Two losses at the hands of the Red Sox (who are now 26-12 in their last 38 games) with Lester and Beckett on the mound and one might think that the sky was falling on the North Coast. Yet here the Indians sit, still 6 games up on the Tigers and 9 games ahead of the Royals and the White Sox before Memorial Day. Nothing quite like a terrible game (and Wednesday's affair was terrible) to drudge all of the fears about a team, regardless of what the W-L ledger tells us. While things may not feel all that rosy on the North Coast after the last couple of games and as they head to Tampa to face off with Price, Shields and Hellickson, let's all take a deep breath.

Feel a little better now?
Good, because this gauntlet the team is about to go through is going to serve as a major test for them as it is true that the Indians still hold their division lead, but that lead shouldn't be treated as some sort of mandate to let things go horribly wrong and sit about waiting for things to right themselves. By that I mean that some cracks are showing and springing leaks on the team and, while strengths abound, the time to prevent the Good Ship Indians from taking on water here may not be far away.

With that said, let's get some Tomahawks in the air…

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With the Indians sitting atop the AL Central, paced by their pitching and their young talent acquired via trade, the "news" that CC Sabathia will exercise the opt-out clause that was written into his contract (as if nobody saw this coming as soon as that "opt-out" became public

knowledge) that will allow him to become a FA at year's end struck me in an odd way. By that I mean, most mentions of CC or Clifton Phifer or El Capitan (that's Victor, not Jeets) in the past two years or so have brought me sadness as they have reminded me of what once was, what could have been, and perhaps what should have been.

But this "news" about Sabathia is one that actually has me gloating a little bit as it brings to light this idea that perhaps even the Yankees are not able to occupy this perfect place in MLB because of their revenue streams. After an off-season in which they committed 3 years and $35M to a set-up man in Rafael Soriano (who was just shelved with an "inflamed ligament" in his throwing elbow) and meted out a 3-year, $51M deal to Jeter (who has a .632 OPS, outpacing Cleveland's offensive black hole Orlando Cabrera by .005 points), the Yankees are now coming face to face that a self-inflicted shot is coming their way with this inevitable opt-out by Sabathia.

Remember that whole idea that the Indians should have ponied up the cash to keep their aCCe and that they screwed up by not doing so?
Not only did CC take the largest contract for a pitcher in history, but he made the Yankees include that opt-out clause that allows him to essentially be guaranteed another three years on the back-end of the deal, all without assuming any risk in case of injury because the FIRST deal was all guaranteed money.

Just to keep track of all of these dollars and all of this nonsense, the Yankees have paid CC $69M since the beginning of 2009 and would be on the hook to pay him $92M over the next 4 years…if he wasn't going to opt out. The Indians' total payroll since the beginning of 2009 has been $192M, so CC has earned about 35% of the total of EVERY Indians' player for the last three years, including this year's AL Central division leader. However he's going to get plenty more, as SI.com's Jon Heymann points out , CC's "friend and former Indians' teammate Cliff Lee was offered $148 million over seven years by the Yankees. And Lee was 32 years old at the time, two years older than Sabathia is now, at the time of that offer."

That offer to Lee from the Bronx (which was turned down) then was a 7-year offer to a 32-year-old pitcher for about $21M per. When CC exercises that opt-out in his contract (which was a brilliant maneuver by his agent, by the by), how much do you think he's going to ask for, fully realizing that the Yankees have painted themselves into a corner with him? The only course of action the Yankees can take is to overbid on CC (once again) despite essentially bidding against themselves (once again) because they can't afford to lose him.

Don't take this as some sort of condemnation of CC, who has taken advantage of the rights allowed to him through MLB and through the Yankees' desperation and largesse. However, to see all of this in the context of both the Yankees and YOUR Indians atop their divisions is interesting because CC represents what the promise of that 2007 season became for most Indians' fans as it all came crashing down, only to rise from the ashes once again this season.

