Paul is off enjoying the majesty of Milwaukee this weekend, so I'm filling in on this Lazy Sunday here in the midst of the pursuit for the AL Central crown. Stop me if you've heard this before, but it's going to be a frantic race to the finish, as the Wahoo Warriors have 43 games in 41 days to close out the season. Battling Central Division foes, injuries, weather and now the schedule, if these Indians can end up with a better record than the Tigers and White Sox, they'll have earned their playoff berth like few teams in recent memory.

Will that crucible serve to harden their resolve and forge them for the playoffs? Or will it crush their spirit and see them fall short of the postseason? We'll just have to see, as we're getting a little ahead of ourselves here in mid-August. So on to all of the news that's fit to link…

The biggest news this weekend is that 2B Jason Kipnis has found himself on the 15 day DL, retroactive to August 14. Kipnis had missed a few games with general "left side soreness" that he had begun to feel even before his 5-5 game back on August 10. He was in the lineup and ready to play Friday night against the Tigers, but pulled his hamstring running in the outfield just a few minutes before the first pitch. Kipnis had provided a nice boost to a sagging Indians offense, hitting .279/.347/.603 with 6 HR, 4 2B and 11 RBI in his 18 games since replacing the inept Orlando Cabrera in the Indians lineup. He posted 41 total bases in those 18 games. Not to continue to defame Orlando Cabrera, but from June 2 until he was traded after July 30, the OC collected 43 total bases. So…yeah, Kipnis was a pretty significant upgrade for an offense that was in desperate need of an upgrade. To replace Kipnis on the 25-man roster, the Indians called up Luis Valbuena, who is distinctively Cabrera-esque at the plate. Jason Donald will likely

get the majority of the playing time at 2B, and he's been solid but unspectacular in the majors this year. So for those of you keeping score at home, that now makes Kipnis, Sizemore, Hafner, Choo, LaPorta, and Brantley who have missed time with injuries this year. I'm not normally one to complain about injuries, because they really are a part of the game, but this is just getting ridiculous.

Paulie C. himself did a great job capturing some of the challenges that the Indians will face down the stretch in this very space on Friday. It's going to be a tough row to hoe, there's no doubt about that. Before this season started, there was a lot of talk about the Indians farm system, and how it didn't really have a lot of "elite" talent but did have a lot more depth than most systems around baseball. That depth is going to allow the Indians to weather the storm of September, because when rosters expand on September 1, there are plenty of options in the upper levels of the system that can step right in and contribute. Starting pitchers for the doubleheaders are an obvious need, so you'll see guys like Jenmar Gomez and Zach McAllister get spot starts as needed. But the Indians will also need bullpen arms, so expect to see some/all of Josh Judy, Nick Hagadone, Zach Putnam and C.C. Lee. Zeke Carerra and Shelley Duncan will be up providing OF depth, and even when Kipnis comes back from injury Luis Valbuena and Cord Phelps will probably be around as utility infielders/pinch runners. The 2011 season is a great example of how a farm system feeds into a small market club to fill in for injuries (Sizemore/Choo), ineffectiveness (Orlando Cabrera) as well as providing depth down the stretch when the weather and schedule provide additional hurdles to clear. Would I rather the Indians play a more normal schedule down the stretch that would allow for regular rest? Of course. But Antonetti, Shapiro, Brad Grant and company have built a system through trades and the draft that puts the Indians in a much better position to weather the storm of this brutal schedule than most other teams around baseball. Will it push the Tribe to the postseason? Time will tell, but I'm a lot more confident right now than I would be if we had the Tigers or White Sox farm system to rely on.

Speaking of our Central Division foes, Adam Burke takes a unique look at the other four teams in the division, based on his dislike for each . I won't spoil the end result for you, but he and I agree on the team we dislike the most. Ok, I'll give you a hint…it's the team that poses and postures after each HR, to the point where they've been involved in at least one bench clearing brawl this year because of opposing pitchers taking exception to being shown up after each round tripper. Also, their closer dances on the mound like an idiot after every save. And the team name rhymes with Retroit Ligers.

