With the Tribe fresh off of a relatively baffling win against the Rays to snap a 3-game losing streak, the Indians head into Sunday's contest with an opportunity to improbably win the series against Tampa and to maintain their commanding lead in the AL Central. Though the last week or so has been the cause for some concern for the Tribe (and rightfully so), it is worth noting that no team in the AL Central has a winning record in their last 10 games with only the Indians and the White Sox posting a 5-5 record in their last 10. So while concerns exist for Cleveland, no other team has caught fire and made a run at the Indians, who continue to play .500 ball against a tough stretch of their schedule. In fact, with May coming to a close, it is worth noting that the Indians are tied with the Tigers for the best divisional record during the month, as each team is 13-10 in May, ½ game better than the White Sox. So, as the Tribe has scuffled a bit (particularly offensively) recently, the rest of the division remains firmly mediocre and the Indians' built lead remains intact as the calendar is about to flip to June.

The Indians maintain a 6 ½ game lead in the Central and while the offense has become an…um, adventure to experience, it has become fairly obvious with the recent lineup moves that, as my friend Tyler puts it, "the team won't upend the clubhouse chemistry or shrug off service time worries" in the interest of perhaps improving the team, even in a few obvious spots. So, as the Indians roll along, attempting to keep their hard-fought lead intact in the Central, using the "players that got them there", perhaps the idea that the lead horse in the cavalry was Al White just might be a solitary reinforcement.

While I'm not going to continue to bang that drum (as my arm has grown tired) and since the Indians have won a few games that they probably shouldn't have (though this is because of their pitching), I'll save the manifesto that the Indians need to be pro-active instead of reactive and shouldn't be resting on their laurels for the sake of continuity for another day. Reason being that just when it looks like the Indians are in for an extended stretch of losses, given the opposing starters they've faced, the Tribe comes roaring back to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat…again.

However, a noticeable trend is emerging for the Tribe, particularly in terms of their offense where the team has unquestionably missed Hafner and is still integrating Sizemore into the lineup. There are black holes in the lineup (that don't seem to be close to going away…and LaPorta has too many days when he looks like MaTola), but the Indians have been paced, particularly recently, not by the middle of the lineup, but by the two players at the top – Mike Brantley and Asdrubal Cabrera.

Did anyone know that Brantley and Asdrubal have combined to cross home plate 65 times already this season, representing nearly 27% of the runs that the Indians have scored?

Certainly it takes more than just one or two players to plate runs, but Asdrubal and Brantley have been the players stepping on home plate for the Indians this season and without their contributions, the early (and recent) struggles of Choo and Santana and the time lost to injury by Hafner and Sizemore, the Indians probably aren't in the place that they are right now, atop the AL Central.

While stories about Asdrubal have been dropping from the sky from every conceivable news outlet, with the best one comes from Joe LeMire at SI , even if he uses the words "Souvenir City" to close the article. While it's been almost impossible to not be impressed by Asdrubal this season (and have at it with the All-Star game conversation, which interests me less than Hall of Fame discussion), I'm not sure that many Indians' fans appreciate the talent that's been on display with Asdrubal this year. A few years ago, B-Pro's Kevin Goldstein proclaimed that if you were looking at Asdrubal and didn't see a star in the making that you weren't looking hard enough, but perhaps it's time to provide some context for what Cabrera has been as a player since he arrived in 2007.

Back in February, I mentioned that Asdrubal's 2011 would tell us a lot about what kind of career he would have and pointed out that one of the closest comparable players, in terms of stats for players through their first 3 seasons in MLB, was no less than Troy Tulowitzki. Admittedly, even I was a little dismissive of the findings, writing this :

Is that to suggest that a Tulowitki-esque leap to superstardom awaits Asdrubal?
Certainly not, but it definitely puts the disappointment of Asdrubal's 2010 (before and after the injury) into some perspective...

Um…well, in light of what's transpiring with Asdrubal this year, perhaps it's time to re-visit this comparison, as outrageous as it may seem at first glance, given Tulo's standing among the MLB elite. Regardless, here are the numbers compiled by each through their first 3 seasons, up to the point when each was 23 years old that prompted the revelation:
Tulowitzki (2006-2008) – 281 games
.276 BA / .346 OBP / .435 SLG / .781 OPS / 96 OPS+ with 99 XBH in 1,082 AB

Asdrubal (2007-2009) – 290 games
.287 BA / .355 OBP / .411 SLG / .766 OPS / 105 OPS+ with 92 XBH in 1,034 AB

Seriously, and that's not even bringing up this season for Asdrubal…
Now it is worth mentioning that Tulowitzki's HR total (33) for that 3-year stretch more than doubled the output (15) by Asdrubal in his first 3 years, but the XBH were on par with each other and it is worth noting that those 3 seasons were accumulated from the time that each was 21 years old through 23 years old.

