It is a sad day in Cleveland. Paul Cousineau has announced his retirement from the world of sportswriting. Saying that he wanted to spend more time with his family, Cousineau is currently in beautiful Shipshewana, IN with his wife, in-laws and two young sons. He's enjoying his time out of the spotlight, and has no plans to return. At least not until tomorrow, when he will pull a Favre and quickly un-retire himself and resume his rightful place at the top of the Indians sportswriter mountain. So if those first two sentences gave anyone out there a heart attack, I apologize. Paul is away for the weekend, and I'm pinch hitting for him on this Lazy Sunday, the first of which we have "real" baseball being played with "real" stats and observations to analyze! Forgetting for a moment that me pinch hitting for Pauly C. is akin to Jamey Carroll pinch hitting for Albert Pujols, let's jump right into this week's links…

Your Cleveland Indians currently stand at 4-4 in Cactus League play after winning one and losing one yesterday in split-squad action. TCF colleague Adam Burke did a nice rundown yesterday of how various players have been performing so far this spring, and not a whole lot has changed since then. To update the competition for the last couple of open slots on the 25-man roster, both Travis Buck (.500) and Chad Huffman (.571) are working hard to stake their claim to a reserve OF role. The 5th starter competition is intense as well, with David Huff going three shutout innings yesterday and recording two strikeouts. Huff has thrown 5 innings so far this spring,

allowing just two hits, no runs and striking out five. Meanwhile, Jenmar Gomez got roughed up in his start against Seattle, giving up four ER in 2 1/3 IP. The third amigo fighting for the final spot in the rotation is Josh Tomlin, who has matched Huff's 5 scoreless innings so far in Arizona. The smart money here is on either Tomlin or Huff to break camp with the team, and it will be an interesting competition to monitor throughout the spring. As for the final spot in the bullpen, Vinnie Pestano had an impressive outing against the Pale Hose yesterday, striking out the side in order in his one inning of work, giving him 5 K in 2 innings so far this spring.

Paul Hoynes has a nice feature on Huff that talks about his struggles last year, both on the field and off. "Twittergate" is now pretty common knowledge at this point, and Huff and the club seem to have moved past it. Far more interesting for me is this little tidbit:

While he was in the big leagues, former Tribe catcher Mike Redmond introduced him to Mets lefthander Johan Santana. Huff asked Santana to show him his famous change-up. Its a pitch Huff has been throwing 50 percent to 60 percent of the time this spring. Along with his fastball, the occasional slider and curveball, it has helped him get off to a fast start.

Mike Redmond...the gift that keeps on giving. If Huff masters his changeup and is more effective against righthanders this year, he will at the very least have to send Redmond a fruit basket.

This brings us to the two players I consider the Most Important Indians (MII's) for 2011. Conveniently, we have one position player and one pitcher. My MII position player for this year is 1B Matt LaPorta. It's no secret that LaPorta has been a disappointment at the ML level since he was acquired from the Brewers in the C.C. Sabathia trade. His career OPS is .694, with 19 HR in 557 at bats. This after posting a career .956 minor league OPS, with 5

6 HR in 884 at bats. Clearly, something has been lost in

the transition from AAA to The Show. LaPorta has struggled with various injuries, including hip and toe problems. Are these ailments sapping him of his power? Or does he simply not have the physical tools to be a presence in the middle of a major league lineup? Either way, we should find out in 2011 as LaPorta is now 26 years old and is running out of excuses. He finally had a normal offseason this past winter, and was able to work out and condition himself for the grind of a 162 game regular season. The Indians have two very important building blocks in the middle of the lineup with Carlos Santana and Choo. A healthy and mashing LaPorta would give them a 3-4-5 capable of contending for the division. If he can become the .280/.380/.480 guy that we envisioned when he came over from Milwaukee, that would make him a crucial building block in The Plan v2.0 that would still be under club control for quite some time. LaPorta is hitting a sluggish .158 so far this spring in 19 at bats. The Silver Lining Department reports that all three of his hits have been for extra bases, with a HR and a pair of 2B. LaPorta is saying that he feels better this spring than he ever has, and hopefully the numbers reflect that once the games actually count.

