



Every playoff race has its moments. Tuesday night, the Indians had their moment.

Jason Giambi's walk-off home run in the bottom of the ninth inning might have been the single most important hit for the Indians as a franchise since Tony Fernandez lofted an extra-inning solo shot over the right field wall at Camden Yards in Game 6 of the 1997 ALCS, providing the Tribe with the run that sent them to the World Series.

Yes, it was that important.

Sure, there have been other memorable hits in memorable games since 1997. In 2001, Omar Vizquel lined a three-run triple into the right-field corner, driving in the tying runs during the Indians' epic 12-run rally against Seattle. In September 2007, Casey Blake all but sealed the division title with an 11<sup>th</sup>-inning blast against Detroit. In the 2007 playoffs against the Yankees, Travis Hafner wrote the final verse of what has become known as the "Bug Game" with an extra-inning RBI single.

But none of those hits carried the gravity that came with the situation Giambi faced when he stepped into the batter's box with a 4-3 deficit to the last-place White Sox, two outs, Michael

Brantley on second and the smog wrought by a Chris Perez blown save still thick in the air.

It was a fork in the season road. The Indians were wedged in between Tampa and Texas in the wild card standings, one game's worth of room on either side. Hundreds of miles away, those teams were winning their games. And the number of games left on the schedule was slipping away like fall's evening daylight. The Indians had five more games after Tuesday.

A stumble, a slip-up, a several-day swoon, and the season could be over.

Everything about the 15 minutes leading up to Giambi's at-bat had been migraine-inducing. Perez had coughed up two home runs in the top of the ninth, the first blowing the save, the second giving Chicago the lead.

The single that put Brantley on base was sandwiched between swinging strikeouts by Yan Gomes and Mike Aviles. On Aviles' second strike, he swung wildly – as he often does -- then grimaced and shook his head, as if to say “Why did I swing at that?”

That was the story of the ninth inning to that point. The Indians were watching opportunity slip through their fingers. They were complicit in their own demise, but there was nothing they could do about it. It's as if they had been taken over by some self-destructive compulsion.

If Giambi strikes out, if he lofts a lazy fly to the outfield, if he beats one into the ground to second, everyone – including the players in the clubhouse – goes home remembering the Perez flameout and the swinging hack-fest in the bottom of the ninth. The players leave the ballpark with their heads low and come to the park Wednesday with perhaps more tension than they would have otherwise. More pressure to right the ship, to make the perfect pitch, to get the hit, drive in the run.

Baseball is a sport that gives you a lot of time to think. And sometimes thinking can be your worst enemy.

If Giambi makes the final out, Tampa is two games up for the first wild card position. The Indians are tied with Texas and potentially a one-day swing from finding themselves back in the chase pack and no longer steering their destiny – not a good place to be with nary more than a weekend to play.

Giambi was the fulcrum upon which all 156 previous games teetered as he stepped into the batter's box Tuesday night against Chicago closer Addison Reed. He waved at the first pitch, which caused our throats to tighten just a bit more. He took the second pitch, a ball.

When Reed left a slider high and dry on the third pitch, Giambi heaved his still-beefy 42-year-old shoulders into motion, lumberjack-chopping the night air and making solid, square contact. When the ball left his bat, it was instantly apparent he had sent it on a season-saving flight to the visitor's bullpen beyond the right field wall.

And for a few moments, 21,000 in attendance on a cool late September night sounded like the crowds of 42,000 from years past.

Maybe Giambi didn't put the Indians in the playoffs with his heroics, but he very well could have kept the window from slamming shut under the crushing weight of tension, pressure and lament.

After the celebration had died down, Giambi told reporters that he made Perez give him a hug. It was a pick-me-up for an embattled teammate who, largely due to his own actions, is finding it increasingly difficult to pitch well in front of the home fans. But it was symbolic of everything that was made right by Giambi's home run.

The season could have started to spiral out of control on Tuesday. Perez could have all but punched his ticket out of town. We, as a city and fan base, could have taken a turn down the familiar path of blame and bitter resentment. It could have all been yet another dark, depressing chapter in Cleveland sports.

But it wasn't. It was all salvaged, rebuilt and buffed to a mirror-shine by Jason Giambi and his timeliest of timely hits.