Let the countdown to Opening Day begin!

With Spring Training officially underway as pitchers and catchers begin to arrive at camp, that time of year when we first hear the crack of the bat and the slap of the ball on leather is nearly upon us.

Thus it is time to begin a position-by-position review of the Cleveland Indians as they approach the start of the 2011 MLB season.

This is Part One of a three-part series, and will focus on reviewing position players. Part Two will review Tribe pitching in a similar manner, and Part Three will be published at the close of Spring Training, where we can review just how wrong I turn out to be in the preceding installments.

Without further adieu, here's a preview of where the outlook for the Indians looks good, bad, or downright ugly at each position on the diamond.

First Base

As recently as 2010, the only saving grace for the Indians on the trade that sent CC Sabathia to the Milwaukee Brewers seemed to be that it ultimately may have proven even more futile for the Brewers than it did for the Tribe. Obviously, that isn't saying much.

The good news is that with Sabathia long-since departed from the Brewers, the Indians still have the potential to come out the clear winner in this trade. But that depends entirely on first baseman Matt LaPorta, who came over from Milwaukee as a prospect in the deal, as well as on outfielder Michael Brantley, (who will be discussed later in this article).

2011 is the make-or-break season for the thus far over-hyped and under-achieving LaPorta. Acquired for what was supposed to be explosive power at the plate, last season LaPorta bashed an anemic 12 HRs and 41 RBIs, logged a horrific .221 average, and struggled to even keep his job in the majors. His biggest claim to fame in 2010 was an embarrassingly inept comment during spring training: "Is it bad that I'm dehydrated in one leg?"

Despite his lack of genius and disappointing numbers in 2010, LaPorta will see the bulk of the playing time at first in 2011, and this is the season that will decide whether he keeps the job over the long haul.

Based on past performance, this means things look pretty grim for the Tribe at first base. Still, we can't ignore LaPorta's tremendous potential, which he occasionally has showed flashes of in his 162 games with the Tribe over the last two years.

Second Base

The Indians will open Spring Training with a big question mark at second base, also known as the second-scariest spot on the field (right after the seemingly endless disaster that is third base).

So, who is the Tribe's 2011 second baseman? Heck if I know, and sadly, heck if Chris Antonetti and Manny Acta know either. Ah yes, the Indians; perpetually short on assurances but long on surprise parties.

In the mix for the job are the ever-struggling Luis Valbuena and Jayson Nix (also third base candidates), Jason Donald (a better fit at third), and new free agent acquisition Orlando Cabrera, as well as talented prospects Jason Kipnis and Cord Phelps.

There's a good argument that either Kipnis or Phelps would be the best candidate for the job, but the Indians would like to see both players take more time to develop in the minors.

Kipnis is almost certainly out of the running, as he is expected to be the starting second baseman on Opening Day at Triple-A Columbus. Phelps too may be held back because the Indians don't want to rush him.

Most likely, the job goes either to Nix or Cabrera (who, don't forget, is a natural shortstop), though we can't call this one until Spring Training is well underway.

One thing is for sure though: whether it's because the job is held by an inexperienced youngster like Phelps or Kipnis or because the job is held by a veteran who just doesn't have it like Nix, second base is going to be a rough spot for the Tribe this year.

Third Base

Much like a haunted house, watching the Indians at third base is an activity best suited to those who enjoy being scared. Unfortunately, unlike the deranged dentist hacking up a patient with a plastic chain saw, the blundering ineptitude seen at the hot corner for the Tribe is very, very real.

Last season the Indians began with Jhonny Peralta at third, a guy better suited to playing either Sleepy, Grumpy, or Dopey in a community theater production of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves than to playing baseball. They ended the season with the three headed monster of Nix, Andy Marte, and Luis Valbuena, disaffectionately known as Nimartuena, a nightmarish monster as elusive as Nessie in its batting average and as ugly as Big Foot in its defense.

