Now that the Cavaliers have finally won a game over the Clippers (and is now a good time to mention that the Clippers, with Blake Griffin and Eric Gordon are 13 games under .500…so here's to the bounces of the ping-pong ball equaling success in the near term) and with the temperature on the North Coast finally cracking 40 degrees, it's time to get loose on a Lazy Sunday on the precipice of pitchers and catchers reporting which is, of course, Tuesday.

Under the Arizona sun, while there will be some moderate intrigue as to who the 5th starter will be, it figures to pale in comparison to the depth of the mess in the infield so before wading into that marsh, here are a couple of quick hits on different ways that the Indians can go with that 5th starter spot. Providing a nice encapsulation of the "competition", Jon Steiner examines the likely "combatants" and realizes that most of it merits a hearty "meh", saving the vitriol for Dave Huff, whom he asserts is "just not good at pitching". While I don't think that Huff's MLB record to this point could lead anyone to a different conclusion, LGT's Adam Van Arsdale comes to the defense of Dave Huff, recalling some pertinent rankings (from Goldstein), debunking the idea that he's "another soft-tossing lefty" of the Sowersian ilk and concluding that "if Huff can tweek his change and slider, regain some of his (excellent) minor league control, and figure out how to use his pitches more effectively, Huff can still be a major league pitcher."

If I was really forced to choose someone for the 5th starter spot entering Goodyear, given that Tomlin is what he is and Gomez could use more seasoning in AAA (I'm not including Ant Reyes in the discussion) and seeing that the Indians have not added that veteran pitcher that they've reportedly been courting, the player with the highest upside is still Huff (even if his MLB track

record has shown that he perhaps is "just not good at pitching") as his left-handedness in an Ocean of RH makes him all the more valuable...potentially, at least.

Given that there's been some well-documented friction between the Indians and Huff, if I'm the Indians I give Huff the 5th spot on Opening Day with the idea that he'll have two months to either assert himself into the teams' future plans or to simply fade away into Sowersia. Essentially, here's your rope…either save yourself or make your own noose because, with some of the other arms that have yet to come, Huff needs to show that his 2008 season in the Minors was not the aberration and that he is able to make the transition to MLB that has eluded so many pitchers before him.

If the Tribe went in another direction at the 5th starter spot, it would certainly justifiable (and I suppose it will be worth watching), but it's time to tell Huff that his future as an Indian is in the balance and that it's time for him to either step up or step aside.

Additionally, there will be some question as to which arms fill out the middle portion of the bullpen, in front of C.F. Perez, Sipp, R. Perez, Smith, and Lewis...but those are largely fungible pieces and parts that figure to be doing the I-71 Shuffle for most of the season. As for the make-up of the bench, I'll get to some of that, but debating the 25th spot on the roster is ludicrous…unless you want to hear my screed against Trevor Crowe, 2011 Cleveland Indian.

No, most of the eyes will be focused on what the Indians' infield is going to look like as the recent (apparent) signing of The OC (that's Orlando Cabrera...and I didn't come up with that) certainly seems to add questions on top of the existing questions that were obvious in the infield before the addition. On the surface, The OC makes sense as a back-up SS to Asdrubal adding some veteran help to the infield and upgrading over the possibility that Adam Everett would be spending time in Cleveland at all this year. But the intimation that The OC is going to "compete" for the 2B job throws multiple layers of confusion over what was already a baffling situation.

Perhaps the Indians surveyed the FA landscape and, unable to locate a 3B that fit their needs, they went to the "Next Best Option" in The OC, figuring that he would provide some stability to the infield. That sounds good in theory, and I've been hoping for some sort of infield upgrade as noted in the Hitting the Fan piece when the news hit . However, let's realize that The OC's cumulative OPS over the last 3 years is .692 (OPS+ of 83) and that his once-steady glovework has been deteriorating for the last few years at SS. With the news that he will "compete" for the 2B job, the assertion that I made in the piece seems to be coming to fruition as it looks like the Indians will be asking him to learn a new position when his bat doesn't justify it, falling in line with the "Nixian" philosophy that seems to have pervaded the corner of Carnegie and Ontario in recent years.

