It was a great weekend to sweep Pittsburgh in anything, for Travis Hafner's return to the Indians lineup, for Carlos Carrasco's continued development and dominance as part of the Tribe's rotation and for Cord Phelps's first Major League home run. In large part due to all three of those factors the Indians swept the Pittsburgh Pirates to regain sole possession of first place in the AL Central.

And they swept Pittsburgh lest that fact be forgotten.

Empty the Bilge!!!

The Good Ship Indians was taking on a ton of water over the past 30 days. A 6-game division lead was lost (if only for a day) and a lot of holes were popping up in a starting rotation and a lineup that had been motoring along splendidly through April and half of May.

But this weekend the Indians baled a lot of water, got the anchor of their lineup back and, at least temporarily, got themselves out of the rough seas they had been traveling by taking all three games from a Pirate team that came in playing pretty good baseball.

For this offensively challenged team you can't discount the importance of Hafner's return to the lineup. Even if he's not the Pronk from five years ago he had been hitting the baseball hard before he strained an oblique muscle and went to the disabled list three and a half weeks ago. In getting Hafner back the Indians not only got back one of their most effective hitters in 2011 but they also restored order to a lineup that had undergone dome drastic changes in the past week.

Hafner is a middle of the order placeholder for the Tribe. Without him the Indians alternated between Carlos Santana, Travis Buck and Michael Brantley (for God's sake) in the cleanup spot and it threw the rest of the lineup out of whack. Pronk's production is needed but more so than just the hits, home runs and RBI he brings a sense of order to the order and allows everyone else to assume more natural roles.

The Indians are being careful with Hafner so he didn't play Saturday. But with Carrasco throwing zeroes against the Pirates they didn't need a ton of help. When I mentioned the potential development of Carrasco as a vital component to the Indians' hopes in 2011 the last three outings that saw Little CC throw 21+ scoreless innings were precisely what was hoped for.

Carrasco is settling into a comfort zone mixing in a 93-95mph with ever-improving secondary stuff and he's also rising up the ladder in terms of becoming the Indians best starter. Right now Carrasco has made the necessary adjustments in terms of his approach and pitch-mix. The league will again adjust but Carrasco no longer seems overwhelmed by the moment or in panic-mode on the mound.

That bodes well.

Speaking of overwhelmed, that would be a fitting description if you were looking for a word to describe Cord Phelps' first two weeks in the big leagues. But on Sunday fans got a glimpse at what the Indians organization has seen all along from Phelps. His 11th inning walk off HR Sunday capped off his best offensive day in the league and came hours after he narrowly

missed his first career HR and settled for a double.

Phelps' two hits gave him three hits on the season and he also went from one RBI on the year to four with the game winning HR.

For the weekend the Tribe returned to the recipe that had given them the best record in the AL for nearly a month. They got contributions from their starters and their bullpen, the guys who were supposed to hit actually contributed and they got some contributions from the guys hitting lower in the lineup. That combination is what they need if they're going to stay in the race all summer long.

No Need for a Summer Solstice

It's officially summer when baseball teams begin firing hitting coaches, bullpen coaches and batting practice pitchers so let's formally welcome summer to the North Coast now that the Indians have let Jon Nunnally go. It's quite clear in looking at the Indians that Matt LaPorta's development was being retarded by Nunnally and that the now ex-Tribe hitting coach was spending far too much time with Asrdubal Cabrera and Michael Brantley making them excellent while he was apparently ignoring Shin-Soo Choo completely and telling Grady Sizemore to regress.

Quick, name me ten hitting coaches in the Major Leagues today. Can't do it? Well then just name me the hitting coaches employed by teams in the AL Central?

No?

That's pretty much the point.

You can almost play a game of Mad Libs with the following words and lock down the typical conversation between hitter and hitting coach: preparation, balance, stillness, stride, square-up,

stride, hands, stay back, lower half, recognition, rotation, finish, relax.

