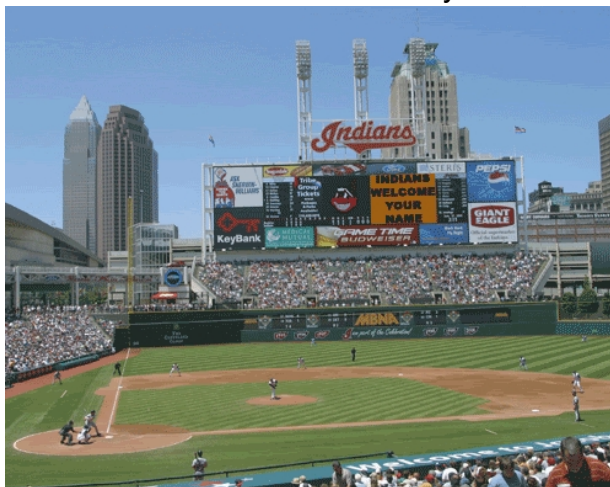


A Mystery Wrapped In A Riddle

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, July 04 2007 7:00 PM -

As mysteries go, it's hardly the most compelling. But with major league baseball at the halfway point, it's a question worth both asking and answering: why are the first-place Cleveland Indians one of the best kept secrets in Cleveland? Last weekend, the Indians finally surpassed one million fans for the season, the last division leader to do so. Gary Benz offers up his explanation in his latest column.



As mysteries go, it's hardly the most compelling. But with major league baseball at the halfway point, it's a question worth both asking and answering: why are the first-place Cleveland Indians one of the best kept secrets in Cleveland?

Last weekend, the Indians finally surpassed one million fans for the season, the last division leader to do so. There was a time, of course, when the Indians front office handed out key chains in gratitude for having a million fans for the entire season and there were many seasons in which the Indians didn't come close to drawing a million fans at all, so everything is relative. But the thought then was that if the team is ever a winner, the fans will show.

That was certainly true in the '90s. Now, not so much. The team is a winning and the fans aren't showing, at least as much as a first place team deserves. And it's not as if they aren't a good home team. As of July 5th, they have, at 31-12, the best home record in the entire major leagues. And it's not as if they lack for promotions. The Indians front office runs so many fan promotions to this point the only things left are a cow-milking contest and bring your dog to the park night.

There are all sorts of theories as to why the Indians aren't drawing. (Read Paul

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Cousineau's excellent [column](#) on TheClevelandFan.com debunking many of the theories.) Some are well-known. For example, many have suggested that the bad taste of last year's disaster, particularly given the promise of the previous season, is mostly responsible. There's probably something to that.

There is no question that generally many fans feel let down by the Dolans. The team has one of the lowest payrolls in the league still and despite owner Larry Dolan's often-quoted promise to spend when the team was competitive it's a promise that still remains mostly unfulfilled. The fans felt betrayed by the decision not to spend going into last season when the Indians seemed on the precipice of greatness and felt further betrayed when the Indians dumped salary last year. Those feelings were hardly assuaged by the lackluster free agents signed going into this season.

But whatever the ramifications of such fan mistreatment, the point remains that right now the Indians are 51-33 and only one team, the Red Sox, with 52 wins, has a better record.

Another popular theory is that the yearly roster turnover has created a team without an identity, making it more difficult for fans to embrace. There's probably something to that theory as well.

Given the way the Dolans choose to fund this team, every off-season involves a fairly healthy amount of turnover. GM Mark Shapiro spends nearly every moment of his life with a cell phone glued to his ear for a reason. There are always 5-7 roster spots that he needs to fill. And it's not as if those roster spots are being filled by identifiable, marquee-type players. Jason Michaels? David Dellucci? Joe Borowski? If anyone has their baseball cards, it's by accident.

But on the other hand, the Indians have their share of stars. C.C. Sabathia, Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez, Grady Sizemore. These are guys that could and would start for any team in either league. They're all young with incredibly

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promising careers.

Which leads to a corollary of the "lack of identity" theory: even if they have identifiable players, the Indians won't re-sign them when their contracts come due, thus investing the time now is mostly time and money poorly wasted.

There is something to this, too. Despite the Indians record, one of the most popular topics among fans is whether or not the Indians will re-sign Sabathia and Hafner. Though neither is a free agent at the end of this season, there is an abject fear, rightfully obtained, that the Dolans will not spend to sign either player. It's difficult to know exactly how much this fear plays in the overall calculus of fan disinterest, but it would be foolish for either the Dolans or Shapiro to ignore it completely.

