As the Indians' grip of Interleague play loosens, it has become more and more apparent that the Indians' season is going to be paced by the success (or lack thereof) of their starting rotation. Certainly, the offense picking up the pace is a welcome respite from the ineffectiveness that was on display for the better part of a month and regardless of who the hitting coach is (and raise your hand if you saw that one coming, Bueller…Bueller…), the Indians' rotation holds the key to keeping the team in enough games to allow their uneven and inconsistent offense to find its footing.

Over the course of three days, the Indians' rotation was on display at its best and most promising as Carlos Carrasco mowed his way through the Pirates' lineup, lending optimism for the present and the future…a feeling that was hard to find on Monday night after Fausto Carmona was bullied by the Rockies en route to another question-inducing loss for Carmona. In the matter of three days, the Indians saw their "ace" of the future perhaps become the "ace" of the present, then had to sit and watch the pitcher who was once thought to be the "ace" of the rotation devolve into little more than a shell of his former self and deeper and deeper into the abyss.

That said (and attempting to start on the Bright Side of Life), while the recent success of Carlos Carrasco has been both unexpected and welcome, does everyone realize what he's put together in his last three outings, as he's twirled some beauties against the Twins, the Yankees, and the Pirates?

If you want to say it's the Twins and the Pirates, that's fine…as long as you acknowledge that the Twins are 14-3 in May and that the Pirates are actively poking the .500 mark while

accepting that Carrasco shut down the Yankee lineup in the 1-0 victory. Regardless, here is what Carrasco has done over his last three starts, with the inclusion of a 3-game line from another pitcher (whose name you may recognize) providing some proper perspective:
Cookie Carrasco – 21 2/3 IP
0.42 ERA, 2.07 FIP, 7.06 K/9, 2.08 BB/9, 0.78 WHIP, .399 OPS against

CP Lee – 24 IP
0.38 ERA, 1.82 FIP, 7.88 K/9, 1.88 BB/9, 0.75 WHIP, .370 OPS against

Yeah, really…
Now Please don't take that comparison as an assertion that Carlos Carrasco is as good as Cliff Lee or that the two are on equal footing as those compilations are over the course of three starts, not three years. Going further than that, it was just a couple of weeks ago that I was comparing Carrasco to Kyle Drabek and now here's a comparison between Carrasco and…gulp, CP Lee.

Regardless, it speaks to the rarified airspace that Carrasco is currently cruising in as he's been as good as anyone in MLB over his last three starts. In fact, if you want to expand the timeframe into the month of June, Carrasco still has the 9th lowest OPS against among all MLB starters in the month at .510 OPS against.

Is this sustainable for Cookie?
Probably not at this level…as you have to remember that he's only 24 and still adjusting to MLB (his ERA+ on the season is still 98), although he's succeeding in a sustainable manner as his groundball percentage (63.8%) for the month of June is the highest in the AL and the confidence and fire that he's shown on the mound certainly feel like he's growing into a viable MLB starter, at the very least, with his ceiling certainly rising.

Carrasco is going to be up and down this season, just as any young pitcher is but seeing the heights to which Carrasco has climbed this month starts to give a peek into what could be with Cookie, particularly considering his youth. That youth is what is important to keep in mind here as (just to throw some more context out there) when Cliff Lee was 24 years old, he threw more innings in AAA than he did in MLB in 2004.

While it is true that LHP generally tend to develop slower as pitchers – all of which is the reason that there is so much excitement for the 23-year-old LHP Scott Barnes who, in his last 6 starts in AAA has posted a 1.80 ERA, 1.11 WHIP, and (this is the important part) 44 K in 35 IP as he's looking to more than just a PTBNL – Carrasco is thriving with less than 150 IP under his belt, meaning that the maturation that was often thought to be unattainable for him to harness his raw talent may actually be within his grasp.

Obviously, Carrasco is going to have his days when he looks like a 24-year-old with less than 150 MLB IP under his belt, but the Indians unquestionably have a building block in their rotation and – this is important – he is a young pitcher whose workload has been built up to the point that he should be under no great inning restrictions this year. By that I mean that Carrasco threw 173 1/3 innings in 2009 between the Minors and MLB and tossed 201 2/3 innings last

year between Cleveland and Columbus. To this point, he's toed the slab for 79 innings, meaning that the Indians shouldn't have to worry about keeping inning counts down for Carrasco – which could be a major factor in the team's ability to stay in the AL Central race.

With Carrasco pitching like he is with every one of his 4 pitches being among the most effective among AL starters this month, it's easy to see the Indians hanging around in the AL Central race because of their young starting pitching, with the young arm acquired for a past Cy Young Award winner leading the way.

On the flip side of things (and invoking the name of the pitcher who finished 4th in the Cy Young vote after the 2007 season), Fausto Carmona could not be more of a trainwreck right now as Monday night's game showed all too clearly why Carmona remains a wrecking ball wrapped in an enigma. Looking past the sweating…um, issue that I've addressed in this space before – and check out that picture sent to me by my TCF colleague Nino Colla of the sweat actually flying off his head while wearing a baseball hat that generally…you know, contains sweat – and into the crux of what has become an ongoing problem with Carmona, here's what Fausto's manager and catcher had to say after the implosion
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First Acta:
"He just dug his own grave, basically…He lost his focus. I can't say anything but that."

