As has been the case all season long, these Indians just keep hanging around. After a 14-inning tough loss in the Windy City, the Indians pulled another rabbit out of their hat as suddenly "Good" Fausto appeared in The Cell. Though he's been peeking his head out since he returned from the DL (prompted by that belly-flop in Cincy, lest you forget), Wednesday night provided the best evidence of what "Good" Fausto still has the talent to do as he shut down the White Sox while saving the bullpen at a time when the Indians needed it most. Just when everyone was readying themselves to watch the White Sox pass the Tribe up in the standings, the Indians did what they have done all year long and continued to remain not just relevant, but IN this AL Central race.

With that, and with a weekend away looming for me, let's get some Tomahawks in the air…

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Though I may have these numbers wrong, it seems that the Indians have begun a stretch in which have started to play 140 games in 25 days…or at least it's something like that. Well, of course it's playing 45 games in the last 43 days of the season as the Indians have two off days from now until the end of the season and three doubleheaders. While this is all old news, remember that whole idea that the Indians' rotation is full of young arms whose inning counts may become worrisome down the stretch?

Well, the Indians' flurry of a schedule (with the games likely meaning something) means that things could get kind of interesting in terms of starting pitching down the stretch. What is particularly notable is that the Indians are likely to play two doubleheaders in the second-to-last week of the season against divisional rivals as they have a doubleheader scheduled for September 20th against the White Sox and figure to have another doubleheader with the Twins when Minnesota is in town from 9/23 to 9/25. There is the doubleheader against the M's next

week, but with guys like Masterson and Tomlin likely to be under some sort of inning restraints (as I'm sure the Indians are hesitant to overuse either), it's going to be interesting to see how the Tribe counteracts what will be mounting inning counts as well as a schedule that allows no rest for the weary.

Of course, the Indians have depth that they should be able to rely on, but how that utilize that depth (particularly in important games in September) bears watching. While there was some consternation a while back about whether Carrasco or Huff was going to be the 5th starter on this team, don't you get the feeling that the Indians could be going about seven or eight arms deep down the stretch in terms of handling all of these starts?

By no means am I saying that the Indians are going to evolve into some odd 7-or-8-man-rotation as…well, that's just crazy but the Indians are going to have to begin to slot these arms for the next 6 weeks with an eye on winning now, but also not burning anyone out for the future. If you add Carrasco to the mix from the DL, the Indians could utilize a modified 6-man rotation (assuming Carrasco is healthy) to keep everyone both sharp and fresh…if those two terms aren't mutually exclusive.

Though many are not eagerly anticipating Cookie's return and are content to continue with Dave Huff in the rotation, realize that I'll be as elated as anyone in terms of Huff finally "figuring it out" as I wore the conductor's hat on the Dave Huff Train for quite some time. Maybe he has developed that cutter to complement his fastball or maybe that quicker delivery has allowed him to command his fastball in a way that he previously had not been able to. Perhaps after years of bickering with the organization, Huff and the Tribe have seen eye-to-eye on how to best utilize his talents…we're not going to know and it remains to be seen if his recent success is a harbinger of things to come or merely an illusion.

Regardless, let's not lose sight of some perspective in terms of this recent success and how it compares to what Carrasco did earlier in the season:

Huff – 3 starts from July 18th to August 2nd
0.51 ERA, 1.02 WHIP, 7.6 K/9, 2.0 BB/9, .549 OPS against in 17 2/3 IP

Carrasco – 5 starts from June 7th to June 29th
0.98 ERA, 0.74 WHIP, 6.9 K/9, 1.23 BB/9, .477 OPS against in 36 2/3 IP

Though Carrasco's immaturity and struggles prior to his (second) DL stint have colored the recent perception of Carrasco, let's not forget that stretch of 5 starts that Carrasco (who is still 24) put forth before we start immediately anointing Huff (who is 26) as the better option for now and for the future. Certainly, Huff's left-handedness is an asset and his recent success is something that the Indians should be looking to capitalize on to see if he can build on it, but if Carrasco is available to contribute in the month of September, the Indians should be able to work him into the mix, as well as some of the youngsters that are still plying their trade in Columbus.

With that said (and just to get back to the original idea of utilizing rotational depth), with inning counts perhaps becoming an issue for a couple of the current starters (and Masterson and Tomlin most notably), the Indians are going to lean on some of their starting pitching depth. That likely means that Huff AND Carrasco (assuming health) see time on the rubber in September as well as guys like Zach McAllister and Jeanmar Gomez as the Indians can take advantage of the expanded rosters in September to fill out their pitching staff and not completely exhaust their arms in the stretch run.

