Since the news out of Goodyear has slowed to a trickle in recent days – what with no updates as to whether Lonnie Chisenhall will be feeding the masses with fishes and loaves or if he's merely turning water into wine – let's take another diversion into the ol' Jon & Paul Plus Baseball series. On today's menu for Jon Steiner of WFNY and I is a player that DID make the Indians' out of Spring Training last year, only to see his 2010 season speed downhill at an astonishing rate – Mike Brantley. Now 2 ½ years into his tenure as an Indian, Brantley enters 2011 as the de facto LF (after he takes some time in CF while Sizemore continues to rehab) and the question for Brantley now becomes what can be reasonably expected of him and whether that is good enough to put him among the potential "core" players going forward for the Tribe:

PAUL: For as much attention has been paid to many of the young Tribe players and the steps forward that they need to take this season to prove themselves as potential "core" players to the next incarnation of what many hope can be a contending team, Mike Brantley seems to be falling under the radar this Spring despite major red flags that flew up all around him in his extended time in MLB last season.

Given that Brantley turns 24 in mid-May and that (during the stretch of time at the end of the season in which he "improved" after his final call-up) he posted a .332 OBP in the last two months of the season, why I shouldn't be concerned about the assumption that Brantley will eventually slide seamlessly into the top of the Indians' batting order?

JON: I'm not sure "seamlessly" is the word I would use. Perhaps "forcibly inserted"?
I don't believe that Michael Brantley is going to be a great player. I don't even believe he's a particularly great fielder: while his arm is certainly better than Grady's and his reads are better than Trevor Crowe's, that's sort of damning with faint praise if you ask me.

No. Brantley won't be great. But he can be good.

I wrote a piece months ago (feels like years, I promise) where I compared Brantley's skills to those of Brett Gardner. Basically, both are speedsters whose value will be determined in three ways: (1) getting on base at a reasonably above average rate--let's say .340 or higher; (2) stealing bases with a success rate of more than 75%; and (3) playing good defense in a corner OF spot.

Last season, Gardner did all of those things, and--believe or not--was the Yankees' second most valuable position player.

I think when we expect Brantley to be Sizemore-redux, we're setting ourselves up for disappointment. He doesn't have the power, the range, or the OBP skill. That doesn't mean he's not going to be a valuable player though.

PAUL: I don't think the Sizemore-redux is a hope held by any reasonable person given the obvious differences between the two, but the Brantley that you describe (and it's not a description I disagree with) sounds closer to a "complementary piece" and his struggles since being elevated to MLB (and I know it's early) don't elicit confidence that he's much more. Given LaPorta's initial struggles, that's kind of a frightening thought in terms of the CC return.

That said, realizing Gardner's value last year, am I just under-emphasizing those kinds of contributions from a player? In this Brave New World that we find ourselves (post-steroid) in MLB, is a player like Brantley (or Gardner) more valuable than a cursory glance would suggest?

Of more immediate and specific interest, will Mike Brantley be more than bottom-of-the-lineup fodder or is there a chance that he develops into the legitimate lead-off hitter that many envisioned when he was tabbed at the PTBNL?

JON: Make no mistake: the Brantley I described is an everyday player--steriod era or not. The question is whether he can ever reach that potential, and I think you're right to question it.

We think (we don't know) that Brantley is an average center fielder, which would make him a well above average left fielder. We also think (we don't know) that he can be a good base stealer. That's two of three. Unfortunately, those are the easy two.

The third component is going to be his ability to get on base. For a guy with absolutely no

power, he's going to have to get on base around 35% of the time to stick as a starter. The good news is that throughout the minors, his OBP was an incredible .388. The bad news is that we haven't seen any of that plate discipline translate to the Big Leagues yet. The good news is he's only 23--a long way from reaching his offensive peak. The bad news is that his OBP has gone down considerably every time he's jumped a level: from .426 in rookie ball, to .406 in A, to .382 in AA, to .367 in AAA. The good news is that he seems a good, hardworking kid. The bad news is that the minors are littered with good, hardworking kids who just can't cut it.