Maybe The OC does represent a better option at 2B than any of the previously-thought-of competition (though I'll get to my point that I think a better option exists in a bit) and Anthony Castrovince does a nice job of walking us through the decision and how Cabrera fits as "the fixer" to a problem
. Castrovince's rationalization is the best that I've seen for the move, although the "fix" certainly doesn't seem as clean as you might hope for, seeing as how Cabrera has played all of 33 MLB

games at 2B, with the Indians admitting that Cabrera will "compete" for the 2B job and (thankfully) will not supplant Asdrubal at SS.

If Cabrera then is thought to be the front-runner for the 2B job and not just an upgrade over Adam Everett (cumulative OPS of .589 in the last three years, which puts The OC's offensive "contributions" of the last few years into perspective) as a back-up SS, what the move does then is move the mess of the infield situation firmly over to 3B…as if it wasn't already enough of a mess over there before this.

To that end, let's back to the Castro piece , as he mentions to "count me among the skeptical that Donald has the arm to play third (and Cabrera has never played there). It still seems to me that Jayson Nix is the favorite to land the most opportunity at the hot corner" summarily dismissing Louie V as an option (and rightfully so) at either spot.

Want to know why I have trouble with the idea that "Nix is the favorite" at 3B...not his natural position, when he struggled there last year and was reportedly not improving in Winter Ball at the hot corner?
Frankly, because his offensive contributions don't justify his inclusion in the lineup – particularly if he's playing out of position and if his value (intrinsically tied to his ability to play 2B) is simply not a factor.

Don't believe that Nix's bat doesn't justify him being much more than "in the conversation" at any of these positions…and particularly 3B?
Consider that since the beginning of the 2008 season, 313 players have amassed more than 700 PA with Jayson Nix's .288 OBP in that timeframe placing him 306th among those 313 players. To put that into context, Orlando Cabrera's .319 OBP places him 248th among those 313 players and Luis Valbuena's .289 OBP in the same timeframe just eclipses Nix's total.

But Nix has power, right?
Well, kind of...but his .380 SLG over the last 3 years ranks him 254th among those 313 qualified players and, as long as we're talking numbers from the triple slash, Nix's .215 BA since 2008 ranks him 310th of the 313 players in MLB with 700 PA or more, one point below recent Minor-League signee Jack Hannahan.
No, seriously ...

So we're anointing Nix as the 3B (when he can't play the position), based on what?
We saw Nix play 3B last year and (this is important) after being CUT by the offensively-challenged 2010 White Sox, Nix went on a relative power surge as an Indian, even if those improved numbers only improved his three-year totals to have the 7th worst OBP and the 2nd worst BA for players with more than 700 PA.

Yet he remains firmly in the conversation when The OC (who again, would be playing out of position) is assumed to be the 2B because the idea that he'll just slide over to 3B has become pervasive. To that end, regarding the 2B/3B question, in an attempt at an answer within one of Jordan Bastian's Spring Training preview (albeit before The OC's signing) Bastian opined that, "Jayson Nix and Jason Donald appear to be the leading candidates for both spots. Which player

would play where is not clear right now."

Maybe the frustration of the whole "square peg, round hole" idea that has taken hold in the Indians' infield (when nobody's bat justifies the attempt to push that square peg into place) has embittered me on this situation, but if you look at what is projected for the names that figure most obviously in the 2B/3B mess, consider these projections from a variety of sources:

Jason Donald
ZiPS - .687 OPS
Bill James - .714 OPS
Marcel - .727 OPS

Sonny Nix
ZiPS - .677 OPS
Bill James - .691 OPS
Marcel - .691 OPS

The OC
ZiPS - .676 OPS
Bill James - .680 OPS
Marcel - .665 OPS

Jack Hannahan is not listed on that list because...well, because Hannahan's projections would scare small children as his glove would be his meal ticket and Louie V is not listed for the mere fact that if the Indians are considering him for the everyday 3B job, then somebody should be fired on the spot, if an entire housecleaning isn't in order.