For all of the talk that this might come down to the final couple of weeks, it is worth noting that the Indians' depth in their starting rotation (and I do mean beyond the five currently in the rotation) could be a difference-maker for the Tribe as Carrasco, Gomez, and McAllister all represent viable (if not wildly provocative) options for a team that's going to need them. Gomez has a 2.45 ERA in Columbus and a 2.64 ERA in his last 10 starts while McAllister still has a 3.27 ERA and a 1.18 WHIP (he's only walked 27 hitters in 134 2/3 IP) on the season for the Clippers. Going further on McAllister, his recent performance (3.47 ERA, 1.29 WHIP, 4.00 K/BB ratio in his last 10 starts) show that he's been no fluke in AAA and that he could be up to the task of taking some September starts that inspire more confidence than what the other divisional rivals (namely the Tigers) may be trotting out there down the stretch.

Look, I harbor no grand illusions that Gomez or McAllister is going to put the Indians on their back for the stretch run and I have no idea if what they've done in AAA will translate to MLB success in September (and inning counts apply to guys like McAllister and Gomez as well), but the Indians have some depth among starters that could serve them well in the final 6 weeks in terms of protecting their current five and augmenting the active roster with spot starts in doubleheaders or during what will be a grueling end to their schedule.

The team is going to have to walk the fine line of caution to protect their arms from firing too many bullets this year and prevent any future downside from overuse this year while emptying the organizational magazine to get as much usage out of as many arms as possible down the

stretch…all while trying to remain where they've been all year – in a pennant race.

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By now you certainly know that Jim Thome hit his 600th HR as the pieces about his HOF legitimacy (which seem odd to me, in light of his career stats) and how he left Cleveland have been flying around these Interwebs. Since pretty much every angle has been explored, for the historical perspective and the context on Thome as a hitter, Posnanski and Castrovince (unsurprisingly) nailed it, while
Andrew Humphries at LGT
provided an excellent synopsis together of Thome's departure (reminding us of that 2001 and 2002 season…particularly some things that I don't remember) from Cleveland.

Perhaps the best thing that I found written about Thome (although the piece is about much more than Thome) was an article written a couple of months ago by native Clevelander Pete Beatty of Pitchers and Poets and, soon enough, The Classical , as he takes a long view of Cleveland as a whole and the Indians in the context of the region. The whole piece is worth a read, and this paragraph on Thome gives you a taste as to the level of prose that is on display from Beatty:
Jim Thome's swing has an eerie quality of wind to it. It's a standard-issue slugger's swing, apart from the slightly ominous pointing with his bat toward right-center as a timing device. Early in his career, Thome's cut had a touch of Reggie Jackson's lower-body contortions in it. But as Thome matured, he learned to control his hips, and that's where his unearthly power begins. When Thome really connects, it's almost like he's swinging an oar—the balls seem to lift up on a gust of warm air, skipping out of the frame of the centerfield camera in an instant. The prevailing winds in Cleveland are southwesterly—which just so happens to point toward right-center at Progressive nee Jacobs Field. Maybe Thome communes with the god of wind. But even in stadiums that aren't blessed by weather patterns, his booming drives (and frequent strikeouts) very nearly alter the barometric pressure.

In terms of Thome's legacy as an Indian, there are unquestionably disparate opinions on Thome in Cleveland among fans, despite the nearly universal belief that Thome is a "good guy" around MLB. My sense is that Thome will return here one day to the adulation of Cleveland fans, probably as time passes and as Indians' fans realize the extent of Thome's career achievements. It's likely that Tribe fans will try to attach themselves to Thome once again after

he retires and claim him, once again, as he prepares himself to go to Cooperstown. Everyone wants to be associated with greatness, and in no place is that more true than on the North Coast.

Despite the cavalcade of articles on Thome, I was actually oddly unmoved by Thome's feat in as much as I don't harbor much resentment for Thome and the decision that he made nearly a decade ago and he's been away from an Indians' uniform (playing for divisional rivals, no less) long enough that I've lost the connection that I probably once felt with him. Perhaps because I've rooted against his teams for the past few years as he played for the White Sox and Twins, I have difficulty conjuring up too much emotion for his accomplishment or pushing away the more recent memories of him playing for Minnesota and Chicago as opposed to his stretch of greatness on The Reservation.

