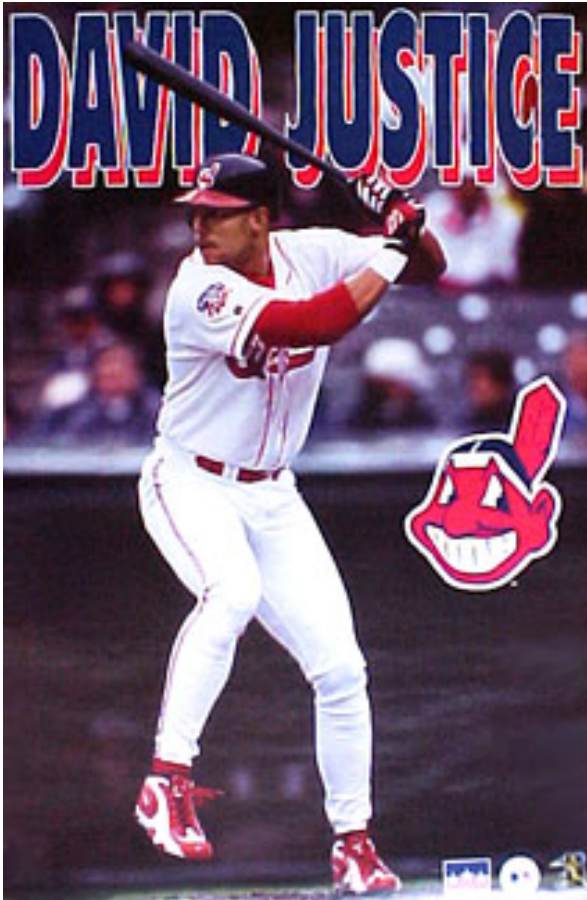


Written by {ga=googleeph2}

Thursday, May 16 2013 10:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 16 2013 3:40 PM



After forty seasons, all of Cleveland was awash in the excitement of playoff baseball.

John Hart had completed what Hank Peters had begun. In the late 1980s, working under the anonymity of yet another Indians rebuild, Peters began collecting the building blocks of a true big league powerhouse. He and Hart famously identified a pool of young players who they considered worthy of long-term contracts. The players forfeited free agency in return for multiple years of guaranteed money. The franchise gained some cost certainty and multiple seasons of player control.

Not all of the Indians players during the early seasons of that era actually panned out as 'core players'. For every Albert Belle, Carlos Baerga and Sandy Alomar, Jr., there were also a Carlos Martinez, a Mark Lewis and a Wayne Kirby.

But of course, they had way more 'hits' than 'misses'. They augmented the roster with veterans, star players on the back end of their careers who plugged holes in the lineup while assuming

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leadership roles in the clubhouse. The first wave of these vets included pitchers Jack Morris and Dennis Martinez, and



position players such as Eddie Murray and Dave Winfield.

To say the formula was effective is to understate the regular-season dominance of those teams. The Indians bludgeoned opponents' pitching- especially bullpens- and wrapped up division championships weeks before other teams. It seemed so easy.

The Indians won the American League pennant in 1995, before taking a step backwards in 1996 with an early playoff exit.

After that season, free agent Albert Belle signed with the rival Chicago White Sox. Hart had begun a new phase in this era of Indians baseball, having already traded crowd favorite Carlos Baerga to the New York Mets in a '96 deadline deal. With nothing to show for the loss of Belle, Hart took a deep breath, and sized up his center fielder. Kenny Lofton was a human highlight clip, with his speed on the base paths and breathtaking defense. Tribe fans still share YouTube

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links that show the home runs Lofton turned into long fly outs.

But Lofton's contract would be up soon, and there was no guarantee he would sign with Cleveland. Hart knew that if he lost Lofton, he needed something substantial in return.

In 1997, with spring training winding down in late March, John Hart made a jaw dropping move, one that shocked the fans in Cleveland. He dealt Kenny Lofton.

Not only that; he dealt his center fielder – a player whose fan appeal was evident by his often being referred to by first name only – to the Atlanta Braves. The team who had beaten the Indians in the 1996 World Series. It would be so 'Cleveland' for Kenny to come back to haunt them.

And what about this deal? Departing the North Coast with Lofton was Alan Embree, a hard-throwing left handed reliever. One player coming from Atlanta would be Marquis Grissom, the centerfielder who would replace Lofton. Grissom, whose father had been a factory assembly worker at General Motors (guess what model vehicle he worked on), was in the middle of a long term contract that the Braves wanted to get out from under. Grissom was solid; he could



hit some and had some speed.

The other player in the Lofton deal was former All Star David Justice. The outfielder who helped beat the Tribe in the 1995 Series, with a home run in the decisive Game Six.

Justice, whom had been on the disabled list since the previous May, was getting paid a lot of money- fans noted his \$6+million salary and wondered why Lofton had to be jettisoned. Also, Justice would be the replacement for Belle, both in left field and in the lineup. The pressure to produce was palpable, both on the 'rebounding' Indians and on David Justice.

The Indians opened the 1997 season at Oakland, vs. the Athletics. The A's were an average team by now, in the wake of one of their most recent playoff eras. Hall of Fame closer Dennis Eckersley was long gone, but the roster still boasted the formidable Canseco-McGwire tandem.

The pitching matchup pitted Tribe ace Charles Nagy against Ariel Prieto. The latter was a celebrated Cuban whom had emigrated to Puerto Rico. After pitching poorly for the Cuban national team, he was allowed to leave that country. The A's selected him near the top of the 1995 amateur draft, and he began pitching in the big leagues right away. His career never really got off the ground, but in 1997, he was still getting his shot.

TOP 1st: Well. 1) Lineup upheaval notwithstanding, the Cleveland Indians could still score runs. 2) We were getting the picture on Prieto. While he may well have been a much ballyhooed import, that didn't guarantee his effectiveness. Mariano Rivera, he was not.

The Tribe batted around in the first. Grissom got things started with a line out to left field. SS Omar Vizquel followed with a liner of his own, to center field for a single. On a 2-1 pitch to 1B Jim Thome, Omar stole second. Thome worked a full count before earning a walk. Then, on the 1-0 pitch to 3B Matt Williams, Vizquel broke for third- the throw was there, but 3B Scott Brosius booted the ball. Williams walked to load the bases.

David Justice stepped up, and sent a ground ball to second that forced Williams. Vizquel scored on the play. RF Manny Ramirez and 2B Julio Franco then each singled in a run.

On the 2-1 pitch to DH Kevin Mitchell, Prieto let loose a wild pitch (is there a good alternative to the overused verb, 'uncorked'?). With first base open, Prieto issued the intentional pass to Mitchell. With the bases loaded again, C Sandy Alomar was next, with an RBI infield single to the shortstop.

Marquis Grissom then crushed a deep fly ball to left-center field... that stayed in the yard. Inning over. Kind of a crappy start for Oakland, with their presumptive ace allowing four runs on four hits. Three of the runs were unearned, but on none of his 42 first inning pitches did he inspire confidence. **4-0 TRIBE, MIDDLE OF THE 1st.**

BOTTOM 1st: SS Tony Batista, Brosius and RF Jose Canseco went groundout-strikeout looking-groundout. Nagy was behind in the count with all three, but escaped.

4-0

TRIBE, END OF 1

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Both pitchers settled in over the next couple innings.

BOTTOM 3rd: On an 0-1 pitch, CF Ernie Young belted a dinger to deep right-center off Nagy. **4-1 TRIBE,**

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Defiant, Offensive David Justice. Back when he was an Atlanta Brave, he was married to

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