And that's what brings this all around to the way I'm feeling now about this "news" about CC as

his career path over the last 3 years has basically been the knife wound, the turning of the knife, and the salt being poured in the wound up to this point. Lest you forget, after the dismal 2008 start (and it is often forgotten that Sabathia had a 4.72 ERA and a 1.43 WHIP in his first 13 starts this year and…you know, starts to the season matter), the Indians moved CC to Milwaukee for prospects for whom the future seemed bright even if that future seemed perhaps a little far off as the Indians attempted to re-tool for 2009 and beyond.
Knife wound…

After 2008, CC moved on to the Bronx as the Brewers received only two draft picks for losing him to FA (which would be used to draft Kentrail Davis and Maxwell Walla …and you should click both of those links for some perspective as to what the Indians COULD have to show for CC had they simply gone for the draft pick compensation) and the 2009 season started painfully for Tribe fans, as Cliff Lee and Victor were traded and the strip-mining of the 2007 ALCS team was nearly complete.
That is the turning of said knife…

Just to add insult to injury, CC faced off against Lee in Game 1 of the World Series as Indians' fans were left to face a very difficult reality that, not only were two former Indians now fronting World Series rotations, but that the Indians may have little to show for the trades of CC, Victor, and Lee.
Salt poured into the gaping wound…

Perhaps even more painful than that however, was the idea that this "gaping wound" wasn't going to close or heal properly as the young players acquired in those deals for CC, CP Lee, and Vic looked like flawed players, lacking consistency, or looking like "misses" waiting to happen.

This is all old news I know and I'm not saying that the wound is fully healed and we're back to tip-top shape, but it is worth revisiting the depths from which this organization has arisen from as now, here we sit nearly at Memorial Day, with the two players acquired for CC among the top 29 qualified players in the AL for OPS+ ,
with each of them under club control through the 2015 season (LaPorta) and the 2016 season

(Brantley), with neither eligible for arbitration until after NEXT year.

But just to take this further, since the players added for CC that are currently contributing to the parent club, remember how that 2005 to 2007 run was built on pitching (CC, Jake, Carmona, Lee) and how those "Waves of Arms" that were supposed to supply the fresh water turned out to be ripples lapping on the shore?

Well, the Indians' strategy of stockpiling arms via these trades and patience has paid off as their current rotation is fronted by the main player netted for Victor Martinez with Acta asserting (in a great piece by Yahoo's Jeff Passan) that, "great pitchers do not fall out of the sky…They develop, they come on, they put themselves up there. We have a staff with guys who are doing that this year." Nowhere is the idea of someone putting themselves "up there" more evident than what Justin Masterson is doing for the Tribe.

Lest you think this is still some sort of flash-in-the-pan for Masterson, realize that going back to his final 9 appearances last year and including his 2011, Justin Credible has a 2.35 ERA and a 1.10 WHIP with 80 K and just 27 BB in 103 IP.
Again, that's a sub-2.50 ERA over his last 100 IP…

Want some context for that?
Since his name provided the impetus for this flight of fancy, CC Sabathia's numbers for the last 102 2/3 innings that he's pitched (just so we're using comparable timeframes here) are a 3.42 ERA and a 1.25 WHIP with 91 K and 30 BB in those 102 2/3 IP.

No, you did not misread that so let me put that into an easier to compare format so everyone can digest that:
Masterson's last 103 IP
2.35 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 80 K, 27 BB

Sabathia's last 102 2/3 IP
3.42 ERA, 1.25 WHIP, 91 K, 30 BB

So here we sit as the Yankees are left to worry about their FA-to-be ace who will command a king's ransom while the Indians attempt to figure out if their young ace is someone that they want to extend given that he'll be arbitration eligible (for the first time) after this year.

And…the circle is nearing completion and while it's been a long, circuitous, often painful journey from that horrible day in July of 2008 to today, the Indians have re-invented themselves as a contender in less than three years with the young players acquired over those three years leading the way for the foreseeable future.

