

The Hot April Nights of 1988

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

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An unseasonably cold April isn't uncommon. Particularly in Cleveland, where winter customarily spills over into the other seasons like a long Friday lunch hour. Consequently, once May finally arrives bright, warm, and breezy, a frosty April is quickly forgiven. And forgotten.

But even when we're confronted with an extended string of absurdly low temperatures when we should be watching flowers bloom and blossoms pop, we know it's only temporary. For as impatient as we may get, deep down we know it will pass. We remind ourselves that the nonsense will soon cease and reality will eventually settle in - just as it always does.

We understand that sometimes April isn't ordinary. And 25 years ago this April, neither were the Indians.

That's not to say there were high expectations going into the 1988 season. If you remember anything about the Indians of the Gordon Gecko/Ronald Reagan decade, you know optimism was scarce. After losing 101 games in 1987 while posting a team ERA of 5.28 - the highest in Major League Baseball in more than 30 years - hope wasn't exactly springing, and it certainly wasn't eternal.

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To their credit, the Indians recognized their primary problem and addressed it, albeit like a Sam's Club regional manager. Finding pitchers from every nook and cranny of the Western Hemisphere, they shipped them to Tucson in bulk. A total of 45 were invited to camp, but none brought any reason for optimism with him.

When the desert dust settled Easter weekend and heavily-moustached (but as yet unfamiliar) Doug Jones narrowly won the final spot in the bullpen, the Tribe broke camp with a starting rotation that would not be confused with the great Indians' staffs of the 1950s. Nor with the milquetoast, below-average staffs of the 1970s, for that matter. After sifting through a flatbed truckful of candidates, the Tribe brass settled on five familiar names who had all been a part of the 1987 intestinal virus: Tom Candiotti, Greg Swindell, John Farrell, Scott Bailes, and Rich Yett.

This was a staff put together not to excel, but merely to survive. To expect this group to lead the team to national prominence was like expecting Rick Astley to build a lasting pop career.

And yet, that's precisely what happened.

At first, it appeared as though nothing had changed over the winter. While Danny Manning and the Kansas Jayhawks pulled off a massive upset of Oklahoma in the NCAA men's basketball championship game, the Indians reenacted their entire 1987 season on a frustrating opening night deep in the heart of Texas.

After a promising start that saw Julio Franco blast a home run to straightaway center in the team's first at-bat of the season and the Indians take a 3-1 lead into the bottom of the seventh, the wheels - as they had countless times the year before - came off the wagon. A nice outing for knuckler Tom Candiotti evaporated with two errors, a blown double play, and a missed tag at home plate as the Rangers tied the game, then scored the winning run on a homer in the eighth.

And here we went again - what little enthusiasm that had sprung up with the return of baseball was instantly stomped on like your backyard's first dandelion. Before we could get to the first

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post-game show, it had become another death march to September. And when the Browns' 1988 schedule was announced the following day, Cleveland was both relieved and excited to be able to turn its attention back to football.

But, efficiently and ever so quietly, the Indians demonstrated that they genuinely were a different team than the one that had haunted Cleveland the summer before. And that this was indeed a different season.

An Abnormal April

Hard-throwing southpaw Greg Swindell, making his first start in 10 months after recovering from an elbow injury, was magnificent in game two, propelling the Tribe to a 5-1 win. A late home run by Cory Snyder - who'd hit a limp .236 in 1987 while striking out a preposterous 166 times - delivered a victory in the rubber match with the Rangers and sent the Indians into their home opener with a winning record.

Not that it generated much excitement within the 216 area code. True, baseball would return to Cleveland that Friday night, and while the symbolism was always appreciated, it didn't feel like the esoteric arrival of spring that purists waxed about all winter long.

That Friday night, as would be the case for the next three weeks, it was cold in downtown Cleveland. Though it was surprisingly dry and remarkably sunshiny, temperatures hovered in the 40s all weekend. But through the chill, the Indians continued to heat up, outscoring the Orioles 28-6 in a resounding four-game sweep that extended their winning streak to six games and propelled them to baseball's best record.