Moving on to the MII (Pitcher Division), we have a young starter that Pauly has waxed eloquently on in this very space at quite some length in the past. I'll not rehash all of his points here again, but suffice to say that I think some people have given up on him a little early. It seems like he's been around forever, but Car-Car doesn't turn 24 until later this month. He posted a 3.83 ERA and 7.7 K/9 in 44 2/3 innings last season, and needs to take another step forward this year if the Indians are going to contend in the near-term. He has the talent to be a solid #2 starter in the major leagues; the question has always been his ability to manage the game from the mental side of the house. Age and experience will only help, and I still am really expecting big things out of a guy who was considered a top 50 prospect in all of baseball from 2007-2009. Carrasco had a solid outing in his first start of the spring, throwing two scoreless innings and striking out a pair. On a personal note, he left the club on Friday to head to Florida to be with his wife as she delivers their child. He missed a start yesterday as a result, but will be back early this week and still has plenty of time to get up to speed. Carrasco earning the #3 role (or better) in the Tribe rotation this year or next is another keystone in the development of The Plan v2.0,

Speaking of top prospect lists, the "Big Three"have their top 100's out, and Kevin Goldstein , Keith Law
, and
Baseball America
all agree that the Indians have at

Law	Goldstein	BA	**AVG**
Chiz	35	40	25

Kip	56	28	54
Pomz	60	43	61
White	105	71	47

least three of the top 100 prospects in baseball. Lonnie Chisenhall, Jason Kipnis and Drew Pomeranz appear on all three lists. Goldstein and BA both list Alex White as well, and Law has White in his "just missed" article . Law listed 10 players as having just missed the top 100, so for argument's sake let's say White is his #105 overall prospect. If you average out the rankings from those three sources (which are universally considered to be the industry standard), you'll see that the Indians have four of the top 74 prospects in all of baseball according to outside experts with no attachment to the club. This is not coming from internal sources like Antonetti/Shapiro, nor from writers like myself, Pauly C. or Tony over at IPI who were admittedly Indians fans before we started writing about baseball.

In addition to the four top players in the system, the Indians are pretty much universally regarded as having one of the deeper systems in baseball. Guys like Jason Knapp, Nick Weglarz, Chun Chen, Felix Sterling could leap into the top 100 next year with healthy and productive seasons. Baseball Prospectus has pulled together a spreadsheet compiling several top 100 lists , and those guys appear on a number of lists from around the industry. There is plenty of depth available, especially when it comes to power bullpen arms. No club can ever have too much pitching, and a number of the internal options could find their way to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario at some point in 2011 for a cup of coffee or more.

All of this should of course be taken with the caveat that prospects are what they are, and placement on any top 100 list is no guarantee of future success. One needs only to look to the Baseball Prospectus series on the top 50 "most disappointing" prospects of all time to see that (I'm looking at you, Andy Marte). But the core of this team is still very young, with Santana, Chris F. Perez, Asdrubal, Carrasco and others still shy of their 25th birthdays. So while there is talent in the pipeline, there is also plenty of reason for optimisim when looking at the youth movement already in Cleveland.

This seems like as good a time as any to remind everyone that I am headed to Arizona in two weeks to check out both the minor league and major league squads as they prepare for the upcoming season. It's a trip that I took last year for the first time, and highly recommend it to

any baseball fan that can make it. Better weather than Cleveland, better player access than in Cleveland, less stress over who wins and loses than there will be in Cleveland, and more prospects that you'll see in Cleveland. Not to seem like I am running down my hometown, but spending a 75 degree day in March watching Chuck Nagy throw BP to Carlos Santana, Choo and Weglarz is a pretty darn good time. I'll be posting several articles from Goodyear, as well as letting my consciousness stream away on the Twitter. So if you have a question for a prospect or player that hasn't already been answered by Bastian or one of the other beat writers, send it my way (@ alciammaichella) and I'll be happy to try and get it taken care of. I promise not to tweet pictures of the Arizona sunset, or constant weather updates that make you long for the dog days of August while you're digging out of another blizzard on the snowy North Coast.

