With the sun shining on the North Coast despite low temperatures (again), the eternal hope of Spring has taken hold for most Tribe fans as the Indians are all working out under the Arizona sun, with the steady reports and pictures to prove it. While a dose of realism is applicable when evaluating the chances of the 2011 Indians in the midst of their “Rebuild/Reload/Whatever”, it is undeniable that most of the optimism surrounding the Indians has to do with the projected performances of Santana and Choo, with a sprinkling of sun possible with a healthy Sizemore and Cabrera along with an effective (albeit in part-time duty) Hafner while the development of LaPorta, Brantley and, eventually The Chiz and Kipnis provide hope for the future.

The pieces on the chess board have been lined up for the Tribe and, at most of those positions, it’s fairly easy to see an above-average player manning a position at some point in the future, perhaps even this year. While “above-average” is certainly a relative term and dependent upon the maturation and development of certain position players, there is optimism (and reason for it) regarding the future of the Indians’ offense. That being assumed, most deep thinkers and prognosticators (along with the great majority of fans) have trouble buying into the competitiveness of this incarnation of the Indians in the near future and, almost without exception, the reason that’s pointed to is the uncertainty around the pitching staff, and specifically the starting rotation.

The pitching…oh, the pitching…
That’s the question mark for everything that you read nationally, to the point that Dan Szymborski put a “disclaimer” before his 2011 ZiPS projections for Tribe pitchers to avoid sickness when perusing projected numbers for the Tribe pitchers.

Sure, the Indians can point to brighter days ahead with Al White and Pomeranz and Joe Gardner in the rotation with the gaggle of power bullpen arms that line the system (and yes, Acta used the term “the next wave

" when describing some of the young arms, apparently unaware that the "Waves of Arms" from the Minors of the previous incarnation of the Indians amounted to gentle lapping at the shore), but while the future staff has the potential to contain some serious difference-makers and elite pitchers, what are we to think of 2011?

Is it actually possible that the 2011 pitching staff is being undervalued and overlooked? Lest anyone forget (and Manny Acta is here to remind you), "the Indians were tied for fourth in the AL in the second half in ERA at 3.86" and while the All-Star Break is a largely superfluous date in the MLB season, the performance of the teams' staff in the 2nd half is largely dismissed or outright ignored as an illusory source of hope or as a talking point for an organization in need of them.

While reservations about building up hope may be justified for each of those reasons, realize that the period of time referenced by Acta is not a 20-game or even a 40-game stretch of the season. The Indians' pitchers put that performance up over 74 games and, just to expand on Acta's reminder, realize that the Indians' staff posted that cumulative 3.89 ERA while pairing it with a cumulative 1.38 WHIP, with 480 K and 231 BB in the last 74 games of the season after the All-Star Break. The team was 35-39 to close out the season (third best record in the AL Central in the second half) and that "success" was unquestionably paced by that pitching staff that was tied for the 4th best ERA after the All-Star Break, equaling the ERA of the Rangers' staff and better than the Red Sox, the Rays, the Blue Jays, White Sox, Tigers, and Yankees …among others.

That pitching staff in the 2nd half was comprised of the arms that are out in Goodyear as we speak, yet nearly universally the Indians' pitching staff is dismissed as a hodgepodge of marginal pitchers or pitchers still maturing and evolving. While that latter point is certainly true, since those 2nd half numbers were put up by the guys that figure to comprise the 2011 pitching staff, at the risk of sounding myopic, what am I missing here?

Certainly, the Indians' pitching staff was a…um, "work in progress" for the better part of the 1st half of last year as, prior to the Midsummer Classic, the Indians had a 4.64 ERA, a 1.56 ERA

with a 5.5 K/9 and a 3.9 BB/9 in the first 88 games of the season. For the sake of reference, the team was 34-54 in those 88 games as their team ERA ranked 12th among the 14 AL teams in ERA prior to the All-Star Break.

However, back to that 2nd half ERA and how it compares to rest of the league, before anyone goes and dismisses it as more of a mirage than as a harbinger of things to come, perhaps it would be instructive to go back and look at how it compares to the Indians' "half-seasons" back to the beginning of 2003, when "The Plan" was set into motion, with the idea that it would be deeply-rooted in pitching.