Then Marson:
"That inning killed him. I thought he was going to roll…It was frustrating. You get those first two guys out on five pitches -- two quick outs -- and then a two-out walk and everything broke loose."

If you were to write a book about Fausto Carmona's 2011 season, I would assert that Marson's line - "And Everything Broke Loose" - would be a pretty good title for what has happened with pretty much all of Carmona's starts…and particularly recently. Just when you think he's about to shift into cruise control and mow through some batters, showing the talent that he DOES possess, he allows a snowball to turn into an avalanche and before you know it, he's buried.

This was pointed out a few weeks ago with Carmona, but if you think that things "break loose" for Carmona once guys get on base…your eyes don't deceive you as his performance with the bases empty and with runners – any amount of runners on base – is nothing short of stunning.
Carmona – 2011
.623 OPS Against with Bases Empty in 248 PA
1.057 OPS Against with Runners On in 176 PA
Want some perspective on that?
One hitter in MLB has an OPS over 1.057 and it's Jose Bautista, who seems to be playing Baseball Simulator 1.000
out there as he's sitting on a 1.133 OPS. That said, the player with the second highest OPS in MLB is Prince Fielder, who currently holds a 1.031 OPS. Conversely, Seattle SS Brendan Ryan has a .622 OPS, "good" for 146th among qualified MLB hitters.

So…if I may step up to my "Jump to Conclusions" map, with the bases empty, hitters are about as effective as Brendan Ryan against Fausto. Once a base is filled with a runner, the hitter has performed at a level somewhere between Jose Bautista and Prince Fielder against Carmona.

To say that things "break loose" on Fausto does not quite to justice to what happens to Carmona on the mound with runners on, if you just look at some of these numbers:
Runner on 1st only – 1.153 OPS Against
Runner on 3rd only – 1.205 OPS Against
Runners on 2nd and 3rd – 1.027 OPS Against
Bases Loaded – 1.767 OPS Against

While that last number (OPS Against with Bases Loaded) is the result of only 12 Plate Appearances, in the 12 times that Carmona has faced a hitter with the bases loaded this year, he's given up 7 hits, 4 of which were doubles. So, in one out of every 3 times Carmona has faced a hitter with the bases loaded, that batter hit a double.
Excuse me while I sit down to properly process that...

What all of this means is that Carmona simply can't pitch out of trouble and while a majority of that issue is between his ears, that is both settling and disturbing. It's settling because it lends credence to the idea that Carmona's problems are not physical and dismisses the idea that he's lacking in actual talent. What makes it all the more disturbing is that this mental "block" that Carmona has exhibited with runners on base doesn't seem to be one that can be easily fixed nor does it seem to be one that is improving. All told, Carmona's ERA over his last 8 starts is 8.87 and opponents have posted a .961 OPS against him in the 44 2/3 innings and for a team whose divisional lead has evaporated and who needs to be fighting for every inch that they can claim in this divisional race, the inclusion of Carmona in the rotation gets harder to justify with each passing start.

What to do with him becomes the greater question as the Indians simply cannot afford to trot Carmona out there every 5th day, knowing that the avalanche is gaining momentum at the top of the mountain, waiting to bury Carmona. Obviously, he's out of options so they can't simply option him without exposing him to waivers and the idea of moving him into the bullpen means that the team can only really use him in VERY specific spots as a reliever as the role of long

man wouldn't seem to suit him because…you know, he stinks with guys on base and long men usually come into games with men on base.

So what do the Indians do with Carmona?
As was suggested on Monday night's Smoke Signals , maybe the Indians skip Carmona a couple of times in the rotation since they have days off coming up in an attempt to get his head right. Going back to what Acta said after Monday's game , it certainly sounds like they're going to try to ride it out with Fausto and see if he can overcome his mental issues to work his way back to the success that his talent makes him capable of:
"This guy threw 210 innings for us last year -- good ones…It's not as easy as it looks. This is not fantasy baseball. You can't just get rid of him and bring somebody else over here. He's one of our guys. He's got good stuff.
"We just have to continue to work with him and throw him out there every five days."
You can almost hear the frustration dripping off of even Acta's words as the Indians seem to be close to the end of their rope with Carmona, knowing that the talent is there even if the execution is not.

What that means for his future with the team (particularly as they attempt to keep pace with the Tigers and keep the White Sox and now the Twins at bay) remains to be seen. No longer is the question whether Fausto's option for 2012 will be picked up by the team, the question that starts to grow louder with each passing start for a team that still finds themselves in the middle of a playoff race is if Fausto makes it into August with the team.

Perhaps nothing is to be gleaned from two games which seemed to display "what could be" and "what may never be again", but whether Carmona is able to right himself – and how the Indians handle the situation if he is unable to – is as important to the success of the Indians as the sustained performance of Carrasco down the stretch. While the answers to which direction the seasons for Carmona and Carrasco will reveal themselves over the course of the coming months, those revelations figure to lend more than a glimpse as to whether the Indians can stay in the AL Central race.