



Making the playoffs in baseball is extremely difficult. In the NBA and NHL, more than half of the teams in the league make the playoffs. In the NFL, just six of the league's 32 clubs make the postseason, but the teams are only required to play 16 games, with nearly a week off from playing a real game in between. In baseball, just one-third of the teams qualify for the postseason and have to manage to remain consistent over a 162-game schedule.

Last season in the NBA, the Milwaukee Bucks made the playoffs with a 38-44 record. The Boston Celtics were one game over .500. The 2010 season saw a 37-45 Indiana Pacers team that finished 25 games back in the division standings made the playoffs, along with 41-41 Philadelphia. Last season, in the NHL, one team lost more games than they won and another had a .500 record entering the playoffs. That was in a lockout-shortened season. During the 2011-12 season, the Florida Panthers won their division, despite a 38-44 record.

The three worst winning percentages among MLB playoff teams during a full season are .516, .509, and .506. The 2006 St. Louis Cardinals went 83-78. They won the World Series. The 1973 Mets went 82-79. They lost in the World Series. The 2005 Padres were 82-80. More often than not, it takes 88 wins or more to secure a playoff spot, except for a division winner in a weak division. That equates to a .543 winning percentage over 162 games. That's a staggering level of consistency.

Matt Carson orchestrated the most recent big moment of the season with Thursday's walk-off single in a must-win game. Carson is 32 years old. He's played in 84 games at the Major League level since being drafted 11 years ago. When he rounded first base and was mobbed by his teammates, all those years of toiling in the minor leagues became more than worth it. His expression when he was met by Mike Aviles was priceless and in his postgame interview, he

sounded choked up when asked about how it felt to have the walk-off winner. One look at that celebration tells you how excited the players are right now.

When Indians fans say that they aren't excited for the opportunity to play in the postseason, it absolutely blows my mind. Being relevant in September without a gigantic payroll is a nice accomplishment in and of itself, but actually making the playoffs is a massive achievement. The Indians have eight games left to turn a good season into a great season and, unless you lack a pulse, that has to be considered exciting.

There are a lot of reasons why various people aren't excited. The Indians suck against good teams. They beat up on sub-.500 competition and struggle with the caliber of teams that they would face in the playoffs. The 2010 San Francisco Giants won the World Series despite a 33-41 record against teams with a record above .500. The 2011 St. Louis Cardinals played 102 of their 162 games against losing teams. They went 30-30 against quality competition. They won the World Series. Their opponent, the Texas Rangers, went just 35-37 against teams above .500 and were one Nelson Cruz misplay away from being the champions.

There are cases where teams that won the World Series simply dominated everybody they played. There are cases where playoff teams that were awful against good teams in the regular season got swept right out of the playoffs.

Are the Indians a legitimate World Series contender? Probably not in a relative sense, but making the playoffs automatically makes you a World Series contender because you have the chance to win it all. Once you qualify, anything can happen. Is that fandom or blind optimism? Absolutely not. We've seen a lot of things in sports over the years. The favorite generally does prevail, but the underdog makes his presence known from time to time.

This isn't a situation that the Indians are frequently in. In a small market, the third-smallest among the 30 MLB teams, consistent contention is a herculean task. Cleveland is an unattractive destination to free agents and it's very difficult to keep homegrown talent in baseball's free market free agent system. Seasons like this one have to be cherished. The Indians may ultimately fall short, but relevant, exciting baseball in September is vastly superior to what we've had in September over the last five seasons.

In trying to look from all angles, it's understandable to see why certain fans are pessimistic. Not only did the Indians finish the regular season with a 36-52 mark against teams above .500, but they were outscored 425-343 in those games. The Indians, if they manage to win the one-game wild card playoff, likely against Yu Darvish or David Price, would have to go on the road to Fenway Park and take on the team with the league's best record.

It's a very difficult task. But, I'm not even worried about it right now. I'm enjoying this ride. I'm living in the moment, much like the Indians should be doing. I'm taking it one game at a time and it doesn't matter who the opponent is. September wins are the hardest wins to get. My focus is on today, not tomorrow. I don't care if they had to play the 1927 Yankees (obviously assuming we had the technology to keep all of those guys alive) if they made the playoffs. I'd worry about it on the day of Game One.

It's clearly been a roller coaster ride this season. I think you'd be hard-pressed to find somebody who didn't think that this season has been fun. Has it been frustrating? You bet. Has it been gratifying? Yep. Has it been exciting? Damn right it has.

With any luck, that excitement won't end. This isn't the mid-90s where the Indians won the AL Central by 30 games and the playoffs were a given when the team got to Winter Haven for Spring Training. This is a group of guys that have persevered through ups and downs, injuries, inconsistencies, and plenty of adversity. Guys have made tremendous strides and have improved greatly. Others have regressed. Others have remained consistent.

We can count on one hand the number of times that the Indians have played relevant September baseball in this millennium. I bought playoff tickets on Friday for just the second time in my life. I'll be 27 next month. Indians baseball is clearly a passion of mine. I can't describe what that feeling was like to submit my payment and get the confirmation email. (That said, I will not open any email until (if) we clinch a spot)

Remember this feeling. Savor these moments. They don't come around all the time. And when they do, you better get excited.