



For me, there are two seasons – baseball season and the offseason. The offseason came earlier than I wanted it to, but it also came three days later than I expected. The Cleveland Indians gave us one hell of a ride this season, with plenty of memorable moments, some devastating disappointments, and a bunch of reasons to look forward to the 2014 season. Winning 92 games in this market and doing so one season after a 94-loss campaign is a major accomplishment. It gives the team expectations for next season. The ending was certainly frustrating, but I don't think anybody can argue that it was still better limping to the finish line like the team had in each of the previous five seasons.

It all started on April 2 with a win over R.A. Dickey and the Toronto Blue Jays, a team expected to contend after a busy offseason that revamped most of the roster. It ended on October 2 with a loss in a one-game elimination round that essentially serves as a coin flip and provides no representation of how good either team is. The atmosphere was electric and the sight of a full ballpark brought a tear to my eye and skin covered with goosebumps.

The lasting memories of this season for the “fans” that filled up the bandwagon are going to be of a team that shrunk in the spotlight. The Indians went 4-15 against the Tigers and the four-game sweep that started with Chris Perez's painful blown save may have been what kept the Indians from punching their ticket to the American League Division Series with a Central Division title. Then, in the do-or-die wild card game, the Indians managed zero runs on nine hits, stranding runners in scoring position in the second, fourth, fifth, and seventh. After making a living this season on clutch hits, mostly with two outs, the Indians couldn't get that key hit in Game 163.

For the rest of us, those that were along for the entire ride, our mental movie of this season

contains 11 walk-off wins, the development of Jason Kipnis into a bona fide All-Star, the maturation of Corey Kluber, Yan Gomes, Michael Brantley, and Cody Allen into legitimate pieces to build around, and the rebirth of Ubaldo Jimenez. It was a season filled with ups and downs, a team built on great chemistry that was easy to root for, and, for the first time in a long time, Cleveland has a manager that it is confident in.

There are some big takeaways from this season and they start with ownership. Paul Dolan put money into this team by signing Nick Swisher, Michael Bourn, Mark Reynolds, Brett Myers, and made other financial commitments by re-signing Ryan Raburn, ponying up \$3.5M in the Shin-Soo Choo trade to acquire Trevor Bauer, and gave the Indians a payroll figure that granted Chris Antonetti the opportunity to build a contending team.

Say what you will about the Dolans, and there will continue to be skepticism in this town, but the transition from former controlling owner Larry Dolan to his son Paul is a big step in the right direction for the franchise. That was a change that had been in the works for a while but was formally announced in January. It's not a coincidence that the Indians signed Nick Swisher just a few weeks before the announcement and signed Michael Bourn the following month. Paul has a better grasp and a better understanding of this market. Larry may have been unapproachable in his old age, unfamiliar with the changing and shifting landscape of Major League Baseball. Paul made decisions, increased the family's financial commitment, and reaped the benefits with the first playoff appearance since 2007. The 92 wins the Indians amassed was the 13th-highest total in the history of this storied franchise. Paul Dolan deserves a lot of credit for what went on this season.

Chris Antonetti did a fabulous job building this roster. Not every move worked out, but none was bigger than adding Terry Francona to the dugout. Antonetti and Mark Shapiro had a previous relationship with Francona that paid dividends. Skeptics everywhere wondered why Francona would take the job. It's amazing to think that such a respected baseball man like Tito would take a job in a city like Cleveland, a place that free agents don't want to go to and a market that makes consistent contention difficult to achieve. But Francona came anyway. He has lived baseball his entire life and now he lives and breathes Indians baseball. That's something very special to have.

Fans love to chastise Antonetti and Shapiro any chance they get. The fact that a baseball man like Terry Francona respects and admires Antonetti and Shapiro is all the evidence I need to continue my support of both guys. I have come off as an apologist for both of them, but I have not wavered in my support of Antonetti and Shapiro because I understand the market that they have to operate in and how hard it is to be a winner. Francona does too. Organizations need

respect, understanding, leadership, and everybody to be on the same page at the top. The Indians finally have that.

The hire of Mickey Callaway as the pitching coach paid off more than anybody could have imagined. He took a downtrodden Ubaldo Jimenez and pushed him to the top of the mountain. He took a rebuilt Scott Kazmir and helped to turn him back into a strikeout pitcher with tremendous stuff. He polished the raw skills of Corey Kluber to make him a very strong middle of the rotation starter. He, along with bullpen coach Kevin Cash, molded Cody Allen into a terrific setup man and did the same with Bryan Shaw.

Antonetti's trade of Esmil Rogers for Yan Gomes and Mike Aviles was a solid, but unspectacular, move when the trade was made. It turned out to be one of the best trades in recent history, as Rogers was a replacement-level player for the Blue Jays and Yan Gomes became a starting catcher for a 92-win team. Aviles had plenty of contributions, both in the clubhouse and on the field, and gave the ballclub viable depth, something we had not seen in a long time. The acquisition of Marc Rzepczynski for essentially nothing helped to plug a big hole in the boat after Rich Hill proved ineffective in most of his appearances. In Gomes, Aviles, and Rzepczynski, the Indians acquired three very important pieces under team control at very team-friendly salaries. Drew Stubbs, Matt Albers and Bryan Shaw were supplemental pieces of the Choo three-team trade and all of them, at one time or another, helped the ballclub. Even if Trevor Bauer doesn't pan out, the Indians got a good middle reliever, good production from an impending free agent, and a fourth outfielder who is a great defensive player and has success against lefties for one year of Choo. The Indians signed Ryan Raburn, Scott Kazmir and Jason Giambi to minor league deals in Spring Training. Low-risk moves that had a major impact on the season.

All in all, a lot of things went right for the Indians this season and it provided for a far better season than most everybody expected. The Indians played relevant baseball into October. They won 92 games. They hosted a playoff game. It's impossible to diminish those accomplishments because the Indians lost a coin flip game. This is a team that got a very small taste of what it's like to be in the playoffs and clearly has something to strive for next season. Relevant baseball is far better than 90+ losses and for that, I thank the Cleveland Indians for an exciting season.

With my usual Saturday column, I'll look forward to 2014. But, for now, I simply wanted to address how special the 2013 season really was. These weren't the Cleveland Indians of the 1990s, which is an unfair measuring stick anyway since those teams had Hall of Fame candidates sprinkled throughout the lineup and we will never see teams like that again. The nostalgia that people hold on to about the 1990s teams is justified, but it's completely irrational

to use them as a benchmark for any other Indians team.

One gentleman on the Home Run Porch last night was irate, slamming his hat off the railing, proclaiming that he's "never been so pissed off at the Indians in his life". I laughed. My feeling was entirely different. I was disappointed, but content. The Indians exceeded my expectations and played relevant baseball into October. That's a major step forward and after sitting through September games in 2011 and 2012 and watching terrible baseball, this was one hell of an upgrade.

I felt empty leaving the ballpark after the final regular season home game, afraid that it would be my last for the season and business still felt unfinished. Walking back to the truck last night, I felt a lot of things, but not empty. There was pride. There was optimism. There was disappointment. There was happiness.

I'll leave you now with one of my favorite baseball quotes, from Rogers Hornsby. "People ask me what I do in winter when there's no baseball. I'll tell you what I do. I stare out the window and wait for spring."

It was a fun season at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. It may not have been an October to remember, but it was definitely a season to remember.