Now entering the week in which baseball that matters will be played, the 2011 season is so close that the butterflies are fluttering for most baseball fans. Opening Day is finally this Friday and, though my general disdain for the Opening Day crowd is well-known (more people looking for a reason to party than to watch a baseball game) and given that I prefer Game #2, which includes “real” Tribe fans, the opportunity to attend Opening Day with The DiaBride and The DiaTot, will have me heading down to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario this Friday afternoon.

While I had to pass on the invitation to attend the Indians’ new Social Suite (which looks pretty great) for the Home Opener, the fact that I’ll be going down with my boy and my wife have me excited to head down there to enjoy all of this Feller hoopla will be occurring prior to the game and an actual…you know, Indians’ game has the juices flowing on this cold Sunday morning.

However, we are still about 5 days away from that first pitch being thrown and the analysis of the off-season and Spring Training being just that – analysis, with the questions that we’ve been asking for months now hopefully finding some answers as the days, weeks, and months roll on in 2011. That’s why this is always a bit of an odd time to think about (or write about) the Indians as most of the pieces that emerge at the end of Spring Training examine how the final roster spots will shake out as the arguments over the 23rd to 25th spots on the roster are overanalyzed to impossible levels.

As the shocking news that Buck AND Duncan have made the team (I know, buckle up…) may seem compelling at some level, there are far more important questions facing this team that are unrelated to the 5th OF, the backup catcher or the final three spots in the bullpen. Looking at any or all of those “battles” is all well and good, but the outcomes or the “winners” in those situations are going to have a slightly higher impact than you or I will on the win total for the Indians this season.

Rather, let's take the opportunity to use this last Sunday prior to Opening Day to take a bigger picture of the situation in front of the Indians with a kind of a "where the Indians stand" as an organization and what is necessary for them to accomplish to show that there is, in fact, a light at the end of this dark tunnel that we've been traveling through for the better part of the last two years. Certainly, this isn't the time to re-hash what happened from the beginning of the 2008 season to now (contracts were given out to players that regressed or were injured, poor drafting dried up the pipeline, and veterans were moved for younger players) as those topics have been beaten to death and the Tribe fans that are unable to move past the last two seasons are the same ones that still think that any lineup that doesn't evoke memories of that 1995 batting order is substandard.

What every Spring is about is looking forward with some hope (and you should read this if you haven't already from Jonathan Knight
) – which is something that most Indians' fans oddly have trouble doing, despite the fact that most of those same fans look forward to the NFL Draft more than any other day on the NFL calendar and are counting the ping-pong balls that they hope will lead them to Kyrie Irving or Derrick Williams – and there should be no shortage of hope on the North Coast. However, that hope is largely tied into the individual performances of particular players (who aren't the 5th starter, the backup catcher, or the 5th OF) going forth this season, because the Indians are at the point in their developmental curve where the production (or lack thereof) from certain young players are going to tell us a good deal about the future of this franchise, both in the near-term and long-term.

To start off on that, Paul Swydan at Fangraphs had a very frank piece about the Indians in the context of Fangraphs' rankings of each MLB franchise from bottom to top. Swydan looks very honestly at the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and while he's not overwhelmingly positive about the outlook for the franchise, he does put forth some concepts very clearly in terms of what the Indians are trying to do this year and beyond:
The talent on hand still needs to make the jump from paper champions to producing on the field – something evidenced by the fact that they felt compelled to sign Orlando Cabrera to man second base this season – but you can see how the pieces of the puzzle should fit. ***The best way to compete long-term is to have a core group of players that mature at the same time, and this group of Indians fits that profile as well as you possibly can.***
--snip--
The Indians payroll has regressed to 2005 levels, and the ballpark might not be chock full of Tribe fanatics like it used to be, but there is promise there. ***The team on the field this year may not be good, but it is largely cost controlled, has more reinforcements that should arrive in the near-term, and the front office is smart enough to determine who among this group of players should be there long-term.***

While the whole piece is worth a read, the two bolded sentences are what caught my eye as it represents about as good of a one-sentence-only explanation of the Indians' strategy and the application of that strategy that I've seen. It shouldn't be a new concept to you if you've been hanging around these parts and realize that the Indians made many of their trades with an eye at acquiring talent that would arrive and mature around the same time, with the idea of assembling a similar "core group of players" that they did from 2003 to 2005, when Victor,

Hafner, Sizemore, CC, and Westbrook all emerged together to form the base for the 2007 team.