Baseball Prospectus continues to update their computer-generated playoff projections after each game, and going into Saturday the Indians were given a 13.7% chance of making it to baseball's postseason. The Tigers have the best chance at 73.3%, but it's interesting to note that the percentages changed a combined 10.9% after Friday night's Tiger victory. One game

shifting the percentages that much tells me that even the computer really doesn't know what's going on, and despite the 3 in 4 chance it currently gives the Motor City Kitties, this is still anyone's division to step up an win. Well, anyone but the Twins and Royals, who have a combined 0.1% chance to make it to the promised land this season. I like checking BP's odds from time to time, because this isn't Keith Law doggedly adhering to his preseason prediction that the Indians won't make the playoffs. The computer is what it is, and has no bias. It takes in the information it is given and spits out a result. So I much prefer that as a reality check over reading someone with their own preconceived notion for what the Indians are vs what they should be. Personally, I think it's more along the lines of a 50/50 shot at this point, but I'm looking at it through Cleveland-tinted glasses so I probably can't be trusted to be objective either. For the eternal optimists out there, MLB has given the Indians permission to begin the process for printing/selling postseason tickets, and the Indians have begun the process to allow fans to register for the postseason ticket lottery. Get in now while the getting is good.

Speaking of playoff percentages, Jordan Bastain sat down and did something that I've always hated, ever since I was a little kid. He did math. Just by playing the percentages, Bastain figures it will take the Indians going around 25-16 the rest of the way out to win the division. As a .512 team right now, they project to go more like 22-19. Bastain delves deeper in the math, looking at home/road winning %, as well as winning % against specific teams remaining on the schedule, and by his math the Indians are projected to end the season at 84-78, below the Tigers and out of the playoffs. Kudos to Bastain for taking the time to break all of that down, as there's no way in Pittsburgh I'd have had the patience to do that. The bottom line is that the Indians are going to have to play at a clip much closer to their April/May edition than the June-August team that we've been watching of late.

Back in March, I openly advocated for David Huff to be the 5th starter on this team over Josh Tomlin. With every Tomlin start, that seemed like a worse and worse idea, one that I was hoping everyone forgot I ever had. Interestingly though, Huff seized the opportunity that was presented to him last month, and has pitched like he means to keep his rotation spot. With the small sample size alarm blaring in the background, allow me to present these numbers going into his start Saturday night in Detroit: 17 2/3 IP, 1 ER, 15 K, 4 BB, 14 H. That's good for an ERA+ of…wait for it…772. Admittedly, it has been just three starts for Huff, and he could easily go out there and throw a clunker his next time on the mound. But it is extremely encouraging to see the guy who struck out 37 and walked 34 in his 79 2/3 major league innings pitched in 2010 strike out almost a batter per inning and allow no more than a baserunner an inning here in 2011. Huff is still just 26 years old, is still probably the top lefty starter in the org, and could still be an important contributor for the Indians going forward. If you need a reminder that 26 is young, look no further than Cliff Lee, who didn't truly breakout and become the dominant force of nature that he is today until 2008, at age 29. Not saying by any stretch that I expect Huff to follow Lee's footsteps to the AL Cy Young award, but there are reasons for optimism here. Even with some regression looming, Huff can be expected to at the very least offer himself as an

option for the #5 spot in the rotation for the foreseeable future.

