

## The Diary Of A Mad Baseball Fan

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Monday, March 30 2009 7:00 PM -

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Believe it or not, Superfan Paulie Cousineau had never been to spring training. So Paul and his wife decided to pack up and take a break from dreary Cleveland for a long weekend out in Goodyear to catch three days of the Indians inaugural spring campaign in Arizona. From sitting mere feet away from The Atomic Wedgie in Tucson, to being fortunate enough to sit with the incomparable Terry Pluto for a couple of innings, to the glorious nonchalance and familiarity that Spring Training brings ... Paulie put together a little diary of his trip for us.



The sun is hot, the sky is high, and baseball is everywhere...it is Spring Training in Arizona.

Having never attended a Spring Training in any capacity, The DiaBride and I made the decision to join the Indians for their inaugural Spring campaign in Arizona, deciding to spend a long weekend away from the dreariness and cloudiness that has defined the last few months on the North Coast by immersing ourselves into the desert sun and the land of cacti. Since it's an experience that was new for both of us, and realizing that it's something that some people have been fortunate enough to enjoy, I thought I'd throw a little diary together to hit all of the high points, from sitting mere feet away from The Atomic Wedgie in Tucson, to being fortunate enough to sit with the incomparable Terry Pluto for a couple of innings, to the glorious nonchalance and familiarity that Spring Training brings.

### **Friday**

Unlike my esteemed counterpart, [Tony Lastoria](#), our trip to the Great American Southwest was largely uneventful as we checked into our resort in Scottsdale and made the trip West to the Indians' new facility in Goodyear, with the full knowledge that no Indians' games were being played there, but with the idea that we'd spend some time walking around the complex and maybe catching some Minor League action at one of the back fields.

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We arrived in Goodyear, which is sparse but obviously a new town as every building houses either a chain restaurant or national hotel chain, with signs advertising home builders at every turn. The reports that the stadium is around &quot;nothing&quot; are exaggerated as really most of the Phoenix area feels like that as you drive around on the Interstates. It's true that very little is around the ballpark (and the fact that it's in the middle of a desert certainly feeds the feeling that you're in the middle of nowhere), but construction cranes and equipment are everywhere and the area looks certain to develop the way that these towns that spring out of the desert seem to.

Upon arrival to the Indians' ballpark, we walked around the perimeter, surprised at how small it was (though we would learn that small is just how these &quot;stadiums&quot; all look) and impressed by how new and clean everything looked...then realizing that it should, it is a new facility after all. After a quick stop in the team shop to spend money on anything that had the words &quot;Cactus League&quot; or &quot;Spring Training 2009&quot; (and with The DiaBride fortuitously finding the last of our 20% off Season Ticket holder coupons from last year, which was set to expire in two days), we hopped back in the car to head to the back fields to see some prospects and to hopefully spend a while under the sun watching some baseball.

As luck would have it, we arrived to the player development complex at Goodyear JUST as the final out was being squeezed in the last game of the day, which allowed us to watch the minor leaguers grab their bags and head inside.

Great timing, eh...and no Adam Miller sighting to see what someone pitching with 4 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> fingers looks like as the reports out of Cleveland in our absence portended what could possibly be good news for The Atomic One and I was hoping to see the big fireballing Texan letting loose and testing that finger.

Alas...

Nevertheless, we returned back to the resort to do what we do on vacations...sit by the pool and keep the cabana boys busy with trips from our deck chairs to the bar. Nothing too crazy as a big day was on tap for Saturday, but just enough to properly appreciate the Arizona sun and enjoy where we were.

### **Saturday**

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After a quick stop at the airport to pick up The DiaBride's sister and her husband (the Cubs' fan who prompted this whole trip by mentioning at some point a few months back that the Cubs and Indians were playing in Mesa in late March and a trip would be a good time), we made our way down I-10 to Tucson to catch the Indians-Diamondbacks game. Our travel companions were heading to the Cubs-Rockies game as (unbelievably) the two teams that still play in Tucson (Arizona and Colorado) happened to be playing the Tribe and the Cubbies, so we dropped them off at Hi Corbett Field for their game and headed over to the Diamondbacks' Spring facility to catch our first real Tribe action of the weekend.

On the way down, my brother-in-law mentioned that since Tucson is a solid 2-hour trip from Phoenix, it's a common practice for visiting teams to take only a handful of MLB players and that a rule had, in fact, been implemented that a certain amount of "regulars" need to go to Tucson, with the term "regulars" having a pretty broad meaning. We arrived at the game to find that the "regulars", in terms of position players, that had made the trip south were Garko, Cabrera, Choo, and Barfield, with the rest of the lineup consisting of guys whose numbers were 80 or over and didn't have names on the back, which generally gives you a pretty good indication of where you stand in the organization.

