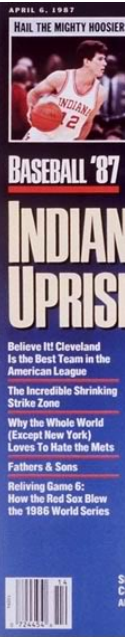


If Past Be Prologue

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, March 28 2007 7:00 PM -

In his latest column, Gary Benz takes a look back at the 1987 Indians team, hoping that there are no parallels with this seasons version of the team here 20 years later. Like in '87, Sports Illustrated predicts good things from the Tribe this season ... yet their predictions (and similar predictions from others) are being met with skepticism from a leery and snake bitten fan base.



When the Cleveland Indians were strong in the early and mid-'90s, everyone knew it—the media and the fans alike. There were other good teams in the league as well, but going into those seasons everyone expected the Tribe to be good and generally they didn't disappoint, except in the World Series.

This week, Sports Illustrated came out with its annual baseball preview addition. In it, they predict that the Indians will be the 7th best team in baseball, the 4th best in the American League. They have the Tribe winning the AL Central but losing to the Yankees in the LDS. But a sampling of various chat boards and call in shows demonstrates that many, perhaps most, fans hardly share a similar opinion. To them, they see a bullpen repaired with injury-prone retreads and a season in which too many "ifs" have to fall into place for the Tribe to get back to the playoffs.

Maybe this disparity in views is the result of the trained eyes of learned Cleveland fans, most of whom have a much better chance to observe the daily machinations of their team, as opposed to the national media types that flit from one story to the other. Maybe it's simply a reflection of a general cynicism from Cleveland fans borne of a lifetime of disappointments. Maybe it's the fault of the 1987 Indians.

After seeing the picture illustrating John-David Filing's [recent article](#) on Cory Snyder from the 1987 Sports Illustrated baseball preview issue, it was time to sift through the personal archives for lessons learned. That issue and the resulting aftermath offer a compelling explanation as to exactly why the fans are so skeptical now.

The issue featured Joe Carter and Cory Snyder. The headline was "Indians Uprising" and the cover also declared "Believe it? Cleveland is the best team in the American League." It may not be quite on par with "Dewey defeats Truman" but it should have an honored place in the hall of

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fame of biggest sports journalism blunders of all time. Not only were the Indians not the best team in the American League, they were the worst, losing 101 games, 24 more than they did the previous season. In fact, they were the only team to lose 100 or more games in the major leagues that season. They finished a staggering 37 games behind the Detroit Tigers, who won 98 games. Sports Illustrated couldn't have gotten the story more wrong if they had commissioned a chimp to write it. Maybe they did.

On the other hand, when you read the accompanying analysis it's understandable how SI got from point A to point B when designating the Indians the team to beat. It's just goes to show that you can get from point A to point B and still not arrive at your destination. Here's what SI was looking at. First, Tony Bernazard was coming off a career year in 1986 when he hit .301 with 17 home runs and 73 RBI. Brett Butler in center was solid and reliable, both offensively (in terms of average but not power) and defensively, Julio Franco, a butcher (but still better than Jhonny Peralta last year) was at short but he was a solid .300 hitter. The middle of the lineup featured a young Joe Carter, who hit .302 and led the league the previous season with 121 RBI, Andre Thornton (more about him in a minute), Mel Hall and Cory Snyder. Hall was a terror against right handed pitching and in the second half of Snyder's rookie year of 1986, he had 16 home runs and 51 RBI. Brook Jacoby played a solid third base and was a very productive offensive player, and Rick Dempsey was brought in to help stabilize an iffy pitching corps that featured starters Tom Candiotti, Ken Schrom, Scott Bailes, Greg Swindell and Ernie Camacho in the bullpen.

Although SI acknowledged that pitching, not offense, could be the Achilles heel, it's interesting to note that Schrom had won 14 games in 1986, Candiotti won 16, Bailes, 10 and Swindell 5 after being called up the previous August. The rotation also featured 48-year old Phil Niekro. Thus, it really wasn't the starting pitching that was the worry, it was the bullpen. Camacho, the closer, had only 20 saves the previous season but of greater concerns was his 4.08 ERA.

All of this provides a very interesting parallel to this year's Tribe team. Again, offense doesn't seem to be the problem. Starting pitching doesn't seem to be the problem either. As with the 1987 team, it's the bullpen, both the setup men and the closer. This naturally begs the question of whether this year's team is headed for a similar collapse. Hard to say, but doubtful, especially when considering the monumental collapse that was the 1987 season.