Speaking of the future, the deadline for signing 2011 draft picks has come and gone, and we can finally close the book on this year's edition of MLB's Rule 4 Draft. I wrote a recap of the Indians draft, one in which they were able to sign 17 of their top 20 picks and 29 of 50 overall. They spent $8.2 million on the draft, and gave big bonuses to their top two picks in order to get them signed, sealed and delivered. They spent $6.3 million in signing 9 of their top 10 picks, which was 156% of the recommended slot spending for picks 1-10. That brings me to a question I've been getting a lot recently; is Francisco Lindor the #1 prospect in the organization right now? In short, yes. When you take out Kipnis and Chisenhall, both of whom will likely lose their prospect standing by the end of this regular season, here's my current Indians top ten. I'm not going to lie, this was a tough list to put together, and it could change between now and March:

_ 1. **Francisco Lindor, SS:** Gold glove potential in the field, above-average hit tool and could develop average power. Toolsy player who is a leader on the field and works hard off of it. Just 17 years old though, so is a ways off from making an impact at the major league level.

2. **Dillon Howard, RHP:** Howard is a young, projectable arm who already throws a "heavy" sinking fastball that gets up to the mid-90s on the radar gun. He's a competitor on the mound, and could be a #2 pitcher in a playoff-caliber rotation.

3. **Tony Wolters, SS:** A teenager in a league where most players are coming out of college, Wolters started at shortstop in the New York Penn League all star game. A move to 2B

might be in his future, but either way his bat will play.

4. **Scott Barnes, LHP:** I'm not going to ding him for a leg injury, since his arm is healthy and effective. Was having a breakout season in Columbus and should be ready to pitch by the beginning of next season. Top starting pitching prospect aside from Howard in the org, and he's lefthanded.

5. **LeVon Washington, OF:** Washington has struggled with some nagging injuries and didn't have a great season for low-A Lake County, but the tools are there. He was drawing Carl Crawford comps before this season, and he's still just 19 years old. There's still quite a bit to like here, despite the sub-.700 OPS this year.

6. **Nick Weglarz, OF:** One of the few power-hitting prospects in the upper levels of the org, Wegz just can't stay healthy. But although it feels like he's been around forever, the big Canadian is still just 23. He could play all year in Columbus next season and still be in line for a big league debut at age 25 in 2013. Guys with his size, power and patience don't grow on trees.

7. **C.C. Lee, RHP:** Lee is at the top of an impressive stable of relief pitchers at the upper levels of the Indians system. He attacks hitters from a variety of arm angles with a mid-90s fastball and a nasty slider that can make righties look downright foolish. He's struck out 92 hitters in 64 2/3 innings this year between Akron and Columbus.

8. **Felix Sterling, RHP:** Sterling is a 6'3", 200lb power righty out of the Dominican Republic. He doesn't turn 19 until March 2012, and is 2-3 with a 4.63 ERA in 5 starts for low-A Lake County. That puts him well ahead of the developmental curve, and his stuff should continue to improve as he gets older and stronger.

9. **Nick Hagadone, LHP:** The top lefhanded relief prospect in the system, Hagadone can get his fastball up to the high-90s. He's thrown 64 1/3 innings this year between Akron and Columbus, and has recorded 71 strikeouts against just 21 walks. That's a dramatic improvement from last year, when he walked 63 in 85 2/3 innings coming off Tommy John surgery.

10. **Chun Chen, C:** His defense will never be more than adequate, but his bat is solid and would be plus for a catcher at the major league level. After a breakout season in 2010 that saw him post a .924 OPS, he's been good but not great for Akron this year, putting up a .265/.327/.456 line. Still just 22 though, Chen still has a bright future in the organization.

Just Missed: Cord Phelps, Zach McAllister, Zach Putnam, Rob Bryson, Jason Knapp, Ronny Rodriguez

The Indians farm system will garner reviews in 2012 similar to those prior to the ones that we saw prior to 2011; solid depth, but not much "elite" talent. Lindor and Howard both have a chance to be top-100 guys overall, but that's probably it. But Brad Grant's drafts since 2008 give plenty of reasons for optimism. Whether they become stars, trade chips for stars, solid regulars or even just affordable replacements, these will be the building blocks for the Indians teams of the future. Like it or not, Cleveland is not going to start signing other team's dominant free agents to megadeals anytime soon. As the warden learned the hard way in Shawshank Redemption, salvation lies within…

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