As odd as it sounds, I'm generally more interested in guys that currently don the Chief and, once they move, they simply become MLB players for other teams for me…and not much else. Though it was painful to watch CC and Lee square off in Game 1 of the WS, it was difficult because it evoked emotions of what "should have been" in Cleveland and generated anger about the structure of MLB more than it did bring about any emotion about those two particular pitchers. As sad as it may sound, I've steeled myself from getting too emotionally invested in these guys because, as an Indians' fan, I kind of know how the characters in this story are going to change, so I remain interested in the script, not the actors.

Pages turn, new names are sewn onto the backs of Indians' jerseys, and (as difficult as it is to practice with a 4-year-old who knows every face, name, and number of the current Indians' team) my connection remains with the team instead of the individual players. Sure, it's rooting for laundry (and stories like this Hannahan one certainly introduce a human element that is hard to ignore), but when Thome left for Philadelphia, he eventually moved to the back of my mind as I'll certainly remember him for the good seasons that he had in Cleveland and the good memories that he burned into my synapses, but my reaction to him hitting his 600th HR was largely one of detached admiration for the accomplishment. That he hit more HR as an Indian than anyone else is not lost on me; it just doesn't interest me all that much right now.

Where that puts me in Andrew Clayman's "Six Degrees of Thome Nation" , I'm not sure (maybe between #4 and #5) and perhaps that will change when he goes into Cooperstown, wearing the Chief and sporting that goofy smile, but that's a long way off from now and since we're going to have to endure countless meaningless "debates" about the merits of his career as a HOF player, particularly in the context of the Steroid Era, I'm sure I'll be tired of it when that time comes around as well…

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Now that the Indians' draft signings are complete and with Kipnis and Chisenhall in Cleveland and Al White and Drew Pomz in Colorado (well…Tulsa), there is one striking thing when taking an overview of the current Indians prospects, as there is an unquestioned gap in the Indians upper minor leagues in terms of talent that could be arriving to Cleveland anytime soon, particularly with potential impact position players and starters. This is to say, there aren't really

any potential impact position players or starters that are on the cusp of coming to Cleveland…or that are even above Kinston.

Sure, there are a TON of potential bullpen arms in Columbus and Akron as well as the aforementioned McAllisters and Gomezes and arms of that ilk and I'd still like to dream on Jason Knapp, Hector Rondon or Nick Weglarz getting healthy, but the reality is that the lineup and starting rotation that is currently on the 25-man roster is pretty much the team that the Indians' Front Office has cast their lot with for the coming years. Most of the guys that have the potential to make an impact in their system (the high draft picks and bonus babies) like LaVon Washington, TJ House, Tony Wolters, or Alex Lavisky, and now Francisco Lindor and Dillon Howard are a LONG way from Cleveland. As much as we'd like to hope that one (or a couple) of these guys can catch fire and fly up the ladder, the truth is that the Indians have been drafting some of these high-upside, projectable guys in the past few years that are unquestionably young and also unquestionably raw.

This is exciting from the sense of it seems to represent a departure from the era of college players with limited ceilings that littered the Indians' drafts for the better part of a decade, but the risk in drafting high ceiling players comes with an element of risk that these guys don't pan out and, even if they do, that they're going to take a while to make it up to MLB. It's easy to forget that these guys are 17 to 21 years old playing in Lake County or Kinston and while their numbers may pale compared to 23-year-olds playing at those levels, their ability to compete against older players (and thrive against older players) is what separates guys that could legitimately become impact players from guys that project (in a best case scenario) as a 4th OF or a swing starter. Maybe it's a little scary to know that the attrition rate is so high with any MLB draftee, but the Indians are taking their chances that guys like Washington, Lavisky, House, Lindor, and Howard will develop into players that could sit at the top or middle of the order or rotation instead of simply providing the depth that the drafts of a decade produced.

How it all plays out remains to be seen (and Al had a great line in his tremendous draft recap , essentially saying that we won't know about these guys for 5 years…which is terrifying on some level), but the Indians' scouts have identified and selected some players in recent years that have moved quickly up to MLB and have the potential to make an impact (for either Colorado or the Tribe) and they've suddenly earned a bit of a benefit of the doubt on these selections.

There's a good possibility that Lindor and Howard won't even enter the conversation of potential Indians' contributors until 2014 or 2015 (and that's actually being optimistic), but the lower-level top-end talent that the Indians have now assembled could make an impact in Cleveland…just not for a while.