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It has now been a week since I proclaimed that "Santana has been one of the best hitters in the American League for going on a month now" with Santana not getting a hit since that was written. While what I wrote last Thursday is something that most would back off of (and the

mainstream media is certainly pouncing on Santana's struggles as an easy talking point), perhaps it is time to look a little deeper into what I meant when I wrote that and suggest a possible reason why Santana has struggled recently at the plate.

For starters, let's realize that Santana posted a pretty impressive line from April 17th to May 17th, and if you're looking at the BA listed below here as the most important …well, you can stop reading now and I'll allow you to go back to looking at the back of your baseball cards. Regardless, here are his numbers for the month prior to last week's post:
.256 BA / .413 OBP / .512 SLG / .926 OPS with 6 2B and 5 HR in 104 PA and a 23-game stretch

That performance led many to believe that Santana had emerged once again as the erstwhile middle-of-the-order bat that so many had predicted him to be. Now, we see him getting days off from Manny Acta to clear his head and are forced to listen to the chorus of "move Santana out of the cleanup spot" or "maybe Santana isn't as good as everyone thinks he is" from the peanut gallery.

However, look at that date that is the end of that month, the day that essentially ended Santana's hot streak – May 17th.
Anyone know what happened on May 17th or, more importantly, on May 18th?

If you didn't know, May 17th is the last game that Travis Hafner has played in, as he was pulled out of the Indians' lineup prior to the May 18th game for the oblique injury that has him currently on the DL. Just to fully fill in the paint-by-numbers here, anyone want to guess when Santana's oft-discussed hitless streak started?

Yep, on May 18th as he has now failed to get a hit in his last 24 plate appearances (though he has walked 4 times) since Hafner was shelved and removed from behind him in the batting lineup.

Is this meant to assert that The Axe Man is still going well and that he'll be fine?
Well, not completely as he is unquestionably scuffling at the plate in the last week…but the hitters behind Santana since Hafner's injury have been Travis Buck and Shelley Duncan who, it should be noted, were both signed as Minor League FA by the Tribe in the previous two off-seasons. If Santana is struggling, could it be because he's pressing or simply not seeing

good pitches as opposing teams pitch around him, preferring to face the hitter "protecting" him in the lineup?

While Santana will likely be fine in all of this (and please stop looking at BA as a measure of a hitter's effectiveness) as he is still just a 25-year-old without a full year under his belt, the fact is that the Indians need to lengthen their lineup with Hafner now out of the picture, probably until the 4th of July. As much as Travis Buck's pedigree may excite me and though Matt LaPorta has shown flashes, the bottom of the Indians' lineup (The OC and Hannahan most notably) has become a black hole as of late and an ancillary effect of that has been increased pressure on the likes of Santana to produce, even if he's not being given the chances (read: the pitches to hit) to produce.

Perhaps the return of Sizemore to the lineup will give more length and balance to the lineup, but they need better hitters than what currently occupies the bottom of their lineup if they're going to compete with their upcoming schedule. If you'd like to, you can talk about "clutch" and "veteran leadership" and put "numbers" in quotes (like I just did), but The OC has an OPS of .595 since May 17th in 121 plate appearances and…well, that's terrible and less of a "bad month" as much as it is "Orlando Cabrera v.2011".

While I'm tired of banging the "Cord Phelps should be an Indian now" drum, realize that over the past 14 days, the duo that is consistently in the second half of the Tribe's lineup has put forth this "production" :
Cabrera - .569 OPS
Hannahan - .506 OPS

That toothlessness of that duo (as well as Duncan, Marson, and Everett) has put a magnifying glass on the offense and while the obvious "weak link" in the middle of the lineup is The Axe Man (.560 OPS over the last two weeks), his lack of production may be as much of a byproduct of the absence of Hafner from the lineup as anything happening with Santana himself.

Obviously, this is not meant to exonerate Santana for his struggles of the last week (as if he really needs exoneration from anything coming in newsprint or over the airwaves), but rather to provide the proper context for his recent downturn. Certainly, he could use some time off to "clear his head" and all of that psychobabble, but would help him even more would be some protection in the lineup, something that may be missing for quite some time with Hafner out, unless Acta gets creative in providing that protection with Sizemore's return.

