



Is Cleveland a bad baseball town?

Apparently, we don't like what we see in the mirror at the moment.

Heading into play Friday, the Indians were 78-68, 1.5 games out of the second wild card spot, 3.5 games out of the wild card lead, and in a deep but still-scalable six-game hole in the division.

They're in the midst of a series in Chicago against the last-place White Sox. The remainder of the season includes three games against the third-place Royals, a four-game home series against the last-place Astros, two more games against the White Sox and four games to close out the season against fourth-place Minnesota.

This is exactly what we wanted in March, right? September finally matters for the Indians, and it's one of the softest September schedules the team has ever faced.

We should be oozing confidence as a fan base. We should believe that the Indians not only could make the playoffs, they *should* make the playoffs. They should be able to tear through the remainder of the schedule at an .800 clip and, at the very least, end up on the doorstep of the top wild card spot.

But we don't believe that. We've voted with our attendance at Progressive Field, where four-figure and low five-figure weeknight crowds are still the reality of the situation.

The first playoff-contending season in six years, and the Indians might as well be 20 games out to look at Progressive Field on most game nights. Much like the team stock that former owner Dick Jacobs issued in the latter part of the 1990s, people just aren't buying it.

It's not the economy. Not when the perennially-inept Browns also make a perennial killing at the season-ticket sales window. Not when nearly every decent restaurant in town has a 45-minute wait on a Saturday night. People still buy what they want to buy.

It's not endemic hard feelings toward owner Larry Dolan. Maybe the fans really are cooler toward Dolan than they ever were toward Jacobs. It's tough to follow an act like what the Indians put on the field from 1994 to 2001. But fans aren't staying away in droves to spite Dolan.

The biggest culprits in the short-circuiting of the Tribe's attendance are the numbers 6 and 27.

That would be the Indians' combined record against the Tigers, Red Sox and Yankees. The three highest-profile teams on the schedule, and the Indians completely wet the bed against all of them.

In other words, this team might make the playoffs, but nobody believes they have chances of making much noise once they get there. In a city that hasn't seen a championship trophy in 49 years, the prospect of making the playoffs just isn't enough to excite the fan base, because all it means is more heartbreak and embarrassment if they do get there.

In baseball, the small-market war cry is “Just make the playoffs, and anything can happen.” That’s true, but when you are all but assured of seeing at least one of the teams that combined to beat you 27 out of 33 games this year, the dreams turn to nightmares in a hurry.

If the Indians were in or near first place, if they had battled the Tigers to a draw this year, if they had the look of a 95-win team that could do some damage in October, chances are the hometown stands wouldn’t be a field of green silence. But that didn’t happen. We have the situation we have. Far from hopeless, but with enough negative warning signs to scare off the region’s emotionally-battered fans.

So is it worth it for this team to even make the playoffs, with the odds so heavily stacked against them once they’re there?

It depends on your definition of “worth it.”

If you just want the ring, you’re fully within your right to feel that way. Forty-nine years – with three teams for most of those years -- is a long enough drought for any city. Nobody in this space is going to tell you to just be happy with making the playoffs.

But then you really take a look and see how bad it can get. And in baseball, the postseason droughts can reach legendary status.

The Indians themselves went 41 years without a playoff game. The Pirates are working on ending a 20-year drought that included no winning seasons from 1993 until this year. The Royals haven’t made the playoffs since winning the World Series in 1985.

The Orioles broke a 15-year playoff drought last year, and the Nationals broke a drought that dated to 1981, when they were the Expos.

Bear in mind, we're just talking playoffs. No mention of the Cubs' 105-year World Series title drought, the Red Sox's 86-year "Curse of the Bambino," the White Sox's 88-year drought that ended in 2005 or the Tribe's drought, at 65 years and counting.

World Series title droughts have their own poetic verse. They almost always involve episodes of failure and foreboding under the bright lights. They become so well-known, they get reduced to names and phrases: Bill Buckner. Steve Bartman. The Black Sox. The black cat at Shea.

Curiously, in a town that loves to attach "the" to every sports misadventure, the Indians' meltdown in Game 7 of the 1997 World Series never really received a widely-accepted nickname. Even the main antagonist of that fateful ninth inning, Jose Mesa, has become little more than a minor sports villain in local lore. It would take 100 Jose Mesas to equal the rage inspired by one Art Modell or LeBron James.

The lack of resentment toward Mesa is a curious anomaly – good for Mesa, and probably good for our collective blood pressure, but still curious -- because he scraped closer to a World Series title than Modell ever did to a Super Bowl title or LeBron to an NBA title during their time in Cleveland. If you're going to get mad at someone, it's probably going to be the likes of Mesa. Those are the rules of the game when a world championship is at stake.

But playoff droughts? Failing to even make the postseason for years and decades? Those are just pathetic. Playoff droughts don't make villains or tragic characters. They simply produce an endless, numbing parade of forgettable players and forgettable teams.

The Indians have been playing baseball in this town for 112 years. They have made the playoffs in 10 of those seasons. That means roughly 92 percent of the time, an Indians season has ended on the last day of the regular season.

Regardless of how much of a buzz they're able to create around the region, regardless of their record against other contenders, regardless of whether they make the playoffs with room to spare or squeak in on the last day of the season, it's better for the 2013 Indians to become the 11<sup>th</sup> Tribe team to make the playoffs than the 103<sup>rd</sup> Tribe team to miss the playoffs.

There have been enough dark Octobers in our past. There will be more dark Octobers in the future. This year – even if it's for a moment – we can have October baseball again. Maybe it won't possess the electricity of 1995. Maybe it won't possess the magic of 1997. Maybe it won't become a surprise ALCS gift dropped in our laps like 2007. But it beats the all-too-familiar alternative.