The good news (yes, there is some) is that at the end of 2011 or the beginning of 2012, hot prospect Lonnie Chisenhall should be ready to claim the third base job and put an end to the Indians Hot Corner of Despair. The bad news is, that still leaves at least half a season of watching a host of bumbling bush leaguers try (and fail) to field hot grounders down the line.

Currently, it appears the candidates for the job are Nix, Donald, Valubuena, Cabrera, and Jared Goedert, whose upside and minor league stats suggest that while he's likely not a long-term solution, he may just have it in him to make the wait for Chisenhall a little less painful.

Most likely though, the job goes to Donald, whose glove and bat are far superior to those of Nix and Valbuena. Cabrera could certainly handle the job as well, but at this point it seems that the Indians are more likely to use him as a utility infielder, due to age and the fact that he's versatile enough to play second, third, and shortstop as a defensive replacement or to spell the younger guys at those positions.

It's tough to feel good about the Indians' situation at third going into the 2011 season, but on the upside, it looks like things will at least not be as scary over there as they were last year.

Shortstop

There is no position battle afoot at shortstop for the Indians this season. That job indisputably belongs to Asdrubal Cabrera. But there is a question looming:

Just who is the real Asdrubal Cabrera?

Is it the sensational youngster with the hot glove and clutch bat we saw in 2009, or the semi-disappointing guy we saw at shortstop in 2010? Cabrera enters the 2011 season as a somewhat unknown commodity with a resume that includes one surprisingly good season, and one surprisingly bad one.

To be fair, Cabrera's disappointing 2010 season was not entirely his own fault. The blame for much of this (in the form of a broken arm that cost Cabrera a long stint on the DL) lies with Jhonny Peralta, who broke Cabrera's arm by running into him on a routine play. Thus Peralta became the first player on the roster to simultaneously destroy two positions on a team, which seemed impressive until you consider that Peralta can destroy anything just by standing on a field with it.

As has always been predicted, Cabrera will never be a power hitter, so what the Indians need out of him is solid contact hitting, stealthy baserunning, and exceptional defense.

While 2010 was a black mark on Cabrera's reputation and while the Indians have a track record for selling false hope, Cabrera's future at shortstop is one of the team's few mysteries that may actually produce a story with a happy ending.

Certainly Cabrera's 2010 struggles should serve as a cautionary tale for the Tribe faithful, but mostly the signs seem to indicate that Cabrera will deliver a performance at shortstop in 2011 and thereafter that may not be spectacular, but will be satisfyingly more than adequate.

Designated Hitter

No surprises at the DH spot for the Indians this spring, as Travis Hafner will once again occupy the role.

After being plagued by injury and ineffectiveness for years following a splashy start with the Tribe, Hafner finally appeared to turn a corner in 2010 and at times appeared to still have the potential to be the tremendous hitter he once appeared to be.

While it doesn't seem likely that Hafner will ever completely return to being the player he was from 2004-2007, he should be able to repeat the relatively-solid performance he turned in during 2010.

The real question is, in the event that Hafner does turn in a truly impressive performance in the early months of the 2011 season, will he be traded? The Indians would certainly like to get out from under Hafner's hefty contract if possible, though the high price tag attached to him may make him difficult to unload.

If Hafner does excel and the Indians manage to move him, that leaves a big question mark about who will take over the DH spot. At the moment, there are no obvious candidates.

Catcher

Among the few spots on the field where there is no question who the starter should be is for the Indians is the catcher's position. Top ranked phenom prospect Carlos Santana will get his shot in 2011 to be the Indians' starting catcher for a full season.

Santana debuted in June 2010 to huge anticipation and didn't disappoint. Unfortunately, his debut season was cut cruelly short after a collision at the plate with Red Sox outfielder Ryan Kalish that resulted in a knee injury that required season ending surgery.

After a lengthy rehab period, Santana was finally cleared to resume baseball activities this winter and is expected to be all set to go for the start of Spring Training.