Of course, Tulo followed up those first 3 seasons with some stat-stuffing years in 2009 (32 HR, .930 OPS, 130 OPS+) and last year (27 HR, .949 OPS, 138 OPS+) while Cabrera's 2010 was undone by a poor start and an ill-fated Jhonny Peralta dive into his forearm.

Yet if you look at what each player did/is doing in their age-25 season, you start to wonder if Cabrera was simply taken off of the track for a short time and if he and Tulowitzki are more similar players than the 2009 and 2010 season for each would suggest. By that I mean that here are Tulowitzki's numbers from 2009, when he was 25 years old:
.315 BA / .381 OBP / .568 SLG / .949 OPS / 138 OPS+

And now, Asdrubal this season, when his is also 25 years old:
.303 BA / .362 OBP / .537 SLG / .899 OPS / 159 OPS+

What is interesting there is while Tulo's numbers look better overall, a stat like OPS+ actually says that Asdrubal is having the better year in the context of what's happening offensively in the rest of the league because it uses the rest of MLB as a comparison tool and relates what each player is doing in the context of the rest of MLB. Now, if you project out what Cabrera has compiled over the 2011 season, he projects to finish the season with 33 HR, 36 2B, and 10 3B, which would best Tulowitzki in each category in his age-25 season.

Maybe Asdrubal backs off of his current torrid pace, but…maybe he doesn't and Asdrubal is starting to emerge as a special player to build a team around. Lest you forget, Tulowitzki is signed through TWENTY TWENTY (that's the year 2020) with a club option for 2021 with the Rockies guaranteed to pay him more than $152M starting next year to the end of his current contract. Yeah, they think that much of him in the Mile High City and while this isn't pointed out to suggest that the Indians need to be locking up Asdrubal through the end of the decade

(though he becomes a FA at the same time that Choo does and I have yet to see any hand-wringing over losing Asdrubal), the Indians may have a special player whose qualifications as a “core” player could have been debated as recently as this off-season.

Now, as we watch the maturation of Asdrubal (both at the plate and in the field…where he is finally making the routine plays AND the special plays), it would seem that the top of the Indians’ lineup could have some stability from a sensational player that is currently carrying the offense on his back.

Though Asdrubal has gotten much of the ink in recent weeks (“chicks dig the long ball”), the other revelation at the top of the lineup has been Mike Brantley who, despite a recent downturn, remains at the top of the league in some pretty impressive categories for a lead-off hitter. Sure, OBP is the most important number to look at for Brantley (and his .347 OBP is nothing to sneeze at, though it underwhelms for where it could/should be), his discipline at the plate and his ability to recognize his pitch and put a good swing on it has been the most impressive aspect of his maturation as a hitter. To say that his maturation has been a pleasant surprise would be an understatement as his performance in the early going (and even in the late going) last year caused some serious concern as to where Brantley’s ceiling existed .

However, to see what he’s doing in the context of the rest of MLB is to really appreciate what Brantley is showing he can become as an MLB hitter. Sure, anyone can say that Brantley “looks” like he knows what he’s doing up there, or that his approach is very “professional”, never looking unprepared or overwhelmed by a particular pitching, but l ook at where Brantley ranks in MLB in some pretty compelling categories
:

Line Drive Percentage – 22% (9th best in MLB)
Groundball to Flyball Ratio – 1.11 (12th lowest in MLB)

What does that mean?
Well, it means that he hits line drives more often than only 8 players in MLB (and Matt Joyce is the MLB leader here) and that if he's not hitting line drives, he's much more prone to groundballs than flyballs than most everyone else. Just to go further than that, only 4% of the flyballs that Brantley hits end up as infield pop-ups, which is the 6th lowest rate in MLB, meaning that when Brantley does put the ball in the air, he intends to do it to put a charge into it.

While he unquestionably remains an unfinished product at the plate, the things that made some fall in love with Brantley as a prospect are starting to come through this year for the parent club as he's helped the Indians' offense survive some pretty debilitating slumps and injuries to keep the offense at or near the top of the runs scored category. It would be nice if he walked more (Jhonny Peralta has walked more frequently than Brantley this year) and if he saw more pitches, but even if this is who Brantley is going to be for 2011, the Indians are in good shape with him at the top of the lineup.

What's amazing about seeing these guys at the top of the lineup (along with Choo and Santana…assuming Acta restores him TO the top of the lineup), is where they came from as Brantley was merely the PTBNL in the CC deal and – I don't know if you've heard this at all recently – Asdrubal came to Cleveland for ½ of a season of Eduardo Perez. While it's odd to see the national media finally catch on to this idea that the Indians have committed grand larceny in some of the "minor" deals they pulled off from 2006 to 2009, it doesn't make it any less enjoyable to read about.