Of course, if that's the plan, the question needs to be asked as we sit at the precipice of the 2011 season as to which of the current Indians (on the parent club or beneath) can make up this next "core group of players"?

The most obvious candidate was profiled by Hardball Talk's Aaron Gleeman, who had some pretty glowing things to say about The Axe Man :
Because excellent plate discipline is such a big part of Santana's game and not everyone appreciates the value of on-base percentage relative to, say, homers and RBIs, his numbers may not scream superstar. However, he's capable of becoming an elite offensive catcher and is also no slouch defensively behind the plate, giving him MVP-caliber upside.

"MVP-caliber upside" is something that I'm not sure anyone would have asserted about Victor back in 2003 or 2004, yet Santana is universally lauded as "capable of becoming an elite offensive catcher" and his presence (plus the fact that keeping him in Columbus until July of last year keeps him under club control through the 2016 season) in the lineup for the coming years certainly constitutes his inclusion as one of the potential "core" players going forward for the current Tribe.

Past the obviousness of Santana, there is Choo (who remains under club control through 2013, despite every attempt by national writers and Jim Ingraham to ignore this and try to figure out when he's going to get traded), who Gleeman calls, in a later piece , "one of MLB's best, most underrated players" and probably Chris Perez (who had the 8th best ERA+ in MLB last year among players with 60 or more IP), even if the newly-minted closer still needs to prove that he can continue his dominance of the 9th inning as saves aren't granted to anyone on the basis of hair, beard, Twitter presence, or self-confidence.

That would be three that would be obvious as cornerstones going forward for the Indians and having them in the middle of the lineup and at the back end of their bullpen is certainly a nice start. However, given the inexperience that Santana and Perez have at the MLB level, they still have quite a bit of proving to do over the course of the 2011 season and beyond to establish themselves as players that don't just project as difference-makers, but who actually do make a

difference between wins and losses.

In that column, they are not alone as the Indians' roster is flush with players that may have some level of prospect pedigree but who need to prove that they are not just capable MLB players, but players who can contribute on a winning team. How that plays out is what bears watching this season as Swyden asserts in the aforementioned Fangraphs piece, "the team on the field this year may not be good, but it is largely cost controlled, has more reinforcements that should arrive in the near-term, and the front office is smart enough to determine who among this group of players should be there long-term."

There are segments of the fanbase (and large ones at that) who would challenge the assertion about the intelligence of the Front Office, but in that piece in which Gleeman called The BLC "one of MLB's best, most underrated players", he finishes the piece with, "my guess is they'll show some relatively modest improvement from last season's 69 wins to somewhere in the mid-70s while having some very interesting decisions to make at the trading deadline."

Since I'm going to dismiss the trading deadline decisions out of hand (as nobody seems to realize that Sizemore's club option for 2012 becomes a player option if he's traded, that Choo is under control for three more years, and that Carmona is working on a contract that includes club options for the next FOUR years), what if the Indians finished the season in the mid-70s in terms of wins?
Would that be a success or a failure of a season?

That's a hard answer to come to, although that largely depends how they would come about that win total, in terms of contributions from particular players. Specifically, what contributions come from players who are ostensibly paid the league minimum and who are a few years away from even sniffing arbitration.

Speaking of those league-minimum salaried players, since this is the time of year that everyone moans and wails about the payroll of the team (and I wonder why, given the headlines coming from the PD), can we please remember how the tear-down and ramp-up of the Indians (by this very Front Office) happened from 2002 to 2005 as the Indians pared back payroll while they loaded up on cost-controlled, similarly-aged players that would…wait for it…arrive and mature together with the idea that they could peak as a playoff team?

Lest you forgot, just to look at that tear-down and the beginning of the ramp-up, here is the Team Record and Payroll from 2002 to 2004:
2002 – 74-88 / $78.9M
2003 – 68-94 / $48.5M
2004 – 80-82 / $34.3M

Very quickly, compare those to what we've seen the last two years (in terms of records and payrolls) and what this year's payroll figures to settle in at:

2009 – 65-97 / $81.6M
2010 – 69-93 / $61.5M
2011 – ??-?? / $48.4M

Back in 2004, the Indians began to identify which of their league-minimum salaried players were worthy of receiving long-term contracts and began to lock those players up accordingly, buying out years of FA in exchange for financial security. As those players accumulated more service time and as their salary numbers escalated, the Indians have had sequentially higher payrolls, but that doesn't mean that the team jumped from a $34M payroll to a $70M payroll as the team record improved.

