With only two weeks remaining in the marathon of the 2011 season, the Indians find themselves firmly out of the AL Central race, clinging to the notion that a .500 record is still a viable “goal” for the season, and readying themselves for what figures to be the most interesting off-season in quite a while for the Wahoo Warriors. Though the games are…um, less than compelling as the Indians play out the string, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t some storylines that don’t merit a mention.

So let’s mention some of them as we watch the Tomahawks fly…

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While the final two weeks of the season wind down, the questions come out as to why these final two weeks feel so bereft of anything meaningful and why the end of this season feels so much different than Septembers of years past, when compelling storylines existed. Whether those final-month narratives involved playoff pushes or seeing players who you had only known by name and stat line, consider how different this kind of “playing out the string” season compares to years’ past, where there was a very clear line of demarcation when the season was lost:
Grady’s missed fly ball in Kansas City in 2005…
The “sell-off” of anything that wasn’t nailed down in 2006…
CC imploding and Dana DeMuth squeezing in 2007…
The CC deal of 2008…
The CP Lee/El Capitan punch to the gut in 2009…
The “sell-off” (again) of anything of value that wasn’t nailed down last year…

Go back and look at when most of those thing occurred – either at the VERY end of the season (or the playoffs) or sometime in June or July. This “contend through August or so” isn’t

something we've experienced since 2004 as, in 2005 and 2007, every game was important up to the very end and the end came much sooner in those other years, to the point that fans had a couple of months to focus on youngsters and had more than just a few weeks to envision what the future held. Sure, we have a couple of weeks to see Hagadone and Putnam as well as some time to watch Kipnis and The Chiz every day while we wonder whether Hafner and Grady will ever get fully healthy, but a lot of the questions that existed prior to the season found answers this year and a couple of weeks in September are unlikely to affect those answers.

The answers that came this season – the ones that give reason for hope – were watching Masterson take the leap from flawed starter/eventual reliever to a legitimate top-of-the-rotation arm, Asdrubal's leap into the upper echelon of not just MLB SS but among the best AL hitters (**15th in the AL in XBH…along with The Axe Man**), Santana's emergence as an offensive force as he now has matched the HR total for Victor's rookie season as an Indian (23) and who has a .820 OPS since mid-April, Kipnis bursting onto the scene and perhaps settling a position that has been unsettled since Robbie Alomar left town, and a gaggle of arms in the bullpen that are emerging from the Minors that can fill out an effective relief corps. With that group of players' performance in 2011, the top-of-the-rotation has some stability, the bullpen inspires some hope (with the caveat that reliever success is fleeting and unpredictable) and the Indians have a troika of under-25 hitters that figure to provide some production as they continue to develop…in Cleveland.

On the flip side, we found out that LaPorta is unlikely to ever be the big RH bat, that Carmona is going to remain frustratingly inconsistent despite all of our wishes, that Hafner is unlikely ever to make it through a season completely healthy and **will likely play between 80 and 120 games, with an OPS in the low-.800's as his contract runs out** , that even Choo is not immune to a down year, that well-regarded young players (like Chisenhall) often do not arrive to MLB and perform as immediate All-Stars, and that the once-praised Indians' Training Staff has certainly lost some luster off of their once high-gloss shine.

Certainly, questions remain – who is Ubaldo, what will the Indians do to rectify the 1B issue, could the Huff/Gomez duo contribute to the 2012 rotation with Carrasco out, can the Indians actually stay healthy – that will be answered in the off-season or as 2012 starts, but the building blocks of a healthy foundation seem to be there for the Indians. Thinking back to Opening Day of 2011, those blocks were much harder to see but (with the caveat that regressions and injuries are unavoidable for any team) the Indians have some pieces to build upon as they attempt to use the positive momentum from the 2011 season – regardless of what the next two weeks bring – into a sustained run at the division and (more importantly) an actual look at a playoff run.

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Speaking of the division, with the Tigers now making a play not just for the AL Central (the curtain came down on that "play" about a week-and-a-half ago), and as the Motor City Kitties now make a legitimate push for home field advantage in the playoffs, it is stunning to go back and look at how preseason predictions simply did not jive with how the season played out. For some perspective on how unpredictable the AL Central has been this year, realize that **most**

prognosticators picked the Twins and the White Sox to battle it out for divisional supremacy
. You know, the same Twins' team that is now in last place with a $115M payroll, with SERIOUS issues going forward with their team and the White Sox team that was going to lose "a lot of money" if they weren't a "good team"?

Remember how Travis Hafner's contract became an albatross around the neck of the Indians as an organization?
When signed, Hafner's deal was for 4 years and $57M, with Hafner coming off of a 3-year stretch in which he posted a OPS+ of 170 and on the heels of a 2006 season in which he posted the OPS in all of MLB. Yes, Hafner's deal would cover his age-30 to age-35 seasons, but for all of the hand-wringing that's been done about how Hafner's deal looks like a mistake in hindsight (given the injuries), how about this…

Joe Mauer's deal in the Twin Cities is for 8 years and $184M and will pay his $23M annually THROUGH the 2018 season. It is true that the deal was signed the year after Mauer also led MLB in OPS and was inked when Mauer was about three years younger than Hafner when each signed their respective deals, but the Twins will pay Mauer (who has a full no-trade in his contract) through 2018 for $23M a year. While there's little doubt that Mauer is (when healthy) one of the elite players in MLB, he's played 16 more games than Hafner in the last two years as each has been hampered by injury. Combine the financial commitment to Mauer with the fact that they owe Justin Morneau $15M in 2012 and 2013 while realizing that the likes of Ben Revere and Danny Valencia (while useful) aren't going to pick up the offensive slack if Mauer and Morneau (.618 OPS this year in 69 games) remain injured and you start to see the issues that face small-to-mid-market teams that (allegedly) do things the "right way" if they are affected by injuries, even if those injuries are to the team's homegrown players.

While Tom Verducci may be writing **articles about the "parity" of MLB** , the fact remains that there are going to be "success" stories for small-to-mid-market teams that crop up every year (the D-Backs and Brewers are this year's, with the Rays threatening to join that duo), but those teams change every year and as the Yankees, Red Sox, and Phillies have already figured out how to maximize their inherent advantages to sew up their birthright of a playoff berth, with the Rangers threatening to do the same, it really becomes about 28 teams fighting for 4 playoff berths, with the other ½ of the playoff berths being "reserved" for the usual suspects.

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