In the "news that should surprise absolutely no one" category, Bud Shaw reports that Manny Acta has named Fausto Carmona as his Opening Day starter
. The dreams of Fausto's 2007 season becoming the mean for his career are long gone, but he put up a very solid 3.77 ERA in 2010, and his 3.1 BB/9 rate was the lowest since that magical 2007 campaign. I'll always hav

e a soft spot in my heart for Carmona, as his 2007 performance against the Yankees in the ALDS was probably the most memorable baseball game I've ever seen live. Carmona's defeat over both the Yankees and the Canadian Soldiers had me convinced that he was going to be a mainstay at or near the top of the Tribe rotation for many years to come. He's the #1 starter this year more by default than by proven himself to be an "ace" in the truest sense of the word, but it's not unreasonable to think he can at least repeat his 2010 numbers.

Anthony Castrovice continues his fantastic work even though he's not the assigned Indians beat writer for MLB.com anymore, taking a look at the media guide and extracting some interesting minutia. I for one was both intrigued and shocked to hear that our opening day starter's favorite movie is Major League II. It's a fantastic opportunity and I don't begrudge him a bit for taking it, but a small part of me dies inside when
I read a Castro article about the Red Sox in their role as AL East favorites.
Fortunately he still writes about the Tribe on a pretty regular basis, and his replacement on the Tribe beat Jordan Bastain is fantastic as well.

Speaking of Bastain, he updated a variety of topics late Friday evening on his blog for MLB.com . Among them, he touched on the Sizemore situation:

Center fielder Grady Sizemore (left knee) took another step forward –pun intended?—in his rehab on Friday. Sizemore took part in outfield group drills, catching fly balls and fielding grounders. He also upped the intensity of his agility and sprint drills, nothing that the day's excercises had him moving in 'all directions.' He also took part in batting practice as usual.

As of right now, there's still no plan to move Grady from CF when he is healthy enough to play again. Sizemore's status effects not only the top of the lineup and the OF defense, but the club's bottom line as well. He's one of the players that casual fans will still pay to see, and like it

or not is especially key to the female demographic. Sizemore's return will help put wins in the scorebook and fans in the seats, and I for one would be pleasantly surprised if he were available by tax day.

Moving on to some of the newest Indians in the tepee, Baseball Prospectus' Christina Kahrl does a fine job pulling together her thoughts on the recent roster moves, from Durbin to Johnson to Lawson. She points out that Johnson's recent success occurred under Acta's watchful eye in Washington, when he put up a .291/.426/.405 line in 133 games in 2009. She believes that Johnson can be an effective part of the 1B/DH rotation once he's back to full health, and I agree. Although he and Hafner both hit from the left side, Johnson has actually put up a higher career OPS against lefties (.857) than righties (.840). So he and Hafner are not mutually exclusive, and Johnson can start as well as be a valuable bat off the bench regardless of who is on the mound. Kahrl is also cautiously optimistic on the Durbin signing:

As for Durbin, it is perhaps a mild surprise that he lasted this long on the market, especially after giving the Phillies two excellent seasons out of three, wrapping a 19.1 ARP campaign in 2008 and a 10.4 ARP in 2010 around a -4.8 season in '09. What's sort of surprising is that Durbin has managed to improve his strikeout rate in each of the last three years, topping out at a very nice 21.6 percent clip last year. What makes that even more surprising is that he's not a power pitcher by any stretch, relying on a sinker/slider mix where his heat sits around 89-90 mph, providing his best value by getting spotted carefully against right-handers and weaker lefties. His flyball tendencies will no doubt lead to negative nattering, but happily the Tribe's home park isn't a high-offense environment.

So while the Durbin signing remains much maligned in Cleveland, writers on the national scene seem much more optimistic on his chances to improve the Indians in 2011. Add to that the potential that if Durbin does manage to put together a solid season, there's a possibility that he could fetch draft pick compensation if he chooses to ply his trade in greener pastures in 2012. Bullpens being what they are, there will still be plenty of chances for the plethora of power arms in the upper reaches of the minor leagues to make their mark on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario this season. The talent will rise to the top, whether they begin the season down south in Columbus or not.

The Ides of March are approaching, the first week of spring games are in the books, and the 25-man roster is starting to take shape. If you're not getting excited for Indians baseball now…well, I don't know what to tell you.