Example- “Choo needs to keep his **hands still**, **relax** his **mind** and **focus** on **staying back** and
rotating
his
hips
through the baseball.”

The people that welcome the news of a hitting coach or bullpen coach being let go like it’s the troops being brought home from WWII make me laugh. They’re also the same people who couldn’t name another four hitting coaches or a single bullpen coach outside of Cleveland.

If you’d like to argue that occasionally there needs to be a different person brought in to say the same tired shit a different way then I’m right there with you. We can call that the ’10-year Old Kid Phenomena’. For many years I worked part time instructing young kids on the ‘art of hitting’. Actually, I broke the process down to a very intricate and detailed lesson plan revolving around the complex philosophies of start, step and finish.

I had to make it complex so that it typically took 8-10 hours of time spent with the precocious youngster at $50 or so an hour to make sure little Johnny was ready for the start of Little League season. And of course parents were appalled and horrified that many of them actually understood the ‘complexities’ of start, step and finish and had spent numerous hours with little Johnny trying to get him to listen.

Alas, little Johnny had no time or interest in what dad was teaching him regardless of the fact it was no different than what I was saying for the most part. Difference being I was an outside authority to Johnny. I had the credibility of training cages and pitching machines while wearing my ringer-t with the hitting school name featured prominently on the chest. When I leaned on the bat and told Johnny the keys to hitting he was hearing the Sermon on the Mount in his ears. He sure wasn’t at home in the driveway with his old man bitching at him about getting his hands away from his body for the 800th time that month.

Obviously that’s oversimplifying things as there were many parents who couldn’t tell little

Johnny which end of the bat to hold. But the ‘different voice’ part isn’t far from the truth and it is a viable reason that Jon Nunnally was fired and Bruce Fields was hired to work with Indian hitters.

What did the opposite ends of the statistical spectrum think about the change? You’d have to assume Asdrubal Cabrera would be furious and that Choo would be thrilled, right?

Asdrubal Cabrera said Nunnally helped him get off to a hot start. The shortstop hit .301 with 12 homers and 43 RBIs in his first 69 games this year. In 387 career games entering 2011, he had 18 homers.

"He showed me a couple things, gave me some tips," Cabrera said. "He was very helpful."

What? That was somewhat tepid. He was ‘helpful’ and showed him a ‘couple things’? Hmm… that less than ringing endorsement might mean Choo is going to trash Nunnally:

"I don't know what's going on around here," said Choo, a .297 career hitter batting only .237.

"We're still in first place," Choo added. "Why is he fired? I am very disappointed because he helped me a lot. Not just me, everybody on the team."

And there you go. Clear as mud. Such is the life of the nomadic and hired-to-be-fired hitting coach. Bruce Fields is one day closer to people on message boards blaming him for the Tribe’s two-week collective team slump and one day closer to being fired to bring in a ‘new voice’.

No Drama

This Thursday is the NBA Draft and the Cavaliers will select Duke PG Kyrie Irving with the first overall selection. I’m not buying into any other scenario as it pertains to the first pick.

The fourth pick is a bit trickier in that Cavaliers have publicly expressed interest in any number of European big men that would immediately provide them some size and skill down low. It would be a bit unnerving if both Irving and Enes Kanter were Cavaliers after four picks on Thursday. Only because the two players combined for a total of 11 games played this past season as Kanter sat out after being declared ineligible at Kentucky and Irving was sidelined by a foot injury for most of his only season at Duke.

Hell, there's no guarantee the Cavaliers will even use that fourth pick as they've been mentioned in many corners as looking to deal out of the pick or to package the pick with a player to actually move up to the 2nd position on the draft.

Regardless of what they do the rebuilding process takes another big step Thursday night when the Cavaliers can't help but improve the quality of their roster. That's in some part due to the talent of players like Irving who the Cavs will acquire but also due in no small part to the fact there's not a great deal of talent on that roster right now.

By this time next week we'll at least have a much better idea of what that roster will look like when they jump it up after the impending labor dispute is resolved.