



Sometimes the truth can set you free. Other times the truth is too much to bare. In the case of your 2013 Cleveland Indians it just may be a combination of both. For the sad truth is that the Indians, while likeable, improved and entertaining, are simply not among baseball's better teams and lack the talent that typically trumps likeability and effort.

There's no need to make a mountain out of a molehill as it pertains to this Indians-Tigers series. In case you were sleeping through the first two games of the series, Detroit has scored in only two of the innings the teams have played but that's been enough to win each of the two games and extend their AL Central lead from three games to five games.

The Tigers used a 4-run 9th inning Monday night to completely pop the balloon of momentum the Indians had built through eight innings. That 4-run 9th turned a 2-0 lead and a potential 2-game lead for the Tigers into a 4-2 Detroit win and a 2-game swing in the standings. Tuesday night the Tigers score five times in the 5th

inning on tribe 'ace' Justin Masterson to turn a 1-0 deficit into a 5-1 win and a 5-game lead in the division.

The problem the Indians face isn't so much that the Tigers are on a very hot roll right now so much as it is that they are simply better in pretty much facet of the game than the Tribe. The Detroit starters are better, their lineup is better and their bullpen is at least the Indians equal, if not actually better.

All one really has to do is look at hitters two through five in each lineup to get a gage on the two offenses. The Indians 2-5 features a struggling Nick Swisher, a steady Jason Kipnis, a miscast and slumping Asdrubal Cabrera in the cleanup spot and the steady (but not fearsome) Michael Brantley hitting 5th. Meanwhile the Tigers run out Torii Hunter, Miguel Cabrera, Prince Fielder and Victor Martinez as their 2nd-5th hitters in the lineup to compliment leadoff hitter Austin Jackson and the rest of their lineup.

Hunter, Cabrera, Fielder and Martinez are a rough road for any pitcher and Cabrera has 100RBI himself while Asdrubal and Swisher have combined for 74RBI, two fewer than Fielder has on the season. Hunter's 56RBI and Martinez's 61 would both be good enough for second most RBIs on an Indians team led by Kipnis's 68.

The cold, hard truth of the matter is that the Indians are 5-23 against Boston, New York and Detroit this season. If you can't find it in your heart to consider the Yankees one of baseball's elite teams (and you're likely correct in that argument) then replace the Yankees with the Rays and the Indians are 6-21 against those clubs.

If likeability, effort and character equated to wins more often than plain, old talent did this Indians team might be atop the standings and headed toward glory. But the bottom line in baseball is that talent most often wins out and the Indians are clearly behind baseball's best in that category.

That's not to say there is no value in beating the dregs of the league and struggling against the elite teams. Simple math and common sense tells us that are far more dregs than elite clubs and the Indians have improved this season to the point that they routinely beat those bad teams and that they can jump up and bite some decent teams like Texas when those teams are struggling. You can reach the post season that way and you can also look at the Tigers and wonder how a team with that much talent can't seem to put a great deal of distance between themselves and the Tribe.

The Tigers have a tendency to sleepwalk for periods of time and are prone to going through the motions. That hasn't been the case since the All Star break, though, and Detroit seems pretty damn engaged since that point in time. Good, veteran teams do pace themselves through the long season and the Tigers certainly appear to be doing that knowing that their best effort is

simply more than the Indians can keep pace with.

In this series alone the Tigers have toyed with the Indians like the Tribe was a mouse trapped in a bathtub, giving the team and their fans some hope and then violently snatching it back seemingly at will. Monday's Indians loss was particularly cruel, with Detroit seemingly waiting until the last minute to snuff out hopes of Indians fans and players. That was the first time all season that a noticeably affected Tito Francona faced the media after a loss and LOOKED like he had lost. Francona was at a loss for words, his voice trailing off after a sentence or two, and he clung to words like 'resiliency' like a life raft.

Resiliency isn't the problem with the Indians. They, by and large, play with a lot of heart and they play for each other. The bigger problem is that they're just not as good, 1-9 in the lineup or 1-5 in the rotation, as teams like Detroit and it's hard to play uphill all season long.

Making matters worse is that Justin Verlander looked like he re-discovered himself Tuesday night, hitting 97-99mph regularly and throwing his sharp breaking stuff for strikes. That came only minutes after the Indians advised us that Corey Kluber had been put on the DL with the same injury Zach McAlister just recovered from, a sprained finger on his pitching hand, that took McAlister weeks to return from. Kluber has been, arguably, the Indians most consistent pitcher since assuming a spot in the rotation and he's been downright dominant over his last five or six starts. Those are losses and holes that teams like the Indians, who lack organizational depth that's the by-product of bottomless resources, struggle to recover from.

Danny Salazar is slated to start tonight for the Indians and he'll likely be the guy to assume Kluber's spot in the rotation if he's up to the task. That's all well and good and maybe Salazar is the 2013 version of 1997's Jaret Wright. Even in the event that Salazar is your ace up the sleeve you just played him earlier in the campaign than you would have liked and he's likely on an innings watch as he recuperates from Tommy John surgery. That means he's a finite resource and it also means that you can't use him as the replacement for anyone else that goes down with an injury or should another starter falter. It also means that even if guys were healthy and effective down the road that you're burning Salazar's innings now as opposed to maybe putting him in the pen to stabilize that area of concern down the stretch run.

As mentioned before, this isn't to say that this Tigers series defines the Indians season. This team HAS been resilient and can still make a run down the stretch. But it means the Indians are back to playing the 'if' game. Teams without unlimited resources and with limited talent always

go into a year betting on 'ifs'. 'If' Kluber and/or McAlister can develop, 'if' Scott Kazmir gets his groove back, 'if' the bullpen is solid, and so on. The Indians have already hit on their fair share of 'ifs' this season and it's unreasonable to expect that those bets keep coming in.

We can often get caught up in an 8-game winning streak built on the bodies of a slumping (at the time) Texas team and a bad Chicago club. But reality can smack you right in the face when you play a legitimate, title-contending team like Detroit.

And reality bites.

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