With the sporting events in South Beach and with the disappointment coming out of Columbus (as NFL labor strife rolls along), the Indians have somehow emerged as the bright light on the North Coast, chugging steadily along in 1st place as rumors of their demise have been greatly exaggerated. That's not to say that some troubling trends aren't emerging (just look at where the Indians ranked in various statistical categories in May, compiled by Jordan Bastian), but since the Indians entered the "gauntlet" portion of their schedule (which started with the weekend series with the Reds), the Indians are 6-5 with games against the Reds, the Red Sox, the Rays, and the Blue Jays. They were able to post that record despite some bad outings from a few starters, Sizemore looking lost at the plate upon his return, and the defense that had proved to be so instrumental to their hot start turning in some sloppy games.

More challenges remain on the horizon with 8 of their next 11 games coming against the Rangers and the Yankees, the other two divisional leaders in the AL, and the Indians look to continue to right the ship that looked be veering off course as recently as this past weekend. However, as much as they were able to tread water in the last two weeks against some formidable opponents, with the calendar now flipped to June, the time has unquestionably arrived to put the teams' best collective foot forward.

Don't take this as a call to hit the panic button (as some of the issues facing this team are related to injuries…ahem, Hafner), but rather as a call to press down on the accelerator a little bit to see if the Tribe can put more distance between themselves and the Tigers instead of simply leaning on this built lead in the division. Since it has been well-documented that the rest of the AL Central is intrinsically flawed, how about going for the jugular as the rest of the division wallows, or how about attempting to kick up some dirt on the Tigers in an attempt to bury them

completely?

Baseball is a marathon, not a sprint…I know. But the season is made up of a series of sprints and the difficulties that the Indians experienced over the last 10 days or so raise some red flags, but (luckily for the Indians) they represent easily rectified problems that could help this team turn and burn in the division.

With that all being said (and serving as a kind of segue), let's get the Tomahawks in the air…

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Earlier in the week, we were all forced to read Acta's proclamation that The OC's not going anywhere from this everyday lineup and, while I understand Acta protecting his players and standing up for his veterans and the created chemistry for a winning team, it completely dismisses the idea that a better alternative probably exists internally in Cord Phelps.

Since it seems as if the "Free Cord Phelps" bandwagon has started to fill up, let me remind you what was written here back on April 27th :
Simply dropping Cabrera in the lineup isn't the answer as the real solution is demoting him to the Utility IF role, where he can remain to impart wisdom on the young players on an everyday basis without sabotaging inning after inning at the plate while waving at groundballs to his left in the field.

As for who would replace Cabrera at 2B, it's time to see Cord Phelps in Cleveland. While it goes against the organization's current philosophy of moving infielders all over the diamond to positions that ARE NOT their natural positions, calling Phelps (a "natural" 2B) to take over for Cabrera at 2B could represent a major offensive upgrade while not removing Uncle Orlando from the 25-man roster.
--snip--
Lest you think that Cabrera is suddenly going to improve on his offensive numbers…he won't.

Yet, people rush to the defense of keeping Orlando in the lineup with the flawed line of thinking

being articulated perfectly from the aforementioned Hoynes piece as he writes in defense of keeping The OC in the lineup that, "The time for development in the big leagues has been put on hold. That's what happens when a team is in first place."

That's all well and good and it sure does feel nice to be in 1st place, but what got the Indians into 1st place was providing opportunities for players, allowing them to earn more playing time/innings based on their accomplishments and what's being confused by this irresponsible line from Hoynes is "development" and "improvement". Of course, they're not looking for guys that have yet to "develop", but at the same time, if the team can "improve" at a particular position even if it means an adjustment period for a young player, wouldn't it behoove the Indians to make that improvement to themselves, regardless of divisional lead?

While I'm certainly happy that everyone's hopping on board this "Cancel The OC/Free Cord Phelps" train that's been idling for over a month in this space, that last line that was written here back at the end of April is the one that needs to be explored further as The OC didn't "improve on his offensive numbers" since April 27th and the degree to which he's not producing at the plate is pretty stunning, when placed in the context of the rest of MLB.

Before we get into this, please stop with this "he's producing at the plate" nonsense because of Orlando's Batting Average or RBI totals (and Hoynes dips his "pen" in that well in the linked piece above) as here is where Uncle Orlando ranks among qualified AL hitters in terms of OPS:
86) Orlando Cabrera - .616
87) Brian Roberts - .604
88) Daric Barton - .585
89) Alex Rios - .573
90) Ryan Rayburn - .565
91) Brandon Inge - .557
92) Mark Ellis - .535
93) Alcides Escobar - .516
94) Chone Figgins - .488
Disregard for a moment that the A's 2B is even lower than The OC (and that Oakland is flush with young arms that I'd love to see added to the Tribe's pitching staff with the Indians' stock of middle infielders in the upper levels embarrassing), and realize that Cabrera is among the bottom 10% among qualified AL regulars at the plate, in terms of OPS.