While scouts praised Santana's bat as major league ready when he was called up last season, they had a few misgivings about whether his defense was up to snuff. Surprisingly, given the Indians perpetual bad luck, Santana didn't disappoint on either count. Provided that he is fully recovered from his injury and surgery (and there is currently no reason to think that he isn't), Santana is almost sure to impress again in 2011.

The only question pertaining to the catcher's spot seems to be about who Santana's backup will be. Most of us would prefer to see Lou Marson get the job. While his offense was, well, horrible (he finished last season with an average below the Mendoza Line), defensively he's about as good as they come.

On the surface, giving the job to Marson seems like a no-brainer despite his shortcomings as a hitter, but it's possible that the Indians send him to Triple-A where he can play every day and have a chance to improve his hitting. This means we may see Paul Phillips or Luke Carlin backing up Santana behind the plate in 2011.

Right Field

Amid the chaos that plagues nearly every position on the field for the Indians, there exists one trouble-free spot in right field, where the consistently impressive Shin Soo Choo resides.

Choo, who has managed to avoid a truly "down" season thus far, should once again fail to disappoint in 2011. Keep in mind that while Choo won't be a free agent at the close of this season, because he signed just a one-year deal this winter, this is still effectively a contract year of sorts for him. Choo will need to impress in order to push for a long-term contract next winter or at least to position himself to earn top dollar in the event that he and the Indians go to arbitration before 2012.

Barring injury, Choo is largely an every day player, so there shouldn't be much concern about who will back him up. Still, in the event that he needs an off-day, there is little cause for concern as the Tribe has plenty of outfield depth with Shelley Duncan, Austin Kearns, and possibly Trevor Crowe and Jordan Brown in the mix.

Center Field

Two years ago, center field was the least troublesome spot on the field for the Indians. Now, it's

among the most worrisome. Fallen hero Grady Sizemore has finally been pronounced fully recovered from the knee injury that has plagued him for two seasons, but no one really knows yet whether he's returned to form 100%.

The microfracture surgery Sizemore had at the end of the 2010 season required a lengthy rehab program, and Sizemore has just recently been cleared to resume all baseball activities (he took batting practice for the first time this past Saturday at the Indians' training complex in Arizona).

Supposedly the results of this surgery should be well worth the long wait and have finally fixed the problem that plagued Sizemore's knee for good. What we unfortunately don't know yet is whether this means Sizemore is capable of showing he's still the same guy who in 2008 posted a 30/30 season and and was among the best center fielders in baseball.

It will be months before we can determine whether this is possible, but say this for Sizemore: he's one of the hardest-working, most focused and determined players in the game. His effort level and dedication are off the charts. If there's anyone who can fully return to form after two injury-plagued seasons, it's this guy.

One caveat as we enter Spring Training: the Indians are very, very conservative about rehab and return from injury. If there is any doubt about whether Sizemore is at 100% going into Opening Day, he will start 2011 on the DL, in which case Michael Brantley will slide over to center field from left field and Austin Kearns will man the left side of the outfield until the team is certain that Sizemore is up to the task.

Left Field

Entering Spring Training, Michael Brantley appears to have a lock on the left field job for 2011.

Brantley wowed the team and the fans when he made his debut in late 2009, where he hit .313 in 28 games and flashed some impressive leather in the outfield. In 2010, it appeared the honeymoon was over as Brantley struggled both in the field and at the plate and was even sent

down to Triple-A to work on his fundamentals.

Whether Brantley can truly handle the starting job day in and day out remains to be seen, but he did appear to improve significantly at the end of last season when he returned from the minors. He made far fewer mental errors in the outfield and seemed to have stopped pressing so much at the plate.

There's also a rumor going around that the Indians may bring Kenny Lofton to camp this spring to help Brantley continue to improve in the field and at the plate and to help him turn his impressive pure speed into greater success on the base paths.

At the risk of sounding overly optimistic, I think Brantley will be able to deliver and prove he's worthy of the starting job in left field this season. And if his struggles continue, the Indians have a great insurance policy in bench outfielder Austin Kearns, who could take over the day-to-day left field duties if necessary.