For example, while current manager Eric Wedge is often criticized for the team's slow starts, he had nothing on Pat Corrales. The 1987 team started 1-10. At the halfway point, they were 28-53. They endured two different 8-game losing streaks and a boat load of 4, 5 and 6 game losing streaks. Their longest winning streak was a meager 4 games and they had 3 other 3-game winning streaks. When you lose 101 games, that isn't much of a surprise. It's hard to imagine, on the other hand, the current Tribe team, with its lineup, suffering a similar fate.

Individually, it wasn't a pretty picture, either. For example, relying on Tony Bernazard to again hit .300 was a pipe dream. As SI noted in its 1987 preview, somewhat cryptically it turns out, his .301 average in 1986 that this was a full 44 points higher than his career average. They call it an average for a reason and water tends to find its level. In 1987, Bernazard reverted to form, hitting .239, about 20 points under his career average. In other words, 1987 was merely a

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season long correction to his abnormal 1986 season.

Cory Snyder was also another major disappointment. His average dipped to .236. In fact, his 1987 on base percentage in 1987 was .273, only .001 percent higher than his 1986 batting average! Brett Butler, on the other hand, delivered similar performances in 1986 and 1987 while Brook Jacoby was better in 1987, hitting .300 as compared to .288 in 1986 and slugging 32 home runs, nearly double his output of 17 in 1986.

Which brings us to Andre Thornton. He's a player that most Cleveland fans remember fondly. Often he was the only player worth watching on one dismal team after another. But in truth, despite his reputation as a slugger, he really wasn't, particularly during this time period. In 1986, he hit only .229, had 17 home runs (as much as Brook Jacoby) and 66 RBI, 14 less than Jacoby. Thus, counting on him as a force in the middle of the lineup was probably more wishful thinking than anything else. As it turned out, he hardly played in 1987 due to injuries. However, Carmen Castillo and Pat Tabler basically filled the DH role and combined for 22 home runs and 117 RBI which was probably better than if Thornton had stayed healthy.

But while there were some positives, offensively the Indians were far worse than advertised. They hit .263 as a team, 21 points less than in 1986 and scored 742 runs, far below the 831 of the previous season, meaning that they averaged about .5 less runs per game.

And while the offense was unexpectedly faltering, the pitching was worse than imagined. The team ERA was 5.83, almost a run and a half worse per game than the previous season. What makes this even more astounding is that it was just 1985 when the Indians had set the franchise record for highest ERA with 4.91, meaning that the new record they set in 1987 was almost a full run higher. Bailes, Candiotti and Niekro led the team with 7 wins each. If the Tribe's fifth starter this year has only 7 wins, that would be a major shock. Doug Jones led the team with 8 saves. In all, the team had only 25 total saves the entire season. While we may not know what this year's pitching staff truly holds for the Indians, barring a slew of injuries (which may be happening, given Sabathia's unfortunate run in with a line shot Wednesday), it would be hard to even come close to matching the haplessness of the 1987 staff.

But perhaps what really set the 1987 team in a tailspin is what really differentiates it from this year's team, or does it? At the start of spring training, Joe Carter walked out of camp in a salary protest. According to the SI article, Carter, who was not arbitration eligible, had demanded a \$437,000 salary. Lacking any real leverage, he lowered his demand to \$387,000, which was double what he made in 1986. Unable to come to terms with him, the Tribe renewed Carter at \$250,000 and he walked out for six days. When he returned he was still visibly upset and it clearly carried over to others on the team.

Consider, for example, Snyder's views. He told SI: "We've got such a good thing going, why not pay a little more to keep the players happy? We're just talking about fairness, not millions. We can keep a good team here for years. Why create a situation where as soon as a player gets the chance, he'll move out? That's not fair to the fans who've waited so long. I know I don't want to leave Cleveland. I love it."

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Maybe that's a reflection of the times; maybe that's a reflection of all times. Either way, it seemed to doom what looked to be a promising season. And in many ways, it's analogous to the tone set before last season began. The Indians seemed well positioned to challenge for the AL Central title based on how they finished the 2005 season. Many fans expected that the team might spend more in free agency to acquire the last remaining pieces and instead they and the rest of the team saw nearly the opposite. The payroll cutting, the decision not to sign Keith Millwood, and the poor choices made in who they did sign sent a message to the players and the fans from which they never did fully recover.

This past off season was a mixed bag, although it generally contained more positives than negatives. But there was no major splash, either. Whether justified or not, the fans, and perhaps the players, still have the sense that the Dolans won't spend enough to push this team over the top. The looming free agency of Westbrook, Sabathia and Hafner, coupled with the recent past of free agents lost, only feeds that beast.

Hopefully the national media has it right and the locals have it wrong. But in fairness to the locals, they lived through the 1987 season while the national media stopped paying attention about 30 days in. Their cynicism is justified. While it's highly unlikely that the Tribe will collapse like they did in 1987, it's important to remember that no one on the 1987 season anticipated what was about to come, either.