To wit, that 2005 team that finished with 93 wins had a $41.5M payroll (or lower than this year's projected payroll) and that 2007 team that was one game away from the World Series? It was a $61.7M payroll or about $200K more than last year's 2010 team…seriously.

While it may seem like I'm getting sidetracked, it actually speaks to the strategy at hand here - load up on the youngsters, identify which ones are going to be "core" players and sign them to deals that buy up years of their FA. That's what the Indians did in the early-to-mid-1990s, it's what they did in the early-to-mid-2000s, and it's what they're attempting to do in the early-to-mid-2010s.

Back in 1993, nobody knew what Jim Thome or Manny Ramirez or Al Belle or Omar Vizquel were going to become just as nobody knew who Victor Martinez or CC Sabathia or Grady Sizemore would turn into when it was 2003. Sure, there were hopes and aspirations, but short of being able to look deeply into the future, any assertions of "sure" things were folly because of how much can go right or wrong with prospects in baseball. Perhaps Manny was a generational talent and CC was an obvious ace, but it took a while (for CC at least) to establish himself as a consistent presence for the Indians and the answer as to whether he was ever going to "figure it out" didn't come quickly.

Not many people care to remember this while CC pitches for the Evil Empire, but if you combine the numbers for CC's 2004 and 2005 seasons, you come to a 4.07 ERA (105 ERA+) as CC had not yet realized how to pitch, something that would come about around the middle of June of 2006 (he had a 4.18 ERA in mid-June of that year) and lead to his evolution into the dominant frontline starter.

Of course, it's fair to ask whether there are players on the Indians' roster that generate the kind of excitement that CC did back then?

Probably not (although Pomeranz is certainly generating some heavy breathing), but the point to injecting CC's numbers from 2004 and 2005 in there is to assert that the answers aren't going to come quickly for the current batch of Tribe youngsters, although 2011 should start to provide some answers. If we're starting with Santana, Choo, and CF Perez as potential "core" members based on their 2010 performances, what the Indians need is for other players to emerge here as more than complementary parts and to show some sort of potential as elite players. If you'll remember that mid-to-late-2000s team was built, the team that emerged in 2007 was ostensibly

built was around a couple of elite players complemented by pieces and parts, young and old.

Arguments could be made with the pros and cons that Asdrubal could become a “core” player and an argument could be made that Asdrubal should have already established himself as more than a complementary piece, but injuries and inconsistency have plagued him. Perhaps 2011 is the year that he actually flashes the leather that earned him his “slick-fielding” reputation and can replicate the success that he enjoyed at the plate in 2009, but Cabrera (who, like Choo, is club-controlled THROUGH 2013…as it stands right now) is far from alone in having potential, if not consistent production.

The once high hopes for Matt MaTola have taken a considerable hit, something that hasn’t been lost on a couple of hacks as well as Terry Pluto , who all pointed out the importance of MaTola on this team going forward. Maybe MaTola shows why he was a universally well-regarded prospect when he was moved or maybe he moves into placeholder (or worse) territory. Honestly, you could go up and down the roster and see a glass half-full and a glass half-empty situation for most of these young players, just as easily as you can see the overflowing glass and the completely empty cup for guys like Carrasco and Masterson, just to name a couple.

But the only way that the answers will come on some of these guys is through their performance in MLB and, even then, there’s no guarantee that they become the cornerstones that the Indians hope so badly they will become. However, it’s important to remember that the 2004 team had an infield of Broussard, Belliard, Vizquel, and Blake with an outfield that included both Matt Lawton and Jody Gerut, so the emergence of players in 2011 doesn’t have to be unilateral and overwhelming.

Very simply, the Indians need one or two players to emerge as pillars of the lineup (other than Choo and Santana) this year to at least show that a bright future is ahead for the offense. Let’s all remember that Victor and Hafner established themselves in 2004 with Sizemore not arriving for a year after those two to form the troika that would pace the Tribe’s offense at its peak in the late-2000s.