Back to those main three however, those are pretty underwhelming projections overall, right? Figure in that each and every one of them figures into positions that are not their "natural" position and you start to see the veins in my forehead appearing. That being said, which one of those players do you see legitimately fitting past July of 2011 in any role...the one with higher projected OPS from all three sources across the board, right?

Yes, Jason Donald has been a SS throughout his minor-league career and looked horrifically deficient in the defensive department last year (both at 2B and SS), but if the Indians are

completely abandoning hope to put together the best defensive infield, why wouldn't Donald be the preference over Nix? Perhaps it's hope in the devil I don't know (what Donald looks like at 3B) over fear of the devil I know (Nix at 3B), but the assertion that Castro made that Donald's arm wouldn't be strong enough for 3B leads me to wonder if he had the arm for SS, wouldn't his arm be better suited to 3B instead of 2B?

If Donald moved over to 3B, he'd at least be on the same side of the diamond as his "natural" position and names that have moved from SS to their right (Mike Young, A-Rod, Jhonny P., etc) is more complete than the one that I can compile off of the top of my head of success in moving across the bag. Maybe Donald lacks the skill-set to play 3B (and if he is able to play 3B, whoever in the Indians' organization that made the suggestion last year that he should be playing 2B when 3B was just as large of a gaping hole should be re-assigned) and maybe that will reveal itself under the Arizona sun, but between Nix and Donald, which player more obviously fits into the Indians' long-term plans and which has the higher ceiling?

Nix, with his 77 OPS+ over 718 PA and three years who turns 29 this August, or Donald, who compiled a 94 OPS+ in his first 325 PA last year and who will turn 27 this September?

Certainly, it feels like picking between the lesser of two evils (and Donald's defensive transition would obviously play a factor here), but if the Indians' 3B job comes down to those two players, playing at a new position, I'm taking Donald with the idea that he has room to grow and is able to provide more of a stop-gap at 3B until The Chiz arrives instead of subjecting myself to more of Jayson Nix's 3B "stylings" in the field, when his bat doesn't justify putting up with those defensive deficiencies. Perhaps you could make the same argument with Donald, but with the addition of The OC to play 2B (and I'm almost there as to why I think he shouldn't), I'd insert Donald at 3B and see what the Indians have in the 26-year-old former SS who was a Top 100 Prospect in MLB just two years ago – square peg, round hole and all…

Maybe Donald goes Louis V. (2010 version) and completely buries himself in the organization, but the only way to make that determination is by giving Donald an extended look at MLB and, unless you think that Jay Nix figures more obviously into a future roster for the Indians (at any level of contribution), there's no better time to start than the present.

As for the assumption that The OC has been signed to "settle" 2B, most of the justification that I've seen for the move revolves around defense (which we don't know about because he has yet to play 2B and, if we're talking about the best 2B defensively, it's Nix) and veteran leadership, which rings hollow for me as a reason to include him in the everyday lineup. That being said, if The OC was brought in to simply be a "fixer" at 2B until Jason Kipnis is deemed to be ready, let's go back and take a look at those ZiPS projections for the 2011 infield "competition" participants, including one more name in the list, one that frequently gets overlooked:

2011 ZiPS projections

Donald - .687 OPS
Nix - .677 OPS
The OC - .676 OPS

And…wait for it…
Cord Phelps - .700 OPS

Projections are just that and certainly that's not a HUGE difference in terms of performance than the names above Phelps, but remember how everyone's waiting for Jason Kipnis to be ready to take over 2B for the next 6 or 7 years and how the Indians say that Kipnis needs time in Columbus (while denying that they're managing his service clock) before ascending to the parent club?