If you don't like OPS, and would prefer an advanced metric like wOBA , Cabrera still sits at the bottom with the same usual suspects shown above:
85) The OC - .274
86) Hideki Matsui - .271
87) Daric Barton - .269
88) Brandon Inge - .264
89) Mark Ellis - .252
90) Ryan Raburn - .251
91) Alex Rios - .250
92) Alcides Escobar - .226
93) Chone Figgins - .221

Don't ask me why ESPN (the source for the OPS list) has one more qualified hitter in the AL than Fangraphs (the source for the wOBA list), but the point should be made here in terms of how poor Orlando Cabrera has been at the plate – new "Era of the Pitcher" or not – as he ranks at the bottom of offensive statistics that measure more meaningful numbers than BA or RBI or some other "back-of-the-baseball-card" stats. Further, if Fangraphs is truly "Manny Acta's favorite website", don't think that the struggles of The OC are lost on him (or the Front Office, who I'm surprised hasn't stepped in here), as much as Acta praises the influence of Uncle Orlando in the clubhouse.

Regardless, you already know how bad The OC has been (particularly recently) simply by watching the games, but those lists are pointed out to put the proper context around just how bad he has been at the plate for the Tribe. But that's not where this ends, as he's costing the Indians games with his bat AND (even more obvious to the naked eye) with his glove, something that's becoming more and more apparent with each passing game. Realizing that it is just one play in a 162-game season, Monday's should-have-been-DP that turned into a 2-run play in which The OC should have been saddled with 2 errors on one play, turning the tide of the game and unraveling Carmona (more on this later) to the point that a win simply wasn't going to happen.

While the "intangibles" and "imparted wisdom" card can be played by the organization, with Hafner out of the lineup (probably all month) and with the rest of the offensive contributors not named Asdrubal still prone to stretches of hot and/or cold, the Indians need to be maximizing their lineup in any way possible. Even if that means incremental improvement, the Indians need to explore this because, again, a replacement for Cabrera doesn't register as "development" for the youngster that arrives, but likely as "improvement" for the lineup and the team. If the team wants to keep Uncle Orlando content to some degree, maybe they institute the convoluted platoon that was suggested here almost two weeks ago with Phelps playing "at 2B and 3B with days at DH when he's not in the field", particularly against RHP, who have eaten The OC (.513 OPS vs. RHP) alive this year.

Honestly, I don't know what Cord Phelps could do in MLB or if he brings immediate "improvement", though he certainly has torn through the International League as a switch-hitting natural 2B who has only made himself into a more valuable asset with his newfound versatility.

What I do know is that the Indians' worst everyday player right now is Orlando Cabrera, and that the organization has Phelps (and Kipnis) sitting there waiting in Columbus for the chance to perhaps provide the same internal upgrade that Asdrubal Cabrera did in 2007 when he replaced Josh Barfield as the everyday 2B (seriously…Barfield was the Opening Day 2B for a team that almost went to the World Series) to improve the team without having to go outside the organization for that upgrade.

Maybe the Indians don't want to upset the chemistry of a winning team, but they're going to have to make a change at some point as Uncle Orlando continues to flounder at the plate and in the field, and the question becomes when a good time to make a change will present itself?

How about now?

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As mentioned above one of the effects of The OC's defense was on full display on Monday night as a misplayed groundball turned into a game-changer as Fausto Carmona become completely unhinged on the mound, as the thought that existed just a few weeks ago (in this space) that Fausto had returned to some degree to his 2007 form looks to be slipping away. While most quantify Carmona's starts as "Bad Fausto" and "Good Fausto", it is actually more likely that both personas take the mound together (I know, this is invoking a little Robert Louis Stevenson here) and that Fausto is actually affected by what's happening in the game instead of appearing in different incarnations from start to start.

This has been fairly obvious as Carmona's inability to limit damage this year has been his undoing. As a scout told B-Pro's John Perrotto on Carmona , "He's slipped into most of his old bad habits: no command, letting innings get out of control, getting rattled on the mound. He's a very frustrating pitcher. You know the talent is there, but he beats himself too many times."

Whether it takes a scout or not to see that and articulate it…that's about it, right?
But that idea that Carmona lets "innings get out of control" is what needs to be put under the magnifying glass here as some alarming numbers were recently noticed in terms of Carmona's performance with the bases empty versus Carmona's performance with runners on base.