Speaking of reinforcements, it's going to be awfully interesting to see how the Indians handle their bullpen and the 5th spot in the rotation going forward. While Al White's finger certainly throws a wrench into the idea that the Indians would lengthen the quality of their rotation with his presence, the struggles of Mitch Talbot in his return bear watching. They don't bear watching because it was one bad outing, but rather because the Indians have built this lead in the AL Central and shouldn't use that lead as an excuse to simply "weather the storm" with anyone on the roster, particularly a player like Talbot. To this point, they've set the pace by being pro-active (see the White promotion) and by allowing the performance of these players

(like Pestano and Brantley) dictate how they are being used.

Given what's coming in the schedule, I wouldn't be surprised if the Indians keep Talbot on a short leash with Zach McAllister pitching as well as he is in Columbus (seriously, look at his numbers) and given that Justin Germano's departure from the 40-man has left the Indians without a true long man. By that I mean, if Talbot struggles for a couple more starts, he may be slotted into the long-man role (and yes, The Fury is out of options) with McAllister coming up to take his spot in the rotation.

Going further than that, there may be some movement in the bullpen as Zach Putnam continues to thrive in Columbus , where he has now been joined by Nick Hagadone. While Josh Judy had a quick cup of coffee with the parent club, now might be the time that the Indians start cycling through Putnam, Judy, and even Hagadone in the spots currently occupied by Frank Herrmann and even Joe Smith.

Whatever is done, the Indians need to start integrating some of this talent in AAA into Cleveland (record of the parent club considered) to make sure that the Tribe doesn't fall back to the pack because of weakness at the back-end-of-the-rotation or in the middle relief corps. Perhaps if they were lacking ready options, one could make the case that you see if Joe Smith reverts back to his dominance of RH hitters (of the 37 RH hitters he's faced this year, 14 have reached base), but with the Indians having built this divisional lead, wouldn't they be smart to ensure that it doesn't flitter away by exploring some of these arms like Putnam or Hagadone as needed, to bring the future closer to the present?

While the overall performance of the bullpen remains good, some of their peripherals (the ones that matter with relievers – striking guys out or K/9, limiting baserunners or WHIP, etc.) are less than confidence inspiring, particularly when you compare them to other relievers in MLB. Just to illustrate that, there are 144 MLB relievers that have thrown more than 15 innings on the season, and here is where the Indians relievers rank among those 144 bullpen arms in terms of K/9:
Vinnie Pestano – 10.31 K/9 - 20th in MLB among relievers
Chad Durbin – 7.91 K/9 - 64th in MLB among relievers

Rafael Perez – 6.35 K/9 - 98th in MLB among relievers
Tony Sipp – 5.91 K/9 - 109th in MLB among relievers
Chris Perez – 5.40 - 122nd in MLB among relievers

Now in terms of the 144 MLB relievers in WHIP:
Tony Sipp – 0.84 WHIP – 7th in MLB among relievers
Vinnie Pestano – 0.93 WHIP – 19th in MLB among relievers
Rafael Perez – 1.12 WHIP - 54th in MLB among relievers
Chris Perez – 1.30 WHIP - 84th in MLB among relievers
Chad Durbin – 1.45 WHIP - 108th in MLB among relievers

While I'll hold off on sounding the emergency alarm on this (and Chris F. Perez…um, now might be a good time to stop relying on GIDP by Carl Crawford here), whether the performance of the current members of the bullpen is sustainable or not is something to watch going forward. If things start to go awry, the Indians shouldn't hesitate to dip into their depth of pitchers and start to bring up the likes of Putnam or Hagadone or to call McAllister up to the parent club in an attempt to improve the overall quality of the pitching staff before that divisional lead that the Indians have so painstakingly built is pared down into an actual divisional race.

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Regardless, the Indians are right in the middle of a very trying part of their schedule and how they emerge from this stretch of games through mid-June is going to reveal quite a bit about this team and how the organization is approaching this season, particularly in terms of their young talent.

There's more talent to come…when it arrives now remains to be seen.