



I'm going to share a secret with you all. It's a secret that you probably all already know, but bear with me; I don't feel like I'm much of a writer. I think I know baseball pretty well, and I enjoy watching it and sharing my thoughts, which is why I write in this space as often as I can. But as far as writing itself, that's just not my forte. This column doesn't flow from my fingertips the way it always seemed to when Pauly C. was in the driver's seat. It's an effort, and some weeks are easier than others. This week falls into the "others" category. I spent an inordinate amount of time staring at a blank Microsoft Word screen this week. I just wasn't ready for this season to be over. The "playoffs" were so fleeting that it was more of a tease than anything. We should be talking about who's starting game 3 against Boston right now, not writing an autopsy on the season. I feel like I just read a book that was missing the last two or three chapters. I know I said earlier this season that all I wanted out of 2013 was meaningful baseball down the stretch. I sat in Goodyear, AZ and told loyal reader Tim Futo that back in March. But once I got a taste of the playoff run, I got greedy. I wanted more. I thought that once the Indians made it to October, anything could happen. I was ready to watch the Indians play deep into the fall, and came away crushed with the abbreviated taste of the postseason.

So what was I supposed to write about? Wednesday's game? If you're reading this column here on Sunday morning (or Monday afternoon, depending on your pleasure), chances are good that you watched Wednesday's game. You've probably read several articles on Wednesday's game, and are very possibly sick of thinking about it by now. What more can I say? Should I talk about planning for the 2014 season? Feels too soon to me. The body of the 2013 season isn't even cold yet. A recap of the 2013 season? Ok, I suppose that could interest some, but it just didn't seem right for today. Do I just take the week off and come back next week when there's been a

little bit of time to reflect on recent events? Eventually, I was able to sit down and come up with what you see before you today. I feel like a friend of mine has just been given bad news, and I want to be there for him (you). I don't want to call or stop by if he doesn't want me to, but I also want to be available if he needs to talk. So if you need to talk, feel free to hang with us today on this Lazy Sunday. But if you need a week off to process the hurt, I understand. See you when I see you. Eric Wedge would have been proud of the grit and determination of the column today; I really did my best to grind it out.

If you're really a masochist, [Jordan Bastain wrote up a few of the frustrating notes on the wild card game, and provided an excellent and exhaustive list of links from various sources on the contest.](#)

It's a nice breakdown of what happened on Wends, looking at the well-documented escape artistry of Alex Cobb, the disappointing performance of the top of the Indians order and more. [National writers](#)

[Jonah Keri of Grantland](#)

and

[Sam Miller of Baseball Prospectus](#)

recapped the game and provided their key takeaways as well, and both articles are worth a read if you're desperate to recall the misery of the 4-0 Tampa victory. I'm still not ready to relive the frustrations of the game, from the Delmon Young...Delmon freaking Young!...homer, to the bad BABIP inning for Salazar, to the many, many squandered opportunities by the top of the Indians order. That sentence alone was difficult enough to type. But hey, if you're stronger than I am and want to relive the experience, the opportunity is there.

In the plethora of links, [Bastain includes an article he wrote this past Monday discussing how the Indians reached their playoff goal far sooner than anyone anticipated.](#)

In it, he asks Francona whether or not Tito thinks the Indians are primed for success in 2014 and beyond:

*Does Francona believe that makes the Indians' current run sustainable for many years?*

*"That's easier said than done, and I know that," Francona cautioned. "I am excited about our future here, but you kind of take what you have now and try to do with it what you can, and don't get too full of yourself. And then, when it's over, you start thinking about next year and how you can get better."*

Tito, Antonetti and the Indians are not planning to rest on their laurels and expect to make the

playoffs next year without making improvements in the club. The Indians as currently constructed are close to being contenders for the World Series title. But they aren't there yet, and they know that. The budget isn't going to allow for the type of splash in the free agent market the Indians made last season (Swisher and Bourn), but it won't have to. They'll have to get both creative and lucky to improve the club, making small trades (Aviles and Gomes) and picking up cheap veterans and hoping they pan out (Kazmir and Giambi). The core of the club is strong, but this isn't a roster that can be expected to go deep into the playoffs without some improvements.