With that knowledge, isn’t it more obvious that the Indians need a just a couple of other players

(and it could come next year if you want to use the Sizemore 2005 comparison…ahem, The Chiz and Kipnis), as they could have two of the more effective hitters in MLB this year in the middle of their lineup. If you think that's hyperbole, realize that in the Marcel Projections for the 2011 season , The BLC has the 11th highest projected wOBA with Santana not far behind with the 28th highest projected wOBA in all of MLB. Those are cornerstones that you could build a lineup around.

In the near-term Sizemore is a question mark as it is fairly obvious that the Indians will cut ties with Hafner when his contract runs out at the end of next season (if not earlier), but one (or both) of those players re-capturing some level of their past success would go a long way to an easier transition to seeing some of those players establish themselves into legitimate contributors for the next decade.

Already I can hear it – sure, Choo and Santana look great, but that mid-to-late-2000s team was built on starting pitching, and that just isn't on this roster.

You're not going to hear an argument here that those teams were built on a strong rotation, but the recent performances of CC and Lee have colored the memories of those players as those 2004 and 2005 teams emerged. The truth is that CC and **Westbrook** were the best starting pitchers of those teams as they matured and represented the only two "core" pitchers from 2004 to 2007. You could say that Lee was a "core" player from 2004 to 2007 if you'd like, but you'd be wrong as he posted a 4.76 ERA (92 ERA+) over those four seasons and really only had one excellent season among those four, a body of work that Westbrook (4.07 ERA, 108 ERA+ over 4 seasons) far outpaced over the same timeframe.

Regardless (and back to this team), the questions remain as to whether Carmona continue to rebound with Carrasco emerging going to be a pleasant (if inconsistently pleasant) surprise this year. If they're able to do that it provides the Indians with some level of stability at the top of the rotation…but it's just as easy to see Carmona hitting a plateau and CarCar being done in by home runs. Hope may exist that Masterson can evolve into a innings-eating middle-of-the-rotation starter, but fear is just as prevalent that he's going to end up in the bullpen, even if it strengthens the back-end of a burgeoning bullpen.

In a piece on the Indians' rotation from Anthony Castrovince , he takes a clear look at the Tribe starters going forward and this comparable for Al White caught my eye:
A more applicable expectation would be for him to emerge as a Jake Westbrook type who can give you a ton of quick innings and routinely deliver double-digit wins. While it's a little less sexy, there is, obviously, a lot of value in that type of talent.

As AC writes, there is "a lot of value in that type of talent" and if White projects as that groundball specialist who sits in the middle of the rotation, that proved to be an important role filled by Westbrook in the mid-to-late-2000s and as much as people want to see White as a 1st Rounder heading to the top of the rotation, if he could settle into a Jake Westbrook-type role going forward…the Indians would welcome it.

At this point however, it's all projection with "answers" coming from opinions and not from

actual MLB innings pitched…and you know what?
If the Indians come out of 2011 with Carmona, Carrasco, and White as potential "core" players, then 2011 is a rousing success, win-loss record be damned.

That being said, I'm not going to sit here and say that Player X or Player Y – position player or pitcher – is going to emerge in 2011 because the roster is flush with guys that could (operative word) accelerate their development and establish themselves, but who could just as easily get stuck in neutral or go in reverse. I'd love to say that C. Perez and Sipp are poised to lock down the 8th and 9th innings for the next few years, but I've learned enough about bullpens in the last few years to know that I know nothing about predicting the effectiveness of relievers.

All told, what the Indians need this season is a couple of players to emerge as legitimate "core" players and some level of advancement needs to be seen because, as Swydan adroitly pointed out in the Fangraphs piece, the Indians need "to make the jump from paper champions to producing on the field" which is something that group of young players did in the 2004 and 2005 seasons. While every fan remembers the tear-down of 2008 and, more acutely, 2009, the build-up has somehow slipped everyone's mind and the evolution from a team that "featured" Broussard, Lawton, Jason Davis, and others into a 93-win team in 2005 came when the potential of certain players became legitimate production for those players.

Entering this season, that's the thing to watch all year as the potential within this current group needs to become production that can be counted on going forward. Where it's going to come from is anyone's guess, but standing at the precipice of the 2011 season, we're about to find out…starting this Friday.