Any disappointment over what players did not make the trip quickly subsided as we made our way to our seats, which I thought might be good when I bought them online, but blew away any place I'd ever experienced a game, short a dugout suite at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. We found our seats three rows back from the area behind home plate that was next to the Indians' dugout. Quickly realizing that the coaching staff eschewed the use of the dugout in Tucson Electric Park, our excitement grew as we realized that Wedge was flanked by Jeff Datz and Carl Willis less than 10 feet in front of us, with us enjoying the same view as the Indians' coaching staff, with every movement by the coaches or comment by them being right in our line of vision and, as quiet as these Spring Training games were, every word uttered by them was fairly easy to discern.

The game would be essentially turn into an extended look at Zach Jackson and Vinnie Chulk (or as The DiaBride dubbed him, "Count Chulkula") as two of the final combatants for that 7th bullpen spot each went multiple innings with Jackson getting knocked around and Chulk impressing in his time in relief. While I'm no scout, Chulk was obviously far more effective and multiple exchanges of head nods and eyebrow raises when Chulk would impress while

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Willis made a point of finding Jackson in the dugout to impart his words of wisdom or would pull Jackson aside on the on-deck circle to talk.

While the performance of Jackson and Chulk would, on the surface, to be the most compelling aspect of the game (and as I've been predicting since Miller went down with his finger irritation, [Zachson did get the nod today](#)), sitting behind Wedge and his lieutenants during the course of the game is wildly more telling that anything that happened on the field as the reactions in Arizona are not the measured stoicism that we have gotten so use to whenever a shot of Wedge in the dugout is shown in the regular season. The twitching Wedge that we see all season is replaced with emotions and reactions that are real and uncensored and the looks exchanged between coaches and players and between coaches tell you more than any box score or overused cliché ever would.

For instance, when Josh Barfield stood in for an AB in the middle of the game, he took a pitch that (I suppose) he considered to be inside and reacted to the pitch by throwing his arms away from his shoulders and fully extending them and moving his mid-section away from the plate. You've seen him do it a number of times and know that it's his way of baiting the ump to get the pitch called a ball. It's frustrating to watch as a fan, and the fact that this particular pitch was called a strike made it even more maddening.

Well...if you're frustrated by seeing something like that from Barfield, consider yourself in some pretty good company as ALL of the coaches heads immediately dropped and shook as Barfield took the inside strike, then looked knowingly to the three coaches sitting there, with a look of contrition on his face as if he'd been told not to do this on multiple occasions, but found himself repeating what he had been told not to do, and immediately looked at the coaches who had obviously told him not to do this, only to catch three reactions of frustration and disappointment from each.

Similarly, when Choo misplayed a ball in RF, the collective reaction from the trio of coaches was one of exasperation and when Choo stood on the on-deck circle before he led off the next inning, he would sneak looks at Wedge and the others, just waiting to react to the comment that never came, probably because it didn't need to be articulated as the body language of the coaches let Choo know exactly where he stood with them on this sunny afternoon.

Really, that's the most amazing thing about Spring Training, this inside look at the

chemistry between these guys, unfiltered and raw. It's nearly as interesting as how engaging all of these players are to fans as they'll talk up anybody at any time with a nonchalance that simply isn't seen once the regular season starts.

The familiarity of it all came into clear view when an older man walked over to Wedge and got his attention early in the game between innings, engaging Wedge into probably a 5 minute conversation as the older guy in the stands just sat there and talked to Wedge, who responded politely and even talked to the rest of the people in our section, cracking jokes, smiling widely, displaying an engaging personality and sense of humor that has never been on display for public consumption, which is a shame as Wedge is actually quite funny and light-hearted in the much more relaxed atmosphere.

During one of these turn-around-and-talk sessions, my favorite moment of the day occurred as Wedge just kind of sat there and talked to the people directly behind him about not much at all, just small talk chit-chat when a guy in a backwards visor to our left and one row in front of us got Wedge's attention and initiated the following exchange:

**Backwards Visor Guy:** Hey, Wedge...you think Thome's coming back?

**Wedge (smiling broadly):** Jimmy's a great player.

**Backwards Visor Guy:** Wouldn't it be great to have him on this team?

**Wedge:** I'm sure Jimmy would love to come back.

**Backwards Visor Guy:** Think he'll come back so he can retire as an Indian?

**Wedge (broad smile never leaving his face):** You never know in this game.

Take a look again at the exchange and look at how Wedge said ABSOLUTELY nothing but broad, politically correct responses to this ludicrous line of questioning, and never pointed out anything to the guy that...you know...the Indians already have a DH they're worried about, or shot him some smart-aleck response asking this simpleton why the White Sox would trade Thome to the Indians, much less pointing out that a trade of Thome back to the Tribe is about as unlikely a scenario as can be dreamed up, even by the most obtuse fan.