Realizing that the All-Star Break is just a date on the calendar and not some great moment in time, it does break each season up and, frankly, make it easier to quantify performance and provide similar timeframes over multiple seasons:
2010
Pre-All-Star – 4.64 ERA (12th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 3.89 ERA (4th in AL)

2009
Pre-All-Star – 5.40 ERA (last in AL…with reigning Cy Young winner Cliff Lee)
Post-All-Star – 4.65 ERA (9th in AL)

2008
Pre-All-Star – 4.25 ERA (8th in AL…with reigning Cy Young winner CC and soon-to-be Cy Young winner Lee)
Post-All-Star – 4.74 ERA (8th in AL)

2007
Pre-All-Star – 4.47 ERA (9th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 3.56 ERA (1st in AL)

2006
Pre-All-Star – 4.64 ERA (11th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 4.03 ERA (3rd in AL)

2005
Pre-All-Star – 3.82 ERA (4th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 3.35 ERA (1st in AL)

2004
Pre-All-Star – 4.91 ERA (11th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 4.69 ERA (7th in AL)

2003
Pre-All-Star – 4.20 ERA (6th in AL)
Post-All-Star – 4.22 ERA (5th in AL)

Look at those numbers, descending from 2010 and realize that the last time the Indians' pitching staff was in the top ½ of the AL for those time periods was in the second half of the 2007 season. Going further than that, the team ERA in the second half of 2010 finished tied for 4th in the AL and the only other times that the teams' ERA finished in or above the top 4 of the AL since 2003 were that second half of 2007, the second half of 2006, and both halves of 2005…when that "window of contention" was wide open.

So in those 16 "half-seasons" since 2003, the performance of the 2010 staff was the 4th best and tied for 5th best in terms of comparing their performance to the rest of the AL. Did I mention that 11 of those 16 "half-seasons" contained both CC and CP Lee?

However, back to those 2nd half numbers in 2010, take a look at the entire pitching staff's numbers after the All-Star Break last year. Considering what the top three in the rotation (in terms of performance, not the "#2/#3/#4" designation garbage) and the five main components of the bullpen that figure in most obviously in 2011, does this stand out to you at all, in terms of 2010 ERA after the All-Star Break?

C. Perez – 0.63 ERA
Lewis – 1.76 ERA
R. Perez – 2.40 ERA
Sipp – 2.81 ERA
Smith – 2.96 ERA
Carrasco – 3.83 ERA
Masterson – 3.84 ERA
Carmona – 3.93 ERA

Just to provide some historical context for a "building" team, that 2003 pitching staff (with young arms like CC, Lee, Westbrook, Betancourt, Riske, etc. and this is a great comparative read regarding that 2003/2004 team to this one from Adam Van Arsdale of LGT) doesn't touch the performance of these 7 pitchers, who are likely to serve as the backbone of the 2011 rotation and bullpen.

Historical context perhaps provided, what we may be seeing is the building of an actual entire pitching staff as, although it certainly helps, Tribe fans have learned that having that one difference-making arm can take a team only so far. Thus the importance of a line from Hoynes in the piece linked above with Acta's reminder on the pitching staff:
The bullpen's ERA in the second half was 2.95, the second best in the AL next to the Yankees. In September, the pen's ERA was 2.11, trailing only San Francisco in the big leagues.

It bears repeating, but the bulk of that 2nd half 2010 bullpen sits out in Goodyear right now, and the relievers that spent time on the 2010 staff probably aren't even the most electric or effective arms in camp. That being said, the bullpen still inexplicably scares me – probably because every time it was thought that the Indians' bullpen was in good shape in the past few years, it revealed itself to be the rock tied to the ankle of the team, pulling it to the bottom – and while there's certainly hope that some of the young arms will fill in around the "established" arms of the bullpen (and the earliest a current reliever can become a FA is after the 2013 season , with R. Perez, Lewis, and Smith under control for three more seasons), I'm holding my breath on the bullpen, for reasons unknown even to me.

In stark contrast, I remain as-inexplicably optimistic about the starters, despite the fact that deep thinkers in the baseball world remain thoroughly unconvinced that the Indians' starting staff isn't much more than a mish-mash of intrinsically flawed and uninspiring arms without much room for obvious or immediate improvement. To wit, Baseball Prospectus projects a 72-90 season for the Tribe and much of that is predicated on B-Pro's examination of the starting staff
:
The rotation is full of question marks. PECOTA expects Justin Masterson's ERA to resemble his stellar peripherals more this season (4.26) than last (4.70). The problem, though, is the rest of the rotation, with just two other starters (Fausto Carmona and Josh Tomlin) projected for ERAs under 4.50.

Was the rotation inconsistent and maddening at times in 2011?
Of course and none of the arms have proven that they're going to be consistent or that they can either re-capture success, most notably Fausto (and Hoynes has a fascinating piece relaying information about a very private Carmona
that I can't remember ever seeing, despite the fact that Fausto is entering his 6th season as an Indian) or get their potential to translate to success, as is the case with both Carrasco and Masterson.