[Anthony Castrovice wrote one of my favorite articles of the year earlier this week.](#) He took a look at the offseason moves made by the Indians in the context of leadership and other non-statistical intangibles. Because there's no real way to quantify it with any sort of stat, there's a tendency for some sabermetricians and stat heads to ignore the effect that a manager has on a ballclub. Same with intangibles like leadership and experience. As Castro explains:

*Look, this is one of those stories that lacks statistical support. Let's just put that out there right now.*

*Francona might be a two-time World Series winner, but at the end of the day, he's merely a manager, a guy who is only going to perform marginally better or worse than -- if not in line with -- the level of talent he's afforded. Swisher might have a ring of his own from his Yankees days, but hobbled by the sort of shoulder injury that can betray a batter's clout and confidence, he was, for much of the season, not quite the reliable run-producer the Indians hoped to pencil into*

*the cleanup spot. And Giambi, a long ways from that MVP heyday, didn't bat above the Mendoza Line this season.*

*But some stories tread beyond the statistical into the anecdotal, into the physical and mental grind of a six-month season and all the beautiful, bizarre and bumbling moments that come with it.*

I fully support the integration of advanced statistics like OPS+, WAR, RAR, ERA+ etc. They help enhance some people's understanding of the game, and are more predictive than some of the "older" stats like batting average, RBI and runs scored. But just because there's no stat to encapsulate Tito Francona's impact on the 2013 Indians doesn't mean that he wasn't partly responsible for the massive improvement from the 2012 squad. Jason Giambi's WAR, as calculated by Baseball Reference, was -0.6 . [But I'm wearing a Mardi Gras in September t-shirt as I write this article because of a game that the Indians never would have won without him.](#) Nick Swisher had a down year in 2013, posting his lowest OPS+ since 2008. But I watched the Indians crater down the stretch in 2012, and while I don't know for sure that Swisher's infectious energy was at least partly responsible for preventing a September swoon this year, I have a feeling that it helped.

Would the team have been able to endure the crushing sweep at the hands of the Tigers and come back to win 21 games in September without Tito, Swish, Giambi and the other leaders on the club? Maybe, but I'm really glad we didn't have to find out. [It all goes back to the interview I had with team president Mark Shapiro in spring training this year.](#)

Shapiro talked about looking for "levers" this offseason that could affect more than one player or position:

*"We're always looking for the moves that we can make that are levers, moves that will impact more than one player. Manager is one of those moves, it can impact the culture, the attitude and the energy of the team. Tito's a guy that both has the confidence of having achieved the ultimate within the game, the passion for the game that comes from just being a baseball lifer and having the game running through his blood, as well as an appreciation and desire to be here, which I think is extremely important for us. This is a guy who wants to be here, that appreciates Cleveland, that has a history with Cleveland. He appreciates our culture because he has a history and a bond with our culture having worked with me and Chris. I think that resonates and has an impact throughout our entire organization. Not just players; it has an impact on our scouts, on our player development staff, on our front office. His energy, his attitude has been infectious. It has rubbed off on everyone, and that's been a neat aspect of this camp."*



Antonetti and Shapiro pulled the right levers this offseason, even though not all of them worked exactly the way they'd planned. The 2013 Indians outperformed all but the most optimistic of prognostications, providing an exciting playoff push culminating in an all-too-short one game wild card playoff. With the playoff format of just two years ago, we'd be getting ready to watch game 3 of the ALDS right now. I don't know how many of the Indians 92 wins Tito was responsible for, and I have no clue how to quantify the leadership qualities of Jason Giambi, but I feel very safe in saying that the Indians wouldn't have had an opportunity to play Tampa Bay on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario this past week without them. It's no coincidence that the worst-to-first Red Sox had a managerial change going into this season as well, replacing the abject disaster that was Bobby Valentine with the steadying influence of former Indian John Farrell. While it's clear that no manager can overcome poor talent on the field by his individual brilliance alone, it's also easy to see how a guy like Tito at the controls can push a decent team a little further than they would have been able to get from the players alone. And that's before we even talk about the effect that pitching coach Mickey Callaway had on the 2013 staff, helping turn Ewwbaldo back to the Ubaldo! of old.

