



Seventy-two days. Sixty-seven games. That is all that is left of the 2013 Major League Baseball regular season for the Cleveland Indians. As the Indians begin play in the “second half” of the season, they sit just 1.5 games behind the heavily favored Detroit Tigers in the American League Central Division, 6.5 games ahead of the Kansas City Royals. It will be a two-team race for the next 10 weeks as the Indians try to take advantage of a friendly schedule to punch their first postseason ticket in six years.

The Tigers have been installed as a 1/5 favorite at the Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, giving them an implied probability of 83 percent to win the division. Baseball Prospectus gives the Tigers an 84.2 percent chance of winning the division while the Indians have a 15.4 percent chance of winning the division and a 16.7 percent chance of being one of the two wild card teams. In total, Baseball Prospectus gives the Indians a 32.1 percent chance of making the playoffs. If you had been given those odds back on April 2, would you have been happy with that?

To date, it's been a roller coaster ride for Indians fans. The team opened the season 2-0 and lost 13 of its next 19. At 8-13, the Indians rattled off 18 wins in 22 games for a 26-17 record, the high point of the season at nine games over .500. By June 10, a span of 20 games, the Indians were 30-33. By June 30, the Indians had a record of 44-38, going 14-5 the rest of the month. The Indians entered the All-Star Break at 51-44. Including off days, the Indians spent 17 days in first place over the first 95 games, leading by as many as 2.5 games. The biggest deficit was 5.5 games on June 17. From June 17-July 14, the Indians went 17-9 and picked up four games in the standings, despite losing three out of four to the Tigers during that span.

The Indians have the AL's best record in one-run games at 18-9. Only the Oakland A's have more wins in one-run games with 19, but they also have 11 losses. The Indians have the

fourth-worst record against teams with a record above .500 at 22-32, but are second in the league against teams under .500 at 29-12. Nine of the Indians' 32 losses against teams above .500 are against the Tigers. The Indians are just 3-9 against the Tigers this season, with seven games left, with the four-game series in Cleveland.

It would appear that the Indians' best hope of making the playoffs would be to win the Central Division title. The Indians trail in the wild card standings by 4.5 games and would have to jump over a few teams. Three teams in the AL East and two teams in the AL West have better records than the Indians, with the Yankees and Indians tied at 51-44. Common sense and simple probability dictate that it would be easier for the Indians to outright win the Central than beat out three or four other teams for a wild card spot.

It's cliché, but the best way to look at the Indians' chances in the AL Central is a glass half full v. glass half empty approach. To end on a high note, we'll look at the glass half empty approach first.

Glass Half Empty

With the exception of the bullpen, the Tigers are decidedly better than the Indians. It's reasonable to assume that Justin Masterson would be the Tigers' fourth starter behind Justin Verlander, Max Scherzer, and Anibal Sanchez. Only Masterson and perhaps Corey Kluber would supplant Rick Porcello in the Tigers' rotation. No other team on the planet, especially the Indians, has the luxury of a Miguel Cabrera.

The Tigers' position players are fourth in WAR at 17.1. The Indians' position players are eighth at 14.8. We've all operated under the assumption that the Indians are a better defensive team than the Tigers. It's true, but only marginally, as the Indians are -19 defensive runs saved, while the Tigers are -24. Neither team is particularly good defensively and that negates an advantage that we thought the Indians had entering the season.

The gap between the Tigers and Indians in terms of starting pitching resembles that giant hole in the ground in Arizona. Tigers' starters have combined for 14.5 WAR. They are 44-26 with a 3.73 ERA, a 3.13 FIP, and a 3.83 K/BB ratio. Indians' starters have combined for 4.8 WAR. They are 38-38 with a 4.42 ERA, a 4.23 FIP, and a 2.25 K/BB ratio. Those are staggering

figures.

The Tigers' Pythagorean win-loss record is actually 56-38. The Indians' Pyth W-L is 50-45. Looking solely at run differential, the Tigers should lead the Indians by 6.5 games. Pythagorean win-loss tends to be a statistic that evens out throughout the season. The Indians won't approach Baltimore's +11 gap between Pyth W-L and actual standings last season, but the Indians have not over or underachieved, while the Tigers have clearly underachieved.

Remember the bullpen? The one area we thought we had a huge edge over the Tigers? The Tigers bullpen has gotten some consistency now, jettisoning Jose Valverde, installing Joaquin Benoit as the closer, and using Drew Smyly in a premier setup role. The Tigers pen is 8-16, 20/29 in save opportunities, with a 4.15 ERA, a 3.53 FIP, and a 2.57 K/BB ratio. The Indians pen is 17-10, 23/40 in save opps, with a 4.10 ERA, a 4.20 FIP, and a 2.21 K/BB ratio.

The Tigers bullpen looks to be poised for improvement, while the Indians pen will either remain status quo or even get slightly worse. The 17 blown saves by the Indians bullpen is tied atop the AL with the Baltimore Orioles.

For the Indians to win the Central Division, they'll have to defy a lot of statistical evidence stacked against them. One could argue that the numbers are showing that the Indians are playing about as well as they can, while the Tigers have another level that they have not yet reached. When they reach that level, they will run away and hide from the Indians.