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While some could certainly look at that last missive as a jumping-off point for the Indians NOT making the Ubaldo deal, it brings into focus the idea not only that the Indians are currently playing with the team that they expect to have for the next few years (windows…windows), but also how young the guys that are currently on the roster really are. Obviously the whole "under club control" thing has been hashed and re-hashed by many (mostly me…and here's a reminder), but

just as important as how long these guys are under club control is how young much of the current roster is and how, while some of them have some AB under their belt, most are still cutting their teeth in MLB.

Certainly, some are going to plateau or regress (ahem…MaTola), but take a look at the ages for the Indians' current regulars or players that you can easily see filling a role for the end of this season and next year, if not the next few years:

Santana – 25
Marson – 25
LaPorta – 26
Kipnis – 24
Asdrubal – 25
Chisenhall – 22
Brantley – 24
Choo – 28
Sizemore – 28
Hafner – 34

If you want to talk about a bench, you have Cord Phelps (24), Jason Donald (26) and Zeke Carrera (24) to fill out the roster in an…um, cost-effective manner. Sure, Choo and Sizemore are 28 and Hafner is "old" (which feels odd to type since he's my age), but the Indians have FIVE regulars in their lineup that are 25 or younger and that doesn't count Marson who could realistically be a regular next year, depending upon what the Indians do with their C/1B situation this off-season.

For some perspective on that, the Tigers have two regulars that are 25 or younger (Avila and

Austin Jackson…the overrated Delmon Young does not count here, because he was about to get DFA'd in Minnesota) and the White Sox have one (Beckham), as do the Twins (Revere) in their respective lineups. The Royals are a completely different story with their embarrassment of young talent, but (again) the Indians have FIVE regulars in their lineup that are 25 or younger on a team that is contending right now, not counting Marson who has turned into a regular over the last couple of weeks.

Of course, the pitchers are just as young , but we'll limit this conversation to the young lineup coming together as a group. While the comparisons to the 2004 team are inevitable for this group of players in terms of a team exceeding expectations and getting a taste of winning, it is worth noting that the 2004 club was a much more experienced club (read: older) and the young players that would form that offensive core for the Tribe in the mid-2000s were still looking for extended opportunities in 2004. Yes, 2004 was the first year that Victor, Hafner, and Coco Crisp asserted themselves, but a 22-year-old Peralta played in 8 games in 2004 and a 21-year-old Grady played in 43 games that year.

The offense of that 2004 team was still full of relative placeholders like Broussard and Belliard and Lawton with a bench that was comprised of ne'er-weres or ne'er-would-bes. There were the Alex Escobars and Ryan Ludwicks and Jody Geruts on that team that were thought to have some potential (particularly Escobar), but the Indians were still transitioning to seeing their young talent come up and – most importantly – mature and gel together, something that really wouldn't happen until 2005. Of course, it is worth mentioning that the 2004 team got to within 1 game of 1st place when they were 8 games over .500 on August 14th of that year, only to see the bottom fall out to the point that they were 16 games back and 6 games under .500 a little more than a month later. However, the Indians of 2004 were still largely a patchwork team of scrap heap signings surrounding some important pieces that were emerging.

For proof of this, check out the lineup for the 2004 Tribe team that was only 1 game out in mid-August as they faced the division-leading Twins:
8-15-2004 vs. MIN
Belliard – 2B
Vizquel – SS
Lawton – RF
Blake – 3B
Hafner – DH
Josh Phelps – 1B
Crisp – LF
Sizemore – CF
Laker – C
Sure, Victor would come in as a PH later in the game for Laker, but compare that lineup to the one that we're seeing on a nearly every night basis for the Tribe in which the Indians' hitters are young, talented, and highly-regarded.

Certainly, the likes of Chiz and Kipnis and Santana and Brantley are going to experience their growing pains, just as it is possible that LaPorta (and others) are going to go the way of Josh Phelps or Alex Escobar or that some of the young arms follow the Jason Davis path out of

Cleveland. But the pieces certainly seem to be lined up on the Indians' chess board for the remainder of this season and certainly beyond.

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With a giant weekend series looming in Detroit, I'll be watching from afar as I head up to Milwaukee for the annual mid-August trip for Irish Fest. But fear not as you will be in good hands as Al will be taking the captain's wheel this weekend while the Indians attempt to continue to hang around this winnable AL Central, with their destiny in their own hands.