Check this…
Cord Phelps – 2010 (Cumulative)
.308 BA / .368 OBP / .457 SLG / .825 OPS with 28 2B and 8 HR in 119 games (all played at 2B)

Jason Kipnis – 2010 (Cumulative)
.307 BA / .386 OBP / .492 SLG / .878 OPS with 32 2B and 16 HR in 133 games (all played at 2B)
Clearly, Kipnis had the better performance at the plate last year, but realize that Kipnis started the season in Kinston, then moved up to Akron while Phelps started the season in Akron, then moved up to Columbus. Once at Columbus, Phelps posted this line over the final 66 games of the season, all of which were played as a 2B:
.317 BA / .386 OBP / .506 SLG / .892 OPS with 20 2B and 6 HR

Is now a good time to mention that Phelps is only 2 ½ months older than Kipnis with 273 PA at AAA under his belt?

As Marc Hulet points out in his Top 10 Tribe Prospect piece at Fangraphs , "Phelps actually out-performed Kipnis in the Arizona Fall League (although not by that much) with a .451 wOBA" so wouldn't it make sense that Phelps would at least represent a stopgap until Kipnis was deemed to be ready?

If the Indians could get past their "square peg, round hole" philosophy in the infield, perhaps Phelps at 2B – yes, right out of the gate – does more to advance the development of the current "Rebuild/Reload/Whatever" in that he'd be playing his natural position (The OC wouldn't) and would be rewarded for his excellent 2010 campaign and his Arizona Fall League performance with a chance to justify himself at the MLB level in 2011 from Day 1. As has been explored

before , with Kipnis starting 2011 as the Columbus 2B and The Chiz as the Columbus 3B, Phelps would look to be a man without a position to start 2011. Call me obstinate or just exceedingly frustrated by the square peg-round hole philosophy, but the idea of moving Phelps around the Columbus field in an attempt to find value is short-sighted when an obvious solution is staring the Indians right in the face.

That is (and obviously depending upon what happens under the Arizona sun) going with Phelps at 2B out of the gate with Cabrera as the Utility Infielder to spell the youngsters in the infield and to provide that veteran presence…just not striding to the plate 4 times a game or playing a brand-new position on an everyday basis. Of course, that proposition presupposes that Jason Donald can play 3B and certainly that's no given as I'm sure the odds were pretty long that Jason Donald would be the Indians' Opening Day 3B in 2011 last October.

However, if the Indians looking for stop-gaps until The Chiz and Kipnis arrive, how about ingratiating the two players that would figure in as Utility Infielders once they arrive to give them some time as starters? If anyone brings up the service clock management of guys like Donald and Phelps as a reason NOT to give them a legitimate shot…well, the Indians are in more trouble than anyone could have ever imagined, pushing off arbitration dates with what are likely to be bit and/or utility players. But the Indians should be approaching the 2011 season with the idea that they could afford players like Donald and Phelps the chance to justify their inclusion in some of the top prospect ranking lists that they've been on instead of miring down in Columbus as the organization attempts to convert them into Super Utility guys at the AAA level?

If the Indians are going to embrace this youth movement and start giving young players that could contribute in this next incarnation of the Tribe (even if it's on the periphery of the roster or in marginal roles), it means that they develop their OWN players to fill roles, perhaps eliminating the need to go out and sign the Adam Everetts, Jack Hannahans, and…yes, The OC's in the bargain bin.

The Indians aren't going to know what they have in Donald and Phelps, most notably, until each is afforded an extended chance and with The Chiz and Kipnis not far off, those "extended chances" don't figure to be that abundant in the coming years. It's possible that both Donald and Phelps crash-and-burn and find themselves on the I-71 Shuttle for the coming years, unable to find a toehold in Cleveland, but the Indians are never going to find out if they trot out the likes of The OC and Nix (both playing out of their natural positions) in lieu of answering questions about their internal options at the Big League level. If the Indians go with what looks like their current course of action (a light-hitting, veteran SS at 2B and a light-hitting, veteran 2B at 3B), any thought of contention looks further off, not closer…