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In years past, we'd be able to get an idea of whether the Indians would excel in the rotation, in the bullpen or in the batting lineup. This year, it's kind of difficult to gauge what, exactly, we should expect of this team. Mark Shapiro's moves this offseason, Travis Hafner's lingering production problems, Cliff Lee's putrid spring training performance, and the overall talent and experience levels on the roster, invite enough speculation to make you believe this team could lose 90 games. Or everything could come together and they could win 90. Or they could split the difference and go 81-81 again.

There are some other obvious reasons behind the fog that encases the start of the Tribe's season. For the first time since 2000, the Indians will enter a season without C.C. Sabathia in the starting rotation. Lee is the staff ace based on his Cy Young credentials of last season, but he's also less than two years removed from the worst season of his career, and he's coming off an 0-3, 12.42 ERA spring training effort.

The rest of the rotation doesn't build much confidence, either. Fausto Carmona has electric stuff, but can't find the strike zone with regularity. Carl Pavano hasn't pieced together a decent, injury-resistant season in five years. Jake Westbrook is out until at least midsummer as he continues the long road back from Tommy John surgery. Anthony Reyes hasn't proven anything over the long haul. Scott Lewis, Aaron Laffey, Jeremy Sowers and Zach Jackson? Roll the dice.

In short, the starting rotation feels more like a starting dartboard. Three of these guys have to come somewhere close to the bullseye for the Indians to mount a serious challenge in the AL Central this year.

The state of the bullpen breeds much more confidence than at this time last year, mainly because someone besides Joe Borowski will break camp as the team's closer. Kerry Wood is likely bound for the disabled list at some point this season, but hopefully the injury is of the muscle strain variety, and won't involve the insertion of scalpels and/or arthroscopes into his person. But if he can stay active for the majority of the season, particularly the stretch run, the Indians might have their best door-slammer since Jose Mesa in the mid-90s.

The spring training performances of Rafael Perez (1.00 ERA in nine innings pitched) and Jensen Lewis (1.64 ERA in 11 IP) are positive developments in the construction of a setup corps to get to Wood -- something that was painfully absent from the Tribe's 'pen a year ago. Now if Rafael Betancourt (6.24 ERA in 8.2 IP) could just get on track and stay healthy, the bullpen could even be considered "deep";

Spring training saw a number of good individual performances from the hitters. Jhonny Peralta, Ben Francisco and Victor Martinez all tied for the team lead with 13 RBI. Peralta batted .391 for the spring, Grady Sizemore hit .373 and Mark DeRosa hit .364 upon returning to the Tribe after the World Baseball Classic.

Then again, read into spring training hitting statistics at your own risk. Hitters' swings are often well ahead of pitchers' arms for most of spring training. By the time the Indians leave the Launching Pad at Arlington and head north to open the home portion of their schedule this coming weekend, their hitting prowess might drop like the temperature between Texas and Ohio.

But the weather will warm, and baseball's marathon schedule will allow water to find its level over the span of the next six months. But what is the water's level with regard to some of the Tribe's more important players? Below is how I see some players trending during the 2009 season.

Cliff Lee: Down

It's not just that the law of averages is bound to catch up to Lee after his freakishly good 2008. It's not just that he wilted in the Arizona heat this spring. It's that Lee

has, historically, given up a lot of hits and a lot of runs. He has also historically not had the pinpoint control of his fastball that he showed a year ago.

Unfortunately, a regression to the mean for Lee might mean a regression to a middle-of-the rotation starter, complete with a near-.500 record and ERA in the mid-4.00's. Lee has had a couple of excellent years in 2005 and '08, but the "real" Cliff Lee is probably closer to what he showed in 2006 (14-11, 4.40 ERA).

Having said all of that, Lee is still a solid pitcher, even if he doesn't approach last year's levels. If it contributes to a postseason berth, I think we'd all be thrilled if he could repeat his 18-5, 3.79 performance from '05.

Victor Martinez: Up

Last season was an injury-wracked year for V-Mart. He only played in 73 games, only hit two homers, but still managed to pull his batting average out of the muck and hit .278 with 17 doubles and 35 RBI when all was said and done.

Martinez is one of the two most talented hitters on the Indians roster, and I expect a healthy Martinez to bounce back with a vengeance this year. Prior to last season, he was an automatic .300, 30 doubles and 70 RBI for three seasons. Now fully healthy at the outset of the season for the first time since 2007, Martinez might even exceed those numbers.

Mark DeRosa: Up

When the Indians first acquired DeRosa, my initial reaction was to dismiss him as a glorified utility player, another in a long line of "grinders" routinely overvalued by Mark Shapiro and Eric Wedge.

But a small sample viewing size during spring training and the WBC have changed my opinion, to a degree. DeRosa can hit, and he can play a little defense, too. DeRosa is still a third baseman trapped in a middle infielder's body as far as I am concerned, but if the object of contact hitting is to put a hard swing on the ball and force the fielders to make plays, DeRosa can do that, probably to the tune of a .280 average and 60-70 RBI.

Fausto Carmona: Down

You might think Carmona is already "down" after an 8-7, 5.44 ERA, injury-plagued 2008. And you're right. But adding to Carmona's problems is the expectations placed on him to regain his 2007 form and fill a spot at the front of the rotation. At this point in his career, I have to question whether Carmona can do that.

Carmona seems primed to spend his 2009 showing us flashes of his '07 brilliance followed by long stretches of pitching out of the stretch, because he can't stop walking hitters.

As a sinkerballer, Carmona relies on getting batters to put the ball in play, but that obviously won't happen with any frequency if he's constantly falling behind in the count. The net result, in addition to bases on balls, is a rapidly-elevated pitch count that might force Carmona's exit from many starts in the fifth or sixth innings -- even when he's pitching relatively well.

Travis Hafner: Up

With Pronk, "up" is a relative term. A batting average in the mid-.200s and 25 homers would be an improvement over his .197/5 HR/24 RBI/57 game debacle of 2008.

The 2004-06 Hafner is gone forever. Debate the reasons why until Barry Bonds comes home, but at the end of the day, a 2007 redux (.266, 24 HR, 100 RBI) is a good year from this version of Pronk.

Grady Sizemore: Steady

Yeah, his batting average has been on a steady decline for three seasons. But when his other stats are as rock-solid as Sizemore's were a year ago (33 HR, 39 doubles, 38 steals, 90 RBI) and he's durable enough to never have played in fewer than 157 games in each of the last four years, I think you can afford to be a little flexible with the batting average gripes.

The fact remains that Sizemore really isn't a leadoff hitter. He plays the part well enough -- a testament to his talent -- but he takes a lot of swings, and a byproduct of that is a lot of strikeouts. It's a take-the-good-with-the-bad proposition. Without the aggressive approach at the plate and on the bases, Sizemore isn't a 30/30/30 man.

Jhonny Peralta: Steady

Maybe he won't repeat last year's 42-double performance. But if he splits the difference between '07 and '08, ending up with a batting average in the .270s, 20 homes and 30 doubles, that's a productive year for Peralta. Like Sizemore, he strikes out too much, and his long swing can be an out-producer as much as a run-producer. But taken at face value, Peralta is a solid contributor, and that should continue in '09.