However, going back to the 2nd half ERA's for Carrasco, Masterson and Carmona (notably), realize that there were 72 pitchers in the AL threw more than 40 innings after the All-Star Break in 2010.
Here is how #20 through #35 on the list finished:
20) Brandon Morrow – 3.69 ERA
21) Matt Garza – 3.74 ERA
22) Ricky Romero – 3.75 ERA
23) Cliff Lee – 3.79 ERA
24) Scott Baker – 3.82 ERA
25) Carlos Carrasco – 3.83 ERA

26) Justin Masterson – 3.84 ERA
27) Shawn Marcum – 3.89 ERA
27) Jon Lester – 3.89 ERA
29) Gavin Floyd – 3.91 ERA
30) Fausto Carmona – 3.93 ERA
31) Brad Bergeson – 3.94 ERA
32) Nick Blackburn – 3.94 ERA
33) Carl Pavano – 3.97 ERA
34) John Lackey – 3.97 ERA
35) Rick Porcello – 4.00 ERA
Some names you recognize amongst those names that figure to make up 60% of a "rotation full of question marks", no?

Going deeper than that, realize that Carlos Carrasco ranked 22nd in K/9 with a 7.66 K/9 ratio and 23rd in K/BB with a 2.71 ratio . While that admittedly is for his performance over 7 starts and 44 2/3 IP, if everyone can bury the potential of Carrasco on the basis of his 2009 struggles on the parent club (8.87 ERA in 22 1/3 IP over 5 starts), why isn't it reasonable to exhume that potential, based on his 2010 numbers, as an above-average starter in the AL, with him not turning 24 until next month?

Lest you think that this "2nd half" idea is overblown or that ERA is the only measure of success for some of these guys, realize that among AL starters with more than 40 IP in 2010 (for the whole season), Carrasco ranked 7th among the 89 pitchers in xFIP (a metric used to predict a pitcher's future performance
) with an xFIP of 3.55,
just below Jared Weaver and Jon Lester and just ahead of Brandon Morrow and Justin Verlander
.

Just to flesh out those xFIP rankings going, using that same 40 IP criteria and eschewing the "2nd half" only stats, realize that past Carrasco at #7, the Indians placed Masterson #26 on the list of 89 (xFIP of 4.05) and Carmona at #42 of 89 (xFIP of 4.39)
. That's three pitchers in the top ½ of AL starters with more than 40 IP last year using an advanced metric, in case you think this whole exercise if cherry-picking timeframes and stats.

That all being said (and bringing Carrasco back under the microscope), while Manny Acta can sing the praises of CarCar – and he said this week that, "He has the stuff to be one of the best guys in the American League, period" – let's attempt to give Carrasco a longer look, in the context of another young pitcher whose name you may have read about this off-season.

Certainly there's something to be said that Carrasco is dismissed nationally despite his 2010 season, perhaps as the bad taste from his cup of coffee in 2009 has lingered a little too long. But how does one explain that Kyle Drabek has had more e-ink spilled in his direction this off-season, from the "news" that he may not have an innings limit in 2011 to The Hardball Times putting him under the microscope a few weeks back, and this all comes after Fangraphs spent a whole piece (eliciting 33 comments) analyzing Drabek's debut last September?

Let's start all of this by pointing out that Carrasco turns 24 at the end of this March while Drabek turns 24 next December so we're comparing similarly-aged players at similar (if not identical) levels here, starting with their performance in AAA last year:

Carrasco – 2010 AAA
3.65 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, 8.0 K/9, 2.8 BB/9, 2.89 K/BB in 150 1/3 IP over 25 starts

Drabek – 2010 AAA
2.94 ERA, 1.20 WHIP, 7.3 K/9, 3.8 BB/9, 1.94 K/BB in 162 IP over 27 starts
So, Carrasco struck more AAA batters out last year while walking fewer, with the WHIP for the duo coming in pretty comparatively. But all of the national attention goes to Drabek while none comes to Carrasco, so the difference must be when they ascended late in the season for some MLB starts, right?

Carrasco – 2010 MLB
3.83 ERA, 1.37 WHIP, 7.7 K/9, 2.8 BB/9, 2.71 K/BB in 44 2/3 IP over 7 starts

Drabek – 2010 MLB
4.76 ERA, 1.35 WHIP, 6.4 K/9, 2.6 BB/9, 2.4 K/BB in 17 IP over 3 starts
Other than the ever-so-slight disparity in the WHIP and BB/9, Carrasco bested the performance of Drabek (ranked as the 13th best prospect in all of MLB by Keith Law and the 12th best prospect in MLB by MLB.com, just to use two known lists already out there) across the board…over double the innings and starts to boot.