Grantland's Andrew Sharp took a field trip to Cleveland for the Indians and Browns games this week, [and survived to tell the tale](#). The Indians portion of the trip can pretty much be summed up by a single line that he uttered after the end of the game. “

So

*this*

is what these people have been dealing with. Jesus Christ.” Sharp manages to capture both the passion and frustration of Cleveland fans, and does it without the usual level of degradation that usually comes from national writers towards our fair city. He had front row seats to the passion of a playoff crowd in Cleveland, and came away predictably impressed with the energy and enthusiasm the fans in The Jake brought to the table:

*Fans in Cleveland didn't stop cheering. If there was a sense of doom as soon as Delmon Young hit that home run, that anxious murmur only lasted for a few minutes before the stadium got loud again and everyone went back to shouting through every inning, standing for third strikes and full counts, and everything else that normal, well-adjusted fans do at baseball games.*

Sharp did get to see a Browns victory the next night (despite a first quarter that nearly, *nearly*, had me believing that Cleveland was indeed cursed), so at least he got to see the town react to a positive sports situation as well. The entire article is worth a read, as it's always nice to see how an outsider feels when he/she immerses themselves in your sports culture for a big game or two.

[As expected, Anthony Castrovice came through with one of the most comprehensive and appropriate pieces in the aftermath of Wednesday's loss.](#) The entire piece is required reading for any Indians fan, and I'm guessing most of you have seen it already. It both looks back on 2013 with pride and casts a cautiously optimistic eye towards 2014, recognizing that the Indians have come a long way but still have some serious, challenging work to do to get over that final hump. It's exactly the type of thing I wish I could write, and the fact that Castro had it out on the interwebs about three hours after the game's final pitch tells you everything you need to know about why he's drawing a paycheck from MLB for the pleasure of his thoughts. There are a couple of quotes that I'd like to draw attention to, comments from individual players that help put the season and the future into context. First, from catcher/DH/1B Carlos Santana:

*"I feel like we're a family," Santana said in the aftermath of this loss, and this was coming from a guy who basically lost his job this season, banished to DH duties at the age of 27.*

The Santana comment calls to mind the movie *Miracle*, the fantastic Disney flick that tells the story of the 1980 US Olympic Hockey team. This Indians team came together like none I've ever seen. Even the mid-90's clubs were famous for their locker room divisions, winning because they were a supremely talented squad more so than because of their ability to come together to achieve a common goal. This team, with two notable exceptions that were removed in mid-stream, was the classic "sum of the parts" squad. As in, the sum of the parts as a whole was greater than if added up individually. No one on the team hit more than 22 HR (Swisher) or drove more than 84 runs (Kipnis). Justin Masterson's 14 wins paced the pitching staff. None of the Indians figure to be a factor in any of the postseason awards lists, other than Francona in the Manager of the Year race. You don't win 10 baseball games in a row if there's a weak link in the rotation or the lineup. They were even able to pick up Chris Perez when he struggled in the

back end of the bullpen. The team came together, and that was a big reason they were able to make a run to the playoffs in 2013.



The next quote was from 2B/grinder/team leader Jason Kipnis, reacting to a question about the crowd's passion during the wild card game:

*"My first reaction is that it almost upsets me," Kipnis said, "because I wish I could play in front of a crowd like this every single night. But it's a long season. You knew if we made the playoffs, Cleveland would rally behind us and come out. You tip the cap to them. They came out, they were loud, they were amped up."*

Kipnis, an unquestioned on the field leader for the team, could have easily slid by with a simple "great crowd" comment. But he answered honestly, and told the assembled group of scribes that he was angry. I'm glad he's angry, because he has every right to be. And I'd very much prefer anger to indifference. Kipnis, Swisher, Bourn and the rest of the team could easily just go out every day, play in front of 10-12 thousand fans and cash their (substantial) paychecks, apathetic to fan support or lack thereof. But Kipnis (and others on the team) care about this team and this town. They're passionate, they play hard, and they deserve to be supported by the fans that they're out there playing for. I'm angry too. I'm mad that they only made it one game into the playoffs, and I want them to be back next year. Watching them play down the stretch, needing ten straight victories to secure a home playoff game, living and dying with every pitch, every out...it was incredible. Especially in comparison to watching the Indians play

out the string for the last 5 years with nothing on the line but next year's draft slot. From the lows of a Perez blown save to the incredible highs of a Giambi walk off home run, this baseball season was as much fun as I remembered the playoff seasons of days gone by. I love this team.

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