First we have Fausto's line of how opposing hitters fare with bases empty:
.191 BA / .254 OBP / .275 SLG / .529 OPS with 13 BB and 35 K in 193 PA

Fantastic, right?
He's struck out 18% of the batters he's faced while only walking 6% of the hitters how face him with the bases empty.

But…then, something happens to Fausto when runners get on base as his "Mr. Hyde" emerges with a vengeance, to the tune of opposing hitters posting this line against him this year with any base occupied:
.348 BA / .403 OBP / .617 SLG / 1.020 OPS with 9 BB and 15 K in 131 PA

Look at that again in comparison to the line above and realize that the sample sizes are similar,

if not exact, and that Fausto has been absolutely crushed when facing hitters with runners on base. Even more telling, his BB/PA stays the same (6%) with runners on, but his K/PA drops from 18% all the way to 11% simply based on whether anyone is standing on the bases around him. Additionally, he gives up harder hits with men on base as the .617 SLG against with runners on is the highest among qualified MLB starters.

Perhaps this is oversimplifying things, but the words from the scout telling Perrotto that Carmona has reverted to his bad habits, lets his emotions get the best of him, and allows bad innings to snowball on him (and yes, that was me paraphrasing) bears out in the numbers of how disparate Carmona's numbers are when facing hitters with the bases empty and with runners on base. The words of the scout (directly, not paraphrasing) that, "He's a very frustrating pitcher. You know the talent is there, but he beats himself too many times" have certainly bore themselves out in front of our eyes, particularly recently.

Maybe the Indians can figure out if this is an issue that comes about from Carmona pitching out of the stretch (hopefully) or if it is simply a mental hurdle that Fausto needs to leap over (again, as his OPS against last year was .613) in the attempt to provide some semblance of consistency for the Tribe's starters.

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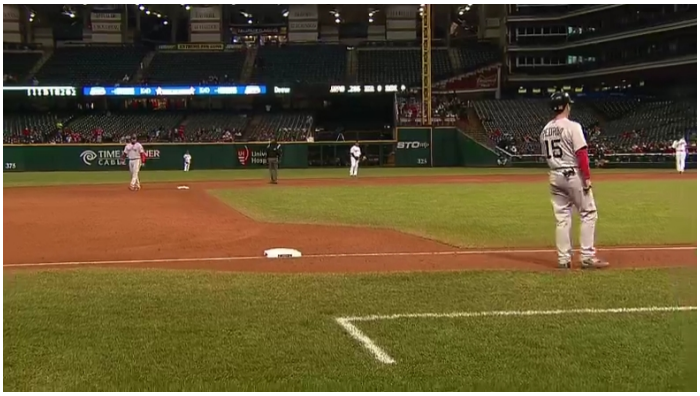
Finally, in light of the Indians getting ready to welcome the AL Defending Champion Rangers to town, I thought it would be interesting to pass along a little blurb from Peter Gammons in his most recent piece at MLB.com. While the main crux of the piece is about the role that scouts play in recognizing talent from other organization (and you'd be right to assume that he hits on the Benuardo deals there, among others that the Tribe has consummated recently), Sweet Pete drops this on you
:
MLB was very concerned about the Cleveland franchise because of the dramatic demographic changes in the area from the 1990s, but despite dreadful weather, the Indians are seeing the benefits of having the best record in the game. Their attendance is up, merchandise is up 100 percent and, perhaps most importantly, their television ratings are up more than 100 percent. During one game last weekend with the Reds, one out of every four televisions in the market was tuned to the Indians game.



This is interesting for a couple of reasons in as much as Gammons has long had an…um, admiration for the Indians' Front Office and regularly uses quotes from Shapiro in his pieces.

That said, it makes you wonder whether Gammons is using Shapiro as his source for MLB being “very concerned about the Cleveland franchise” as well as causing the imagination to wander if the Indians did not get out to their fast start.

While the attendance issue seemed like an easy talking point for weeks for the local and national media to harp upon, this revelation from Gammons certainly puts some perspective into perhaps what could have been if the Indians had not taken such a commanding lead in the AL Central in the early going of 2011. Going further on that, the numbers that Gammons references here are not only impressive because of the increase, but because the reference point from which they’ve improved must have been at some pretty low levels. By that I mean that if merchandise is up 100% and ratings are up 100% as well, the levels from whence they came could have been even lower than the most pessimistic projection might have been.

Though I’ll hold off on any intimation that these first few months of baseball saved baseball in Cleveland, if the first few months of the 2008 season set the Indians on a rapid descent, perhaps the first few months of the 2011 season will serve as the turning point to send them upwards once again.