Wedge just simply and politely allowed this guy to get this stuff off his chest and "answered" the questions as broadly as possible and without any kind of commitment, so this guy thinks that he had an intelligent conversation about Thome with the skipper of the Tribe.

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Moving on from Wedge and his future in politics, the question has to be asked...you have the manager of the Indians engaged in a conversation, you can ask him anything as his mood is jovial and accommodating, and THIS is what you come back with?

A conversation about how great it would be to have Thome back on this Indians team?

Ahhh, the casual Indians' fan...

Really, though, it raised a great topic - that is, if you had Wedge engaged in a quick conversation and could ask him one question, what would it be? My lovely wife, when posed this question in our seats, responded by asserting that she'd say, &quot;we're all behind you this year, Wedgie...good luck.&quot; When it was pointed out that her submission wasn't really a question, she settled on, &quot;do you miss Casey Blake as much as I do?&quot;

The DiaBride, ladies and gentleman...

The other aspect of sitting as close as we did, with such close proximity to the players on the on-deck circle, is that it allowed us some beauties to be fired off in the direction of the players...the ones we knew, at least. My crowning achievement came with Ryan Garko on deck, as I lobbed a &quot;Garko...Polo&quot; out there, to which a smiling Garko whipped around his head to our direction as the coaches between us and Garko yukked it up. Garko looked at Wedge and said, &quot;I like that...that's a pretty good one.&quot;

Score one for Garko...Polo.

As the game drew slowly to its conclusion, with a great inning by Jensen Lewis, the number of players that even I've heard of decreased and the relaxed atmosphere became more lax with each passing AB. I've often heard that the final score of these Spring Training games doesn't matter and my first foray into a ST game confirmed this as, unless you want to know how Damaso Espino and Wilson Valdez looked, one could watch about 1/3 of these games (maybe less) and get a pretty good idea of the important aspects of the game.

When the game mercifully came to an end, we retreated back to our rental car, went to pick up our travel companions as the Cubs-Rox game ended soon after

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and headed back north to Scottsdale, with hopes that Sunday's contest would resemble more of an MLB game and with the idea that a Fausto Carmona-Ted Lilly match-up would be more compelling than what Saturday's game had offered.

We arrived back to the resort just in time to see Scotty Reynolds' runner in the lane to push 'Nova to the Final Four and to realize that the resort bar had Fat Tire, which is a terrific ale from the New Belgium Brewing Company, available only on the West Coast, on tap.

And with that discovery...there's your night.

### Sunday

Waking up early to beat what we assumed to be heavy traffic for the Cubs-Tribe game in Mesa, we arrived at the ballpark in time to see that the lineups were heavy in "regulars" with only Hafner, Shoppach, and Choo missing from the players assumed to be getting the lion's share of the playing time this season. Thus, a full dose of Carmona, Grady, Victor, Peralta, and Francisco were on the docket...oh, yeah and the player that was probably the most beloved in the stadium - one Mr. Mark DeRosa.

I stopped counting DeRosa jerseys before the game even started and to say that he got the biggest ovation of the day doesn't do justice to the reception he got from Cubs' fans. He rewarded their cheers by hitting Ted Lilly's first offering to him so far over the LF fence that neither Al Soriano nor anyone in the LF bleachers even moved...they all just looked up and watched it fly.

As he rounded the bases, what was the response from the crowd?

How about a standing O for an opposing player who quickly gave the visitors a 2-run lead...yeah, he's THAT popular with Cubs' fans.

In his second AB, it was more of the same from DeRosa, who went yard AGAIN to the delight of a foursome of comely ladies behind home plate, all sporting their DeRosa jerseys, among many others who cheered him on. He wasn't done there, though, as he rocketed probably the hardest hit ball of the day in his third AB, bouncing one off the CF fence, some 15 to 20 feet above the 410 mark in dead center. As he cruised in with an easy 2B (almost assuredly not to show up the

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Cubs anymore than he had), he slipped a sly smile in the direction of the Cubs' dugout, confirming what everyone in the ballpark knew - that this was DeRosa's day in Mesa, regardless of what laundry he was wearing.