And they were winning in ways as abnormal as the daily high temperatures.

Chillicothe native Scott Bailes - who'd posted an ERA of 6.61 over the final two months of 1987 - pitched a three-hit shutout in the home opener. Obscure backup Carmelo Castillo came off the bench to start in left field for the first time in seven years and went 3 for 4 to spark a blowout win one day, then Mel Hall filled in for an injured Joe Carter to go 4 for 4 with a triple and a double

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the next.

While the hitting was timely and the hitters were legion, the reason the Indians were winning was the same reason they spent the previous summer losing. The pitching staff that resembled a carnival sideshow suddenly became immaculate, mowing down the opposition with both grace and ease. Each game became a rich, beautiful landscape painting created by a different artist and hung in a museum for all to appreciate. After surrendering four runs in the opener, Tribe pitchers would hold opponents to three runs or less in 13 of the next 14 games. "Three runs will win us a ball game now," Carter noted. "Last year we needed eight or nine."

But ironically, the Indians were doing all this in secret, almost as if they were a part of the witness protection program. After the opening series of the season, they failed to draw more than 7,000 fans for their next eight home games. Part of it was disbelief, part was the unusually frigid April that, against all logic, continued, delivering daytime snow flurries and nighttime temperatures into the lower 30s and upper 20s night after night.

Yet on those evenings when the Stadium filled with the thick clouds of breath streaming from the mouths of the few bundled fans in attendance, there was a discernible warmth in the ballpark. A baseless heat that served as a propulsion through the wintry blackness, somehow suggesting that actual spring may never arrive.

And everybody seemed fine with that. Because incredibly, as winter endured, things got only better.

We're Not Used to All This Winning

The Minnesota Twins, still glowing from their improbable World Series triumph six months before, came to town and lost two out of three. The Indians then set off for equally frigid Baltimore and added to the Orioles' soon-to-be-historic woes with a three-game sweep, extending to 12 what would become a record 21-game losing streak to start the season.

After a dramatic come-from-behind win delivered by oft-forgotten Brook Jacoby on Friday, the

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Tribe pitching stole the spotlight once again. On a frosty Saturday night by the Chesapeake in which the wind chill dipped into the 20s, Greg Swindell pitched 10 shutout innings and moved to 3-0 when the Indians clawed out a run in the 11th on a two-out single by unknown first baseman Willie Upshaw - purchased from Toronto just three weeks before. After John Farrell hurled another gem on Sunday, the Tribe was 11-2 - exactly a year after starting 1-10 - and was no longer flying under the radar.

USA Today put together a feature article on the resurgence. And much to the team's chagrin *Sports Illustrated*

composed a four-page piece on the Tribe - its first acknowledgment of the Erie Warriors since splashing the forecast of an "Indian Uprising" across its baseball preview issue 12 months earlier. In fact, SI coyly confessed that it had meant 1988, not 1987, as its target date for the Indians' surge. "At least we're not on the cover," Tribe president Hank Peters sighed.

Following Peters' sentiment, Cleveland kept waiting for reality to arrive and sweep away this false spring. "Admit it. You keep waiting for the hammer to drop," Paul Hoynes wrote in the *Plain Dealer*

. "For a downpour of acid rain to hit the American League East and erase the first-place Indians forever."

The acid rain was indeed on its way. But genuine, honest-to-goodness spring still wasn't here quite yet, and the Indians would ride this surreal wave just a little bit longer.

They stormed into the Metrodome, where the Twins had been unbeatable the previous October, and scored 28 runs in again taking two of three from the champs. After two more triumphs over lowly Seattle back at the icehouse that was Cleveland Stadium, the Indians were 16-4, had a two-game lead in the AL East, and still boasted baseball's best record. "This is beginning to get serious," Hoynes wrote. "And wonderful."

It was the best start for an Indians team in 47 years, and it was led by the same pitching staff that had been an embarrassment for all of baseball the previous summer. The same group of guys who'd had a 5.28 ERA in 1987 had a microscopic 1.75 clip to start 1988. The starting rotation that may as well have been selected from an L.L. Bean catalog was 10-0, "ruining all those allusions to Venus de Milo everyone chuckled about in spring training," Bill Livingston ruminated.