Carrasco – 2010 Cumulative
3.70 ERA, 1.27 WHIP, 7.92 K/9, 2.8 BB/9, 2.85 K/BB in 194 1/3 IP over 32 starts

Drabek – 2010 Cumulative
3.12 ERA, 1.21 WHIP, 7.24 K/9, 3.7 BB/9, 1.97 K/BB in 179 IP over 30 starts
Give points to CarCar on the peripherals here, with the higher K rate, the lower BB rate, and (obviously) the better K/BB ratio. Yet all that seems to come out about young pitchers includes Drabek being exulted in flowery terms while Carrasco is some sort of disappointment or head case…

Well, maybe not in all cases as Drabek was recently listed as the #13 player in USA Today's "Names You Need To Know" going into the 2011 seaso
n among young players (and The Axe Man was #11), which would, at first blush, lend some credence to that pervasive "Drabek is a Future Ace" thinking until you get a little higher on the list an realize that the
#10 "Name You Need To Know" on that list is one…wait for it…Carlos Carrasco
.

Maybe I'm overly sensitive to the omission of Carrasco's potential in any analysis this off-season up to this point and have been pining for this kind of justification to recognize Carrasco as a legitimate difference-making arm who still hasn't turned 24, but the USA Today list is one of the first that hasn't been overtly dismissive of Carrasco and actually lends some credence to his success last year and his youth, having this to say about CarCar:
Cleveland has been sorting through pitching prospects for the past few seasons, looking for consistency. It finally began to see some from Carrasco, 23, during a September call-up last year. Manager Manny Acta is counting on Carrasco, who he feels has matured since being acquired from Philadelphia in the 2009 trade of Cliff Lee, to be in this year's rotation. He thrives on his fastball-changeup combination.

Looking at the rest of that Top 10, haven't we read about Logan Morrison (#6), Jeremy Hellickson (#7), and Domonic Brown (#9) ad nauseum this off-season from the national outlets?

Yet somehow lost has been the 2010 performance of Carrasco, when he threw the 2nd most innings of any pitcher in the Tribe organization. Throw in the fact that he turns 24 in March – and good ol' Boogie, Bartolo Colon, didn't make his MLB debut until he was 24, posting a 5.65 ERA and a 1.62 WHIP in 19 games as a 24-year-old in 1997 – and Carrasco's potential and ceiling starts to come into view.

Interestingly, in that USA Today list, other than Carrasco (#10) and The Axe Man (#11), the Indians are well-represented by Josh Tomlin (#31 …seriously, one spot ahead of Chris Sale, probably on the strength of Adam Van Arsdale at LGT pegging him as the prohibitive favorite for the 5th starter spot
), Al White (
#36
), The Chiz (
#57
), and Kipnis (
#66
).

The whole series is worth a look (and Josh Rodriguez is #72) as the criteria is not tied into not having too many AB or IP that precludes one from being a rookie and focuses specifically on "young players primed to make an impact during the upcoming big-league season" instead of containing players up and down the Minor-League system. To use the words of the list's creator Paul White, "they aren't necessarily baseball's best prospects but rather the ones most likely to make a mark in 2011" and there are six Indians on the list with Los Dos Carloses ranking

awfully high.

How many of those players actually make an impact in 2011 remains to be seen, but if Carrasco is able to parlay the success in the 2nd half of 2010 into a 2011 season that portends top-of-the-rotation potential, the Indians' chances at competing in the AL Central with an eye towards contention becomes a lot easier to see. It's been said before around these parts, but as important as LaPorta is to the long-term potential of the lineup (and here are just a few of the reasons why), Carrasco is just as important to the long-term potential of the rotation, and the pitching staff as a whole.

If Carrasco legitimately projects as a top-of-the-rotation starter, the Indians have a piece to build around instead of the alternative in which Carrasco is simply one of the secondary arms that can't be relied on as a pillar for the rotation while the Indians hope that the likes of White, Pomeranz, and Knapp not only arrive in a hurry, but arrive in a hurry riding a quick learning curve.

Perhaps the Indians' pitching staff, and specifically their rotation, surprise some people in 2011 and show that their 2010 2nd half performance was not a mirage, but instead a harbinger of success to come. Much will rely upon the development and maturation of the young arms, and most notably CarCar, and after the performance of the pitching staff since the beginning of 2008, Indians fans are due for some "good" surprises, aren't we?