



The psyche of the Cleveland sports fan is built on skepticism. If it's going good, when is the bottom going to fall out? If it's going bad, when does it hit rock bottom? The Indians did very little to address fan skepticism this past week, getting swept by the superior Detroit Tigers. The series began with an outstanding performance from Corey Kluber and ended with a position player pitching the ninth inning. In between, Kluber was placed on the DL for four-to-six weeks, the Indians lost a game in 14 innings, and managed to score three runs off of Justin Verlander and Max Scherzer. All of this while Progressive Field became Comerica Park South and a preseason performance from the Browns has turned them back into the apple of the Cleveland sports eye.

It was a terrible showing at a terrible time for the Indians. Over 162 games, hoping to win the AL Central Division crown over the Tigers was probably a pipe dream. Personally, I believe they're the best team in baseball now that their bullpen issues are sorted out, Victor Martinez is rounding back into form, and Jose Iglesias is actually an upgrade to Jhonny Peralta. The rotation is ridiculously good and Miguel Cabrera is, arguably, the best hitter on the planet. There's no shame in losing to the Tigers, although there is a lot of frustration, and deservedly so.

The Indians are on the cusp of being able to play with the Tigers, despite their 3-13 record against them this season. Of the losses, two are in extra innings, one is a blown save, and five were started by either Carlos Carrasco or Ubaldo Jimenez. Unfortunately, as my father has always told me, "Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades".

Now that the dust has settled, we're left to look at the wild card, which is probably what we've been looking at all along. The Indians are 59-41 against everybody not wearing Detroit or Tigers

on their jerseys, so there's some reason to hope that relevancy in September is still a possibility. This past week certainly hurt the Indians' chances, but the season is far from a complete loss.

What we saw this week is that the Indians have no margin for error against good teams. Up until Thursday's blowout, the Tigers had scored in just six of the 32 innings played. They were 3-0. The Indians have been at their best this season when they are playing free and easy. Guys like Nick Swisher and Asdrubal Cabrera have put too much pressure on themselves all season long, and you can see the byproduct. Both are having well below average offensive seasons. Baseball is a hard enough game with a level head. Add in self-induced mind games and the game becomes that much tougher.

It was really painful to watch. The Indians have a lot of talent. They're better than they've played against the Tigers, but it was eminently clear who the more talented team was overall. The Tigers got the big hits. The Tigers got the big outs. The Tigers made several mistakes in the series in the field and on the bases and were able to overcome every single one of them. It doesn't make the Indians a bad team. It makes the Indians a team that got consumed by the moment. The series probably takes a different turn if Chris Perez saves the first game, but it's no excuse for not bouncing back.

The Indians could have gotten to Justin Verlander early in the second game. They had runners on second and third with nobody out in the second inning. They scored one run and it came without a hit. The Tigers had first and third with nobody out in the fifth inning. It led to five runs. The Indians didn't sniff another scoring chance.

Because the bullpen has no reliable setup man, Danny Salazar was sent back out into uncharted waters on Wednesday. He's been on a pitch count and innings limit all season long in Columbus. But, at the Major League level, in a high-stress environment, Salazar went back out to the mound in the eighth inning over 85 pitches. Miguel Cabrera hit a go-ahead home run. The Indians failed to get more than one run in the bottom of the eighth, despite starting the inning with back-to-back doubles. Over the next four innings, the Indians managed one baserunner, and he was erased on a double play.

The Indians choked in the moment. Not because they're a bad team. Not because they lack talent. But simply because they choked. And it set them back in the standings and in the hearts and minds of Cleveland sports fans.

The next three weeks for the Indians are really important. For one, they need to get back on track after entering the Tigers series on a roll and having it abruptly stopped by a team now on a bigger roll. After that, there is a nine-game road trip, which is important because the Indians are just 25-30 on the road. Following a brief home weekend against the Twins, it's back out on the road to take on Atlanta and Detroit, two of the best teams in baseball.

It will be the final chance for the Indians to prove that they are for real. The September schedule is filled with bottom feeders and the suddenly-relevant Kansas City Royals. The team's playoff hopes will be determined by the rest of August.

One of the best ways to evaluate a team is by how they bounce back. The Indians have bounced back over and over again this season. In the first series after playing the Tigers, the Indians are 5-3 with series wins over Texas and Toronto. One of the interesting dichotomies within baseball is that the game is based on statistics over a large sample size, yet it requires a very short memory.

An old adage in baseball is that you will win 60, you will lose 60, and it's what you do with the other 40 that defines your season. To date, the Indians have won 62, lost 54, and have 46 to go. Clearly, it's what the Indians do with the final 46 that will define their season. It looks like it will take 90 wins to be in serious contention for the wild card, which means that the Indians will need to go 28-18 to have a shot.

As crippling as the Tigers series seems to be, it was four games in a 162-game season. Without looking, I'd guess that the vast majority of teams that have made the playoffs have lost four games in a row at some point during the season. The Indians cannot let this series define their season. Similarly, the fans cannot let this series define the Tribe's season. This is a ballclub that remains worthy of support, regardless of the Browns playing glorified practices or beginning their newest quest to finish last in the AFC North. The wheels of apathy are starting to spin among Cleveland fans already. There's a lot of baseball left and if the guys in that clubhouse believe, then so should you.