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As each frost-crystal perfect April day passed, the reality of the Indians' assault on baseball logic strengthened. NBC climbed on board the bandwagon, designating that Saturday's Tribe game with Oakland as its nationally televised Game of the Week. Which was tantamount to picking up your *TV Guide* and finding the Book of Revelations.

"What happened to the bad old days when a televised Indians game was like so much sporting Muzak," Bob Kravitz wondered in the PD, "relegated to the deep, dark background? When you spent most of your time socializing and/or acting in a depraved fashion, only to cast a parting glance at the game, which generally found the Tribe trailing, 11-1 in the sixth inning?"

And the Tribe's turnaround seemed to be the rising tide that lifted all of Cleveland's ships. The Browns were heading into the NFL draft as the odds-on favorite to win the Super Bowl. The Cavs suddenly caught fire to win eight of their last nine games to clinch their first playoff berth in three years and, for what it was worth, the Force stormed through the first round of the Major Indoor Soccer League playoffs. "We're not used to all this winning," Kravitz confessed. "This is a whole new concept. How are we supposed to react?"

By coming out the ballpark, the Indians hoped. "If the fans don't show up to see us now, then they're horse-bleep," the ever-eloquent (and now imprisoned) Mel Hall announced.

In response - or, more likely, not - better than 25,000 filed into Cleveland Stadium on the last day of this ethereal April to celebrate not only the Indians' resurgence, but the belated arrival of spring after a month-long, frost-coated delay. This sunshiny, balmy Saturday afternoon would provide the chance the Indians had been waiting for, the opportunity to show the remaining doubters that they were indeed the real deal and would be around for the long haul of the 1988 season.

But on the last day of a month that had seen the Indians record more April victories than any other in team history, sensibility finally arrived along with spring - both well overdue.

Reality Catches Up

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With Jesse Jackson and Michael Dukakis both bouncing around town trying to lock down votes ahead of Tuesday's Ohio presidential primary, the Athletics - on the cusp of their own era of greatness - pounded the Indians back to Earth with an 11-3 victory. Oakland then added another body blow on Sunday by scoring six runs in the ninth to steal an 8-4 decision.

With pastel pinks and whites finally beginning to emerge in the landscaping and yellowed lawns dissolving into carpets of emerald, the disastrous weekend started a string of nine losses in 10 games for the Indians, who quickly toppled out of first place...and out of Cleveland's imagination.

To be fair, the Indians bounced back, winning 13 of their next 16 to remain a conversation piece at Memorial Day, and hit a high-water mark of 16 games over .500 after a three-game sweep over Toronto the following week. But never again did they reach first place.

A mid-June series with the front-running Yankees drew better than 150,000 out to the Stadium to watch the Indians take two of three and creep within two games of the AL East lead. But by now, the sunscreen and ice-cream trucks of summer had arrived and the overly optimistic hopes of spring had all begun to melt away. A six-game losing streak soon dropped the Indians out of arm's reach of the division lead and started the wheels turning toward the type of season Tribe fans were used to.

After one final burst - a doubleheader sweep of the eventual pennant-winning Athletics on July 5 - the Indians' popsicle-stick dream house finally collapsed. By the end of July they'd dropped under .500 for good and finished a painfully ordinary 78-84, 11 games back in their customary sixth-place position.

Consequently, a quarter-century later, we don't remember much about the 1988 Indians. Their electric start was scraped away like April-morning frost on your windshield and soon forgotten. In the 25 years that have followed, the Indians delivered a few other false springs, but those hot April nights of 1988 carved out a permanent niche - even if they were dismissed as quickly as the shivery spring that served as the backdrop.

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In retrospect, it may not have meant much. Ultimately nothing more than an extraordinary April in an otherwise ordinary season. But in the heart of a truly dismal era, the '88 Tribe had us talking baseball over hot cocoa, taking off our wool winter hats and scratching our heads over their most unseasonable start ever.

Which was just as welcome as the arrival of spring after a winter that just doesn't want to end.

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