Is it possible that he never becomes anything better than a fourth OF? I think so. But if there's ever a season to throw a guy against the wall just to see what sticks, 2011 will be it.

PAUL: Right, it's all predicated on his ability to get on base and the one of the most promising aspects of Brantley's skill set was that he walked more than he struck out in both AA and AAA. Thus far in his MLB career, he's struck out almost twice as much as he's walked in 100 MLB games…

Given that Brantley will turn 24 in a couple of months, as much as his continued development may be in there somewhere, there has to be a point when Brantley's promise (OBP-wise) from the Minors starts to translate to some success in MLB. While 2011 represents a great time to give Brantley pretty much a whole season to figure that out, Brantley was otherworldly bad at the beginning of 2010 for the Indians. Even though it was only 9 games to start the season, he posted a .156 BA / .229 OBP / .188 SLG / .418 OPS that earned him a ticket back to Columbus.

But that was just 9 games, right?
Well, when he returned on the 4th of July, he proceeded to put up a .157 BA / .231 OBP / .214 SLG / .445 over the course of the month of July in 17 games. Again, only 17 games, but the performance was oddly similar and, if Brantley starts out the 2011 season similarly, how long does the team stick with a player – regardless of developmental hope – in their lineup?

JON: Yes. I'm going to be the guy to talk about the small sample size and the potential and the patience.

Part of that is because I think that 23 year olds still have a lot of room to improve, as a general rule. But part of that is because we don't have someone breathing down Brantley's neck at the moment to take his job away.

I would argue that there are two "viable" options who will, someday, be competing with Brantley for playing time.

The first is Nick Weglarz, of whom I'm particularly fond. He hits for power and gets on base. His problem has always been health, and until he can stay in the AAA lineup long enough to prove his mettle, he won't really offer Brantley a challenge. It's also worth noting that Weglarz and Brantley might play in the same outfield if a certain coffee-mug-toting center fielder were to move on sometime soon.

The second is Zeke Carrera, of whom I know you're particularly fond. I'll admit to not knowing

much about Zeke, but I get the impression that he's the only other legitimate option in CF that the Indians have. But here's the thing: Carrera is the same age as Brantley, with slightly worse minor league numbers. If we think he's going to succeed, shouldn't we feel the same about Mike?

PAUL: Well said on "the potential and the patience" of Brantley and it's beyond hypocritical of me (or anyone) to assert that a guy like Donald (or Carrasco or even Huff) deserves the benefit of the doubt or a long leash while Brantley would not.

You're right in that there is no other player who figures obviously onto the 25-man that projects to be the OF that Brantley could be over the next 5 years (all under club control) for the Indians. Even if he's able to simply come close to we saw out of him out of the final 2 months of the season (.292 BA / .332 OBP / .390 SLG / .721 OPS over 211 PA...and that's an underwhelming body of work), it's prudent for the Tribe to see if that represents a baseline for Brantley in MLB to improve upon. Just as importantly, they need to find out if that line (horrifyingly) represents his ceiling, or even if that is who he is.

The alternatives out of the gate are...well, Austin Kearns and Travis Buck and finding out what the Indians have in Brantley is far more important than giving PA to Kearns or Buck instead in the interest of an extra win or two in April or May. While the dismissive feelings towards Brantley that "maybe somebody else could do this better" - like Zeke - it becomes that question of whether the alternative is desirable because it represents an upgrade or because it's simply an alternative.

This season is all about separating the wheat from the chaff and the performances of Brantley (in MLB), Wegz (in AAA and probably MLB), and Zeke (see Wegz) are going to go a long way to determining which player or players (if any) fills a role in this next incarnation of the Indians. Given Sizemore's contract status, let's hope that the decisions that the Indians have to make are based on solid performances that force their hand, not underwhelming ones that make them want to turn that hand in for different cards.