



At the halfway point of the season, the Indians have played great at times, terrible at others, and haven't really been in between. After starting 8-13, the Indians rattled off 18 wins in 22 games to be 26-17. They followed that up with a stretch where they went 4-16 to fall to 30-33. Now, the Indians are 42-38, winners of 12 of their last 17.

With a pretty big sample size to judge, I'm willing to say that the Indians will be in the playoff hunt for the duration and there's even a chance that they can challenge the Tigers. I'll give a side-by-side stat comparison in an abridged version of this week's View from the Porch. The Indians have a pretty generous schedule the rest of the way that should prevent long stretches of losing like they have had this season. When the Indians had their 4-16 stretch, they were playing a lot of good teams and had a nine-game, three city road trip.

When you look at the other teams in the wild card hunt - Oakland, Texas, Tampa, Boston, New York, and Toronto - all of those teams will be beating up on each other. The Indians will see a lot of Chicago, who will start to sell off some of their tradable pieces, Kansas City, who can't seem to put the complete package together, and Minnesota, who is always a frustrating team to play against, but has a very poor starting rotation. The Indians also play the Mets, Astros, and Marlins in September, three of the worst teams in baseball.

If the Indians can find some consistency, which has been tough because of injuries and various guys slumping at the same time, there's no reason they can't stay within range of Detroit late into the summer. The bullpen is starting to get healthy again, the lineup is finally back to full strength, and the rotation seems competent enough to give the Indians a chance.

How can the Indians possibly stay with Detroit? Detroit is tied with Boston for the league's top wRC+, a sabermetric stat that adjusts runs for park factor and has the second-best wOBA at .339. If you like the traditional stats, they have the second-best OPS and lead all of baseball in batting average. Their starting rotation leads all of baseball in WAR by 3.6 wins. They have the best FIP at 2.87 and the top K/9 rate at 9.21, nearly one full strikeout better than the next team.

That's an impressive group of stats, which are all through Thursday night's games. On paper, a lot of people believe that the Tigers are the best team in the American League, and they're probably right. But, guess what? The Tigers probably can't perform much better offensively or in the starting rotation than they already have and they're only 2 games ahead of the Indians.

The Tigers have the seventh-worst bullpen ERA at 4.07, rank 22nd in defensive runs saved at -18, and have a BABIP of .319. Their bullpen is not good, their defense is not good, and their offense should be due for some regression.

As I've mentioned, the schedule really softens up for the Indians from this point forward. Against teams below .500, the Indians pitching staff is 20-9 with a 3.41 ERA. Compare that to 20-29 with a 4.75 ERA against teams with winning records. Not only has the pitching staff enjoyed sub-.500 teams, the offense has as well. Against teams below .500, the offense has a slash line of .283/.355/.479/.835. Against teams over .500, the Indians are down to .236/.306/.382/.688.

The Tigers have lost Anibal Sanchez and Austin Jackson to injuries. In terms of disabled list situations, the Indians have lost Asdrubal Cabrera, Vinnie Pestano, Chris Perez, Jason Giambi, Scott Kazmir, Zach McAllister, Brett Myers, and have had nagging, non-DL injuries to Nick Swisher and Jason Kipnis. And, through all of that, the Indians remain well within striking distance.

I don't anticipate the Indians overtaking the Tigers and winning the division, but there is a lot of reason for optimism. With what has transpired so far, the Tigers should be up by seven or eight games...and they're not. By Pythagorean win-loss, which is determined by run differential, the Tigers should be 47-31, which would put them 6.5 games in front of the Indians. The Indians are right where they should be at 4X-3X.

There's a lot of baseball left to be played and it should be a fun rest of the season. If nothing

else, it should be a good race until the end.