While each one of these theories likely plays some role in the number of empty seats at Jacobs Field each night, there is also a more obvious reason you don't hear much about: the 2007 Major League baseball season simply isn't very interesting.

Consider the American League East. Right now, exactly one team is over .500, the Boston Red Sox. Whatever your feelings may be about the New York Yankees, they are a flagship franchise and when they struggle there is a ripple effect throughout the league. In the AL West, the Angels remain a top-tier team and while Seattle is playing well and Oakland is a few games over .500, none of those teams capture the imagination, at least here in Cleveland. Unlike the Yankees, the quintessential team that fans love to hate, every team in the AL West garners, at best, a shrug.

In the AL Central, the White Sox this year are like the Indians last year, a major disappointment. But other than that, the division is playing out pretty much as expected, meaning that there is no compelling story to capture the imagination.

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The National League is every bit as uninteresting. Whereas every division leader in the American League has at least 50 wins, the closest in the National League are Milwaukee and San Diego with 48. Milwaukee! Most fans couldn't name more than two players on the Brewers. The National League East, on July 2nd, had the dubious distinction of going 0-5. That pretty much captures what that division is all about. As for the NL West, it is highly competitive, but given its geographical distance and the fact that most of its games start at about the time most people go to bed around here, it remains an afterthought.

Contrast all of this with just last season. At this point last year, the AL East was the strength of the league, with Boston, New York and Toronto all at least 10 games over .500. In the AL Central, the Tigers had re-emerged after a lengthy slumber and were dominating the division, which makes for a very interesting storyline for Cleveland fans given how many times the teams play each other. Moreover, three teams in the division were at least 10 games over .500 with the Tigers having won 56 games by this point. The National League was still a mess, but the Mets were dominating their division and even the Reds were fighting it out for first place in the NL Central.

Moving beyond the league in general and to the Indians in particular, despite their record there is the lingering feeling that this team really isn't all that interesting or all that good. That may be true if your benchmark is the 1920 Yankees or even the 1995 Indians, but in context to the rest of the league it's untrue.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this team revolves around how it is that it finds itself with 50+ wins already. At times, it seems held together by paper and paste. The defense is average, they aren't hitting as well as anticipated and the middle relief remains a source of frustration.

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But yet they are one of the best teams in the league. It's this paradox that begs for further analysis not indifference. For example, the starting pitching has been nearly as good as advertised. In fact, with the emergence of Fausto Carmona, in some ways it's better. That's a story worth following, in and of itself. If that isn't good enough, consider that Borowski leads the league with 25 saves despite the fact that nearly everyone of them was a struggle. A nearly anonymous figure, he's probably the team's MVP to this point.

If that still isn't good enough, look at some of the others. Sabathia is easily having the best season of his career and is well on track for a 20-win season. For anyone watching closely, this is the season that Sabathia has officially gone from a potential number one starter to an actual number one starter. When he takes the mound, good things generally follow.

It would be hard for any player, let alone a catcher, to play any better than Victor Martinez is playing to this point. His offense, always solid anyway, has been spectacular. Defensively, his improvement has been dramatic. Currently, he is ninth in the major leagues (third in the American League) in the percentage of would-be base stealers thrown out. For comparisons sake, consider that Ivan Rodriguez is 14th overall. His selection to the All Star team was every bit the no-brainer that was Sabathia's selection.

Sizemore may not be a superstar yet, but he continues to play like a superstar in the making. Offensively, only Torii Hunter of the Twins is enjoying a better year than Sizemore among American League center fielders. Defensively, he's as good as

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anyone in the league. Casey Blake has been, perhaps, the biggest surprise, particularly defensively. He is playing so well at third base it will be tough, barring an injury, for Andy Marte to get back to Cleveland before September 1.

But rather than see these positives, too many fans seem to be waiting for the other shoe to drop and are doing that waiting anywhere but at Jacobs Field, which is a shame.

It may be that the Dolans, once again, fail the fans by not investing in what it might take come trading deadline. It may very well be that Joe Borowski may wake up and realize that he is Joe Borowski or, maybe even more likely, that Casey Blake wakes up and realizes he is Casey Blake. Travis Hafner may stay in a slump all season. But for right now and for half the season already, that isn't the reality.

Considering how few winners this town has known in any sport, one would think that whatever its warts, this current Indians team should be embraced, not ignored. Why the opposite remains true may be the enigma that clouds the entire season.