has been able to impersonate a major-league hitter. Yes, I know he played in San Diego, which supresses offensive numbers, but I don't think it supresses OBP as much as SLG. And .300 OBP ... well, that's just really awful.

As Cousineau points out, Kouzmanoff is not technically available, but he is a non-tender candidate. Do you know why he might be non-tendered? Well, part of it is that he made $3.1M last year. But the larger part? **Because a .300 OBP is just really awful! Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!**

Ahem.

I realize that I've talked about placing a premium on defense with the groundballers on the staff, and this makes a certain amount of sense. If Kouzmanoff hit 8th or 9th but played sparkling defense, he'd probably offset his really awful hitting and be a net asset, at least compared to our other internal options. Besides, Nix didn't even get TO a .300 OBP last season, which is, I might point out, **REALLY AWFUL**.

But here's what I got to thinking about: I know I said that Nix' potential line is really the baseline we should be dealing with, but now that I consider it further, maybe it's not. I don't mean to present a moving target here, but I'm trying to refine my thought process. It comes down to what you think is reasonable to expect from Jayson Nix et al, what is reasonable to expect from the development of Lonnie Chisenhall, and what is reasonable to expect from the TEAM.

Let's use, for sake of discussion, Nix as the catch-all stand-in for any internal candidate above AA, including Donald, Goedert, Phelps, Marte, Hodges, and Wonder Lizard. There are a very large number of discrete potential outcomes, of course, but I think I can advance the discussion by considering three of each:

Nix:

N1) Stays a bad player in 2011 with minimal development
N2) Learns better defense in the off-season, hits kinda "low side of average"
N3) Blossoms into a 3B who is above major-league average

Chisenhall:

C1) Stalls developmentally and is still not ready for the majors in 2012 (perhaps, like Marte, even never)
C2) Develops at an adequate pace, spending all of 2011 in the minors and has a typically-bad rookie season in 2012, somewhere around "Donald"
C3) Improves his defense and matures into some power, impressing in a 2011 Sept. call-up and starts Opening Day 2012

Team:

T1) Pitching wavers between "crater" and "adequate," Santana not ready, Sizemore can no longer play well, no production from corner IFs, bad in 2011 and still bad in 2012
T2) Pitching develops some, offense has ups and downs, not very good in 2011 but a 75-win team in 2012 starting to jell
T3) Two starters blossom (Masterson/Carrasco, for example), outfield becomes solvent, 1B identified, Santana stars, team ready for .500+ in 2012

I wouldn't be SURPRISED by any of these outcomes. I know what I feel is likely and what is not, but this is what young players breed: large error bands.

But here's where I'm coming from: let's say you believe the most likely outcomes are N3, C1, and T3. That perfectly aligns to plunking down Nix in the slot and considering the problem solved. Nix will prove how smart you are, and when the team is ready to win, you'll already have your now-experienced third baseman ready to go. Huzzah!

Likewise, let's say you believe N2, C3, and T1. In this case, you could stand pat without much of a loss. The team is going to be lousy, so investing in a short-term one-year "solution" at 3B is fiddling in the margins. So you win 67 instead of 64. Who cares? The REAL payoff comes in 2012, when you can get Chisenhall his first full everyday major-league season in a low-pressure develpmental year, and then, again, from 2012 on, the problem is "solved." At least, the 3B problem. SOME first baseman will eventually have to hit, but this is an issue for another week.

I don't necessarily want to walk down all 27 combinations individually, but you can come up with combinations that will tell you whether it is worth signing or trading for Player X or standing pat or some other course of action (maybe revamping the pitching staff, for example).

For Kouzmanoff, for example, you would have to believe N1 or N2 (at least to the N1 side of N2), C2 or C3 (Kouzmanoff isn't a long-term solution), and probably T2. If you believe T1, in my opinion, it doesn't make a tinker's dam worth of difference who you slot in at third, WITH THE

CAVEAT that IF you believe premium defense will help your PITCHING STAFF develop more, you may want to sell out for defense, in which case Kouzmanoff might be exactly the right guy. It all depends on your assumptions and your perceptions of relative likelihoods.

I think you'd have to believe N1 and T3 for Casey Blake to make any sense, for example. I don't believe that tandem, so I dismiss Mr. Blake. You'd have to believe something like an unstated M3 (will blossom into player we once thought) for Andy Marte to be an option, a likelihood I would describe as somewhere around "quantum tunneling." And you'd kind of have to take a pretty large leap to sign Crede, as would he, but his set of conditions looks similar to Kouzmanoff's.

Since I'm not currently an N3 guy, I will be looking next week at solutions that would require some nontrivial machinations to execute. What would make them worth the shenanigans? I'll let you know.