



Despite two crippling losing streaks over the last couple of months, the Indians find themselves in the thick of the wild card chase in the month of September. Even with the awful attendance figures that imply that the fans believe this team will fall short and create another disappointment to add to the laundry list of failures in Cleveland sports, all of us would have instantly accepted contention in September back on April 2.

Sitting three games back in the wild card standings and 6.5 games back in the division has to be considered progress. Oddsmakers in Vegas pegged the Indians for 76.5 wins. With a series win this weekend, the Indians would be at 76 wins. Considering the production the team has gotten from its key offensive players and the streaky, inconsistent play all season long, this is quite an achievement.

My personal mantra has been that I simply wanted the Indians to play meaningful games in September. That's the case, so I consider the season a success. But now, I want more. The schedule sets itself up for the Indians to have that chance, but it's going to take a sustained run of quality play because the Indians have to jump multiple teams.

Here's a breakdown of the remaining schedules for the teams in the wild card hunt:

Team

Record

Opp Win%

Home

Away

Tampa (0 GB)

77-62

.513

11

12

NY Yanks (2.5)

75-65

.502

9

13

Cleveland (3.0)

74-65

.440

12

11

Baltimore (3.0)

74-65

.515

13

10

Kans City (4.5)

73-67

.522

9

13

Tampa Bay has four at home against Baltimore and three in New York. New York has four at Baltimore. Cleveland and Kansas City play each other six times. Of concern for the Indians is that the Yankees end the season against Houston, so if it comes down to that final weekend, the Yankees will be playing baseball's worst team. In this example, I'm assuming that one of Texas or Oakland will secure one of the wild card berths. Oakland has a five-game lead over the Yankees and a weak schedule.

The Indians have things set up in their favor, but some lengthy losing streaks and a season's worth of horrible play against good teams have put them in a position where they cannot control their own destiny. I would set a goal of 17-6 for the Indians and hope that 91 wins is good enough to get the second wild card. That's a lofty goal, but it can certainly be done. The Indians are 40-17 against teams with a record under .500 this season, which equates to a .702 winning percentage. A 17-6 mark is .739, so it's not impossible, and "Team Streak" has gone on similar runs this season. Kansas City is the only team that the Indians will face that is above .500.

One can't help but wonder if the starting rotation is going to be able to hold together long enough to put together that type of run. Justin Masterson is now sidelined with an oblique issue. It's fair to speculate how this has been going on, as August was Masterson's worst month from a control standpoint. It was his lowest month by K/9 at 8.22, his highest in BB/9 at 4.46, and opposing lineups had a .353 OBP against him in August. It was also the month with the highest line drive rate of the season at 23.8 percent, over five percent higher than any other month. It's possible that Masterson has been pitching with this nagging problem for a little while now.

Corey Kluber returns from the disabled list for the Indians, but who knows how many starts it will take him to get back in the groove. Arguably the team's best pitcher this season, Kluber did not make any rehab starts. The key to Kluber's success this season has been his command, cutting his walk rate down and giving up fewer home runs. Those are the things that take time to come back after a stint on the DL, so that's a major cause for concern.

Scott Kazmir has been getting extra rest whenever the Indians can get it for him. After not throwing any Major League innings in 2012 and just 1.2 innings of work in 2011, Kazmir is now up over 130 innings for the season. The wear and tear showed in August as Kazmir posted a 5.40 ERA in 25 innings and opposing batters hit .305/.357/.481 off of him. How much he has left in the tank is anybody's guess, but the Indians will milk every last drop out of Kazmir since he'll likely be with another team next season.

Ubaldo Jimenez has posted a 2.22 ERA since the All-Star Break and has actually found a way to become one of the more consistent Indians starters. His K/9 is up to 9.80 and what's particularly interesting is his dramatic change against left handed hitters. Lefties batted .271/.375/.479 off of Jimenez in 2012 and struck out just 18 percent of the time. This season, lefties are batting .220/.297/.392 and have struck out over 25 percent of the time. Jimenez is possibly pitching his way into a job with the Indians for next season, something I will address in the coming weeks. Can he keep this up when the Indians need it the most? We'll see.

Zach McAllister will continue to be a guy to give you a consistent five or six innings with the occasional gem mixed in. He should be one of the freshest starters for the Indians, missing some time with a finger injury. His ERA and FIP are identical, which means what you see is what you get. If the Indians score some runs for McAllister, he should help the playoff chase.

One of the interesting things about the Tribe's schedule is that they'll be facing some of the league's worst offenses. The remaining schedule, in order, is the Mets, Royals, White Sox, Royals, Astros, White Sox, and Twins. By wOBA, weighted on-base average, the Mets are 26th at .303, the Royals are 23rd at .305, the White Sox are 29th at .300, the Astros are 28th at .300, and the Twins are 19th at .309. The Twins are now without Justin Morneau and who knows if and when Joe Mauer will return. With roster expansion, some of these clubs will be looking at young players, so that could also benefit the Indians, since the teams around them in the standings are largely playing contenders.

Offensively, the Indians are 10th in wOBA at .320 with a traditional slash line of .251/.323/.405. In August, however, the Indians were 28th in wOBA at .292, worse than teams like the Astros, White Sox, Twins, Mariners, Mets, Cubs, and were only better than the Phillies and Marlins. Their slash line of .229/.295/.362 was the worst month of the season. In the team's defense, they faced the Marlins, Tigers, Angels, Twins, Athletics, Angels, Twins, and Braves. The Marlins, as terrible as they are offensively, rank 11th in ERA at 3.74, and ninth in ERA among starters with a 3.77. The Tigers have the best starting rotation in baseball by WAR. The Angels are 22nd in ERA, but the Indians did face both Jered Weaver and CJ Wilson. The Athletics are 10th in starter ERA and seventh overall. The Braves lead all of baseball in ERA at 3.19 and rank fifth in starter ERA.

So the Indians faced some good pitching. They also played games in Miami, Anaheim, Oakland, and Atlanta, four of the most pitcher-friendly ballparks in the league. The Twins rank dead last in starter ERA, the Mets' rotation took a big hit with the loss of Matt Harvey and is pedestrian past him, the Royals and White Sox are in the middle of the pack, and the Astros rank dead last in ERA and 27th in starter ERA. September is decidedly easier all around and should lead to improved offensive numbers.

The Indians need a few things to go their way in order to make the wild card playoff game. For one thing, they have to win. That's non-negotiable. For another thing, they need the teams ahead of them to split the games when they play each other. A sweep for one side or another will not help the Indians in the standings. The Indians' starting rotation has to find a way to keep itself together for these last 22 games.

Personally, I'm cautiously optimistic. Time is a factor and the Indians have to make up three games in the standings before they can entertain real thoughts of making the playoffs. But, again, like I said, this season is a success because the Indians are playing meaningful games in September. That should be the goal of every season. It starts with being in contention. Once football season starts, then it becomes a matter of who gets hot at the right time. It's very rare to

see runaways like the Braves in the NL East or the Dodgers in the NL West. It's incredibly difficult to sustain success at the Major League level over six months and 162 games. Put yourself in a position in September to make things interesting and anything can happen.

I'm not sure if we'll have an October to remember, but it's the first time we've had a September to remember since 2007 and that's a major step in the right direction.