As a quick aside here, later in the day, we were sitting poolside with me wearing a Tribe shirt when we were approached, unsolicited, by a number of Cubs' fans who were also staying at our resort and ALL wanted to talk about how much they were going to miss watching DeRosa play every day for the Cubbies. Every single one had more than harsh words about the Cubs' decision to trade DeRosa and expressed that they'd be cheering for the Indians this year so they could keep cheering for DeRosa.

Aside from DeRosa, the game was highlighted by Fausto Carmona pounding the strike zone (that's a good sign, kids) and giving up only one really hard hit ball. That hard hit ball, of course, came off the bat of one Mr. Milton Bradley and as soon as it left his bat, everyone knew that it was gone. I immediately turned to my Cubs' fan brother-in-law (who was not completely versed on the Bradley-Wedge dynamic) and told him to watch Milt round the bases. Sure enough, as he trotted from 3B to home, Bradley unmistakably pointed to Wedge and the rest of the Indians' coaching staff, seated in folding chairs beside the Indians' dugout, eliciting only head shakes and exasperated looks from the Tribe coaches. Much more vocal about his displeasure over Bradley's antics, a guy in front of us (in a Tribe jersey) immediately jumped to his feet and unleashed a long diatribe over how Bradley would be bagging groceries if he couldn't hit a baseball, how classless Bradley was, and a number of other unmentionable suggestions that were undoubtedly heard by the whole park, Bradley included.

As the game rolled on, I was fortunate enough to be joined by The Plain Dealer's Terry Pluto, who graciously left his perch in the Press Box to spend the 5th and 6th innings in our seats with us and regale us with his insight, knowledge, and passion for sports and for writing. Needless to say, it was more than a great thrill to sit and simply talk baseball with the sportswriter whose opinion I value over all others (probably collectively over all others, if you want the truth) and the topics that we hit on were vast and the insights gleaned were unbelievably fascinating.

Straight off, I asked him about Hafner, whom I had not seen in either of the games I attended and Terry said that he had seen him take batting practice earlier in the week. He said that Hafner WAS in fact hitting in BP...but that it was against Joel Skinner or some other coach and certainly not up to a game environment. He

asserted that Hafner still was unable to really pull the ball as he had always done so mightily when he was putting forth Pronkian numbers and the difference between watching Hafner and Choo taking batting practice clearly put into focus how Hafner was simply not hitting the ball with much authority, unlike a guy like Choo, who he said was simply battering the ball all over the field in BP, spraying line drives wherever he wanted.

The topic of Hafner turned to a very frank discussion that neither of us had ever seen Hafner's name come up in any steroid allegations and how a player like Jose Canseco wouldn't be above simply throwing Hafner's name out there to see if his scattershot approach to outing these players would stick on Hafner, but that his name has never come up. Moving on from conjecture, we discussed about how the Indians seem to almost be preparing themselves for contingency plans for the lineup, almost assuming that Hafner at 100% may not exist and the likes of Shoppach, Garko, LaPorta, and others represented obvious solutions to the question of how to replace an ineffective Hafner in the lineup.

We talked about Carmona and his importance to the season as Terry showed us that he had been charting Carmona's first pitches to see if he was throwing first-pitch strikes, a necessity for Fausto to get ahead in the count and allow his sinker to have its optimal effect. He pointed out that Carmona was not walking people (I think he walked two all day) and how he was done in by some questionable infield defense that made his stat line not look nearly as impressive as he did in his appearance.

I relayed the story of the coaches' obvious frustration with Barfield the previous day, how the body language of the coaches showed how they seemed to be at their wits' end about what to do with him. In response, Terry uncorked an analogy that just about puts the whole "what happened to Josh Barfield" question in proper perspective. He said that the Indians really like Barfield as a person, that he's a hard worker, that he takes instruction well, that he tries to put what the coaches tell him into practice, but for whatever reason cannot get what is told to him to translate to the field.

He compared Barfield's struggles to tutoring a young student struggling in math. The student wants to do well and does all of the homework that you assign to him. He's a hard worker and you genuinely like him and want him to succeed...for him to "get it" to turn the corner to understanding. But, no matter how many times that student looks at that flash card that says "9 X 4", he cannot

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wrap his head around it or come to the quick and obvious answer, regardless of how much he wants to or how much you want him to.

With Barfield, it seems to be the same way, that Barfield knows what to do, he knows what they want him to improve upon, he knows what he needs to do...he just can't do it. And for that, there's nothing more frustrating for student and teacher (or for player and coach) than that inability to have that moment when it all &quot;clicks&quot; into place and the desired results are accomplished because of all of the hard work that's been put in.