As much as the national media is now finding out about how Asdrubal and The BLC were netted for Benuardo, making these trades work isn't as easy as the Indians have made it look just isn't the norm. In a piece that my friend Al Ciammiachella pointed out my eyes to, the Pirates cleared the decks just as completely since 2008 and as this B-Pro piece shows , they just don't have much of anything to show for it. As Al wrote to me, "sure they didn't quite have a Victor or a Lee to deal, but they've gotten nothing out of the Jason Bay or Nate McLouth deals, while the Indians turned Austin Kearns, Ben Broussard and Eduardo Perez into more than the Pirates got for their entire team, to say nothing of the Blake/Vic/Lee deals."

Think about that again and, though I realize that you know where these guys came from (though AC has a nice, clean synopsis), it does go back to those decisions made by the organization back in the summer of 2006 (Cabrera, Choo), 2008 (Santana, Brantley, LaPorta…or is it MaTola), and 2009 (Masterson, Carrasco, and C. Perez, most notably for now) when the Indians were obviously not going anywhere in their division, as they decided not to continue down the path of "what might be" with the group of players that they held in those particular years.

Rather, they ripped the band-aid ("one motion…RIGHT OFF") and to watch these trades reveal themselves as prescient is a sight to behold and it's not something that's lost on the Indians. To wit, as Mark Shapiro told Mike Harrington of the Buffalo News , "Periods like this are an affirmation of why you go through those tough times…We know and accept the reality of building teams in a market like this. It's about making tough decisions that are never popular and are challenging emotionally to both us and our fans. But when you win again with players

you believe in, it is extremely gratifying."

Realizing that this is well-worn territory in these parts, if you think back to what was happening (particularly in 2009), those moves created the perception in the minds of many fans that the team was a habitual "seller" and willing to move anything that wasn't nailed down as they traded nearly every pending FA with the seismic shift of trading two players who weren't FA for a year-and-a-half in 2009 rocking the North Coast to its core. If you have some time (and you should…it's Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, what else are you going to do), go back and r e ad what was written back in this space back August of 2009
, proclaiming the "End of An Era".
Go ahead…I'll stay right here.

But what if the Indians hadn't been "habitual sellers" and had maintained the status quo in those seasons or even played out the string with Lee and Victor, who wouldn't have become FA until this past off-season?

To watch the current team and to know the pain that came pouring upon Indians fans' (particularly in that fateful week in July of 2009) is to gain some measure of respect for the Front Office realizing what needed to be done and to go about doing it. Granted the compelling reasons to make some of those trades were self-inflicted (Mike Aubrey, Jerry Sowers, Crazy Eyes Crowe, Beau Mills…you want me to keep going), but in those mid-season moves, they unquestionably have had more hits than misses and as much as the questions were flying back then (and here's another piece from yours truly attempting to rationalize what seemed irrational back then) as to what the organization was even doing or what direction they were headed, the Indians asked themselves the hard questions, realized that there were hard answers, and didn't shy away from what that meant.

As Chris Antonetti told Joe LeMire of SI (who was apparently on the Indians' beat this week) in a piece that references the mysterious DiamondView system, which is the Indians' data analysis tool for which they own proprietary rights, the seismic shift that occurred back in July of 2009 was prompted by some logical thought, which isn't always the most prevalent line of thinking in professional sports as Antonetti relays the situation thusly:

We started by asking the question, what's our quickest way back to competitiveness? We realized that we could have let a lot of those guys complete their contracts, become free agents and get draft picks back for them. We felt that it would be in our best interest to try and expedite that by getting guys who were further along in the development process.

This is all old news in these parts I know, but the Indians found themselves in a hole (self-imposed for the most part because of their drafting) back in 2009 and punted on the 2009 and 2010 seasons when they moved Lee and Vic, slamming the window shut themselves in late July of 2009. The idea was that they could vault themselves back into contention quickly with talented players at similar developmental stages, under club control for similar stretches of time, which could mature and congeal into a winning ballclub, much as the 2004/2005 had done.

At the end of last year, few would have predicted that the group of assembled talent would do much more than continue separate itself into the categories of wheat and chaff as the team would continue to take steps toward contention. Now, just two months into the 2011 season, it's easy to see how the Indians' Front Office set the table for this to all happen. Sure, some of it may have already been in place from previous moves (Cabrera and Choo most notably), but the Indians spun their straw into gold with moves that flew under the radar for years, adding pieces and parts that all lined up for this 2011 season to occur.

Now, with the Indians firmly in control in their division, it will be up to the Indians to remain seated at the head of the table so their fans can continue to feast in their success…