Glass Half Full

As depressing as the previous 466 words are, there's still reason to be optimistic. For one thing, the Tigers, while likely due for some improvement, are only 1.5 games ahead of the Indians. The aforementioned streaky play from the Indians could have buried them, but they've managed to stay in the hunt. When you consider that the Indians are 3-9 against the Tigers, making for a six-game differential in the standings, the Indians are actually 1.5 games in front of the Tigers when they don't play each other. Obviously we can't take away those games from the standings, but the Indians still get seven cracks at the Tigers.

The Tigers offense is due for some regression. They currently have a team BABIP of .318. Since 2009, only four teams have finished the season with a BABIP of .318 or above. While Miguel Cabrera's will probably remain pretty high because he's just ridiculous, Jhonny Peralta is an enormous regression candidate. Peralta has a .385 BABIP, a line drive rate that is nearly six percent higher than his career average, and has the lowest contact percentage of the last six years. He's swinging and missing more than usual, but enjoying the best average of his career. That seems unlikely to continue.

As awesome as Miguel Cabrera is, he's due for some regression himself. He's putting up historic numbers. Since home runs don't get included in BABIP, since it's technically not "in play", Cabrera's actual batting average when he doesn't strike out is .448. That's just unsustainable. I don't care who you are. Nearly 45 percent of balls put into play going for hits is ludicrous. He's an incredible hitter, but we're seriously talking about one of the most productive seasons ever.

Another one due for a visit from the regression fairy is Torii Hunter. Hunter's BABIP is .362. He doesn't walk and hits a lot of ground balls. His career BABIP is .310 and last season was the only other season with a BABIP over .330. It seems unlikely to continue. It may just be one of those anomalies for Hunter, like 2012, but I'm going to look at it historically and say it's highly doubtful that Hunter keeps being so productive.

With that in mind, there have to be some Indians due for improvement, right? Why, yes, there are. Nick Swisher tops this list. Swisher is posting a slash line of .242/.352/.398/.750. It's not terrible, but it's not in line with Swisher's career slash of .255/.360/.463/.823. The big difference is his lack of power. Swisher averaged 58 extra base hits per season from 2005-2012. This season, Swisher is on pace for 47 extra base hits, if we assume he plays 65 of the remaining 67 games. That's a huge difference for a guy batting in the middle of the order. By ISO, or isolated power, which is $SLG - BA$, this would be the worst year of Swisher's career by a pretty sizable margin.

Another key middle of the order bat who should start producing better is Asdrubal Cabrera. A large increase in strikeouts has hurt Cabrera this season. He is batting 21 points below his career average and his OBP is down 24 points. After averaging 3.25 WAR over the last two seasons, Cabrera has been worth just 0.7 WAR so far this season. If he is able to come around, he'll be a huge asset to the lineup.

Three of the Indians starting pitchers, Justin Masterson, Corey Kluber, and Scott Kazmir all show varying degrees of improvement from their advanced metrics. Masterson has a 3.72 ERA, but a 3.41 FIP. Kluber has a 3.88 ERA, but a 3.41 FIP. Kazmir has a 4.60 ERA, a 4.43 FIP, and a 3.90 xFIP. For Kazmir, xFIP is the important number because it is what a pitcher's FIP would be assuming a league average home run rate. Kazmir's problem has been the long ball this season. If he's able to cut down on those, he'll become a much more effective starter. With Masterson and Kluber, they have good strikeout-to-walk ratios, which really drive the FIP. Masterson may not improve much, but Kluber has the potential to have a phenomenal second half.

Ultimately, the biggest reason for optimism for Tribe fans is the schedule. Of the 67 games left on the schedule, the Indians play just 19 against teams that entered the All-Star Break with a winning record. They play Baltimore at home (3), Detroit home (4) and away (3), Texas at home (3), Oakland away (3) and Atlanta away (3). The other 51 games on the schedule are against Chicago (10; 6H, 4A), Kansas City (6; 3H, 3A), Minnesota (13; 3H, 10A), Houston (4H), Anaheim (6; 3H, 3A), Miami (3A), Seattle (3A), and the Mets (3H).

The Tigers still have to play Boston (3A), the Yankees (3A), Kansas City (14; 8H, 6A), Oakland (4H), Washington (2H), Philadelphia (3H), the White Sox (16; 6H, 10A), Minnesota (6; 3H, 3A), the Mets (3A), the Marlins (3A), Seattle (4H), and the Indians (7; 3H, 4A).

Both teams have favorable schedules, so it will probably come down to the seven games left between the two teams.

In a sense, the Indians could control their own destiny, even though they won't play the Tigers again after September 1, unless there's a one-game playoff for the division championship.

Verdict

The Indians should absolutely be in the hunt for the duration. If it comes down to the final weekend of the season, it's unlikely that the Miami Marlins will do the Tribe any favors. There's no reason for the team to fade from this race. If they do get beat, it will be because the better team beat them.

It should be an entertaining second half and if some things break the Tribe's way, they could be going back to the playoffs for the first time since 2007.