All told, my impression of Josh Barfield in the few days I saw of him does not bode well for his future with the team and [with Trevor Crowe now on the roster](#) , opportunities for Barfield may have just gotten fewer and farther between.

Back to the Pluto discussion, as I asked him what he thought of Ben Francisco, if he thought that Francisco would carry the year as the de facto LF or whether he would eventually slot into the 4th OF role, replaced by one of the guys who would start the season at AAA and he answered with an all-encompassing idea that is often forgotten by Indians' fans. He said that he honestly didn't know, just like he didn't know what was going to happen to all of the LH starters that were in the mix for the 5th starter spot, most of whom figure to start the season in AAA. He said that the depth that the Indians have is designed to augment the team in place on Opening Day as a fluid arrangement of moving players around is going to be pretty prevalent until they can find the right mix.

Is Ben Francisco in LF part of that &quot;right mix&quot;?

Who knows, but those are the answers that will reveal themselves as the season wears on.

Our discussion turned to this year's long Spring Training, how he thinks the WBC has put Choo behind the 8-ball in terms of being where he should be this late in camp, how difficult it is to provide the never-ending content that the Internet Age demands from Spring Training, and how much the Internet has changed the way that Spring Training is covered, and finally how he had to get going to make sure that he could get the quote he needed from the hero of the day, Mark DeRosa for a piece that he was working on for Monday's PD.

He proceeded back up to the Press Box to ready his next column as we were left to contemplate the in-depth and fascinating discussion...that is, until Masa

Kobayashi entered the game as Terry made his way out of our section.

As Masa warmed up, my brother-in-law noticed that the Cubs' GM Jim Hendry was sitting in the front row behind Lou Piniella and Cubs' Bench Coach Alan Trammell, who were all involved in an animated discussion about the game. Before I could even get anything out of my mouth to say, "wouldn't it be cool if Shapiro was right behind Wedge too?" I spotted the Tribe GM RIGHT behind Wedge, Shelton, and Willis. There, in the front row of the third base boxes sat Shapiro and Antonetti, the Polo Shirt-wearing Brain Trust of the Indians, taking in the Tribe-Cubs game and about to witness what could be Masa's Last Stand.

As Kobayashi warmed up, my eyes stayed fixed on Shapiro and Antonetti, who were engaged in a conversation with Willis and Wedge as they prepared themselves for Masa's first pitch. When Kobayashi's offering to Aramis Ramirez resulted in one of the hardest hit balls of the day to the right-center gap, I didn't watch the flight of the ball at all...I kept my gaze on Shapiro and Antonetti, whose body language after the hit was...um, not positive for Kobayashi. After the second hard-hit ball, this time a HR by Reed Johnson off of Masa, Shapiro's head dropped and Antonetti immediately began scratching his head, looking in Shapiro's direction, obviously waiting for his head to raise so the two could exchange what one could only assume to be forlorn glances or raised eyebrows. As Carl Willis made his way to the mound, Shapiro said his goodbyes and made his way up the aisle, a path that would soon be followed by Antonetti....yes, with Kobayashi still laboring through his inning.

If anything can be gleaned from watching the two of them with Masa on the mound, let's just say that the short leash that we all assumed Kobayashi to be on is probably going to be closer to a choke collar.

As the game slowly drew to a close (I can't relay clearly enough how the last few innings of these games are exercises in futility), The DiaBride and her sister (who had left our seats in the shade early on to find the Arizona sun) made their way back to our seats to relay stories of watching Kerry Wood (who did pitch and looked good despite obviously not having his best stuff) warm up in the bullpen and debating whether or not Garko smiled at them from his patch of grass in RF. The game mercifully ended and the kids in attendance made their way around the bases as we made our way out of the stadium, done with Spring baseball for this trip.

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With heavy hearts we headed back to the resort, full of knowledge gleaned from the conversation with Terry Pluto and from the observation of the Indians' coaching staff and Front Office as game action forced them to reveal their feelings through posture and body language. But we were also fully aware that the games under the Arizona sun were over for us and that the next time we would cheer on the Indians, it would be in decidedly less ideal conditions at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. Our appetites were whetted for more baseball, which is coming...just not soon enough.

The promise of Spring and perpetual sun will soon be replaced by the reality of the regular season and the memory that the sun will not consistently appear on the North Coast for a few more months. When it finally does, Spring will be a distant memory and the season will be in full swing, with the observations and opinions put forth in Arizona giving way to what the season holds.

One week until the Season Opener...one week until the Season Opener...