I knew it.

I knew Russell Branyan was holding this Tribe team back.

Now that he and the horse he rode in on have been sent back to Seattle good things are happening for the Indians. They've won six out of seven since the Dark Knight was sent packing and they have whittled their deficit in the AL Central down to a point where they can make a strong run at the division title in the second half.

Okay, most of that's really not at all true. They still actually trail the Royals by 3 ½ games for 4th place in the division and they are 11 ½ back of the division-leading Tigers. Oh yeah; they're also still 16 games under .500.

But they have been playing better baseball over the past week and they have won six of their last seven games.

It's just a happy coincidence that it's all come without Russell Branyan in the lineup and in the clubhouse (maybe).

There are reasons for optimism though. You have to really look hard, but they're there under a lot of crap.

I figured Mitch Talbot's fine start to 2010 would last….well….I didn't think there'd actually be a fine start for Mitch Talbot in 2010. Not to the start of his season and not in any games he started really. But Talbot has been one of the most consistent Indians starters and has provided the Tribe with quality efforts nearly every time he's taken the hill.

Maybe they got a break for once and came up with a find. Talbot came as a player to be named in the offseason deal that sent Kelly Shoppach to Tampa Bay. In 16 starts Talbot is 8-7 with a 3.86 ERA and he's on pace to throw a couple hundred quality innings for the Indians in 2010.

Meanwhile for the Rays, Shoppach has struck out in 20 of his 44 at-bats and is hitting .227 with a home run and five RBI.

Tribe wins.

The other bright spot of late has been Matt LaPorta. The focal point of the CC Sabathia trade

started the year poorly and then got worse. It didn't help that the Indians had Branyan sitting around making occasional contact when LaPorta was making none. Branyan eventually started seeing the majority of the playing time there and LaPorta looked lost.

He also looked hurt. I mentioned a couple months back that his swing had no bottom half to it. LaPorta was all upper body with no drive from his push leg and no hip rotation either. Maybe he wasn't right after his offseason surgeries or maybe he was simply lost in the first 50 games. More likely it was a lot of both.

Lost and hurt is a tough way to approach major league pitchers and LaPorta was sent back down to Triple-A to get right.

Well, he looks right. At least right now. LaPorta is driving the ball and he looks like he knows what he's doing at the dish. His back, toe and swing all look much healthier than they did at the start of the season.

That's good news for Tribe fans praying LaPorta isn't just a AAAA player. And now that Michael Brantley is headed back to Cleveland after his Columbus stint maybe the two guys the Indians received for Sabathia can start making things right with the big league club.

Talbot and LaPorta aren't the only guys handing out handfuls of hope. The last couple of weeks have seen Tony Sipp recover from a horrid month, Raffy Perez look like 2007 Raffy Left and Kerry Wood knock down a couple saves that might increase his trade value down the road.

Maybe we're grasping at straws here, but the last week sure beats the previous 10 weeks.

Kill Me

Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't there a day when reporters relied on reliable sources and checked their stories twice before publishing some half-assed rumor?

You know, a time when reporters cared about accuracy and getting stories right instead of just getting stories out?

Or has it always been a world full of a-holes like Screamin' A. Smith and 35 other 'professional' writers citing unnamed sources so that they could publish a different article everyday to take advantage of the free agent frenzy going on?

It's really pathetic and it's really sad where journalism has gone of late. Even if one of these guys turns out to be right (and they've covered pretty much every single possibility) it will have been through dartboard journalism and the Grace of God. Not through intelligence and sources and certainly not through intelligent sources.

There's next to no integrity with these guys who are paid to inform. Maybe it's just no longer an information game. Maybe ESPN, Yahoo! And other sites and publications don't give a shit about integrity, accuracy or truth. Maybe all they care about is website hits and creating a buzz.

The integrity thing is just the half of it too. Accountability is the other piece to the puzzle. You see, the real problem is until you and I start holding these carnival barkers accountable then the number of hits, Twitter followers and Facebook friends will continue to matter more to these guys than the truth and journalistic integrity.

I thought ESPN's Free Agent Slot Machine was funny when I saw it. I didn't realize it was actually a research tool for tools afraid of research.

Spin that bitch Stephen A. Then get to your Twitter with, "My sources tell me it's 'Bron and Bosh to…… while Wade is going to….."

His mama should have named him Dick.

Speaking of Free Agency

Here's an article I posted yesterday on where LeBron will end up and the three biggest reasons why . See what you think. Forward it along if it's worthy. Hell, go ahead and re-tweet it and link me up on facebook. "Legitimize" me.

Just Weeks Away

Life speeds up as you roar past 40 and head directly into middle-aged. Hard to believe another NFL training camp is just about upon us. We're sitting here on July 4th and Memorial Day seems like it was just yesterday.

We can look at the Browns offseason and what I see are a couple of key improvements. First, Mike Holmgren is here and has immediately restored some credibility to the football side of the operation. This no longer appears to be a rudderless ship although it's tough to tell much about a ship's rudder without seeing how the boat actually responds in the water. But we at least know a rudder was added a few months back.

And while I like the fact that the Browns drafted Joe Hayden, Monterio Hardesty, T.J. Ward and Colt McCoy, amongst others, I really think the key offseason player upgrade was the Browns signing TE Ben Watson from the Patriots.

Watson is going to be a key when the Browns run elements of the West Coast Offense and he's a talented, fast receiving tight end who can catch the football and run with it afterward. If he and Jake Delhomme can develop a bit of chemistry early in camp and hone it throughout the preseason you're going to see an offense that looks at least competent. Controlling the ball with Hardesty and Jerome Harrison on the ground and Watson and a stable of possession-type receivers in the air is going to keep the defense off the field for greater periods of time. Add in a wildcat formation featuring Seneca Wallace and Josh Cribbs for some unpredictability and you can see the makings of an actual offense on the field.

At the very least we'll have something else to talk about after LeBron's "Decision '10" and while the Indians get the kids some innings and at bats down at Progressive Field.