

Series Preview: Indians at Tigers

Written by {ga=pup}

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Well, it doesn't get much bigger than this. Indians - Tigers, late August, embroiled in a fierce battle for the AL Central, going heads up for three games in Comerica. Fausto, Byrd, and Jake will toe the hill for the good guys. Jurrjens, Verlander, and Robertson for Detroit. Both teams come in struggling, and the playoffs are on the line. Cris Sykes previews this HUGE series for us.



Well, folks, it doesn't get too much bigger than this. It is only the middle of August and both teams do have nearly 40 games left to play, but this could very easily be the series that starts a march to October or a march to March.

The Cleveland Indians and Detroit Tigers have to start playing some quality baseball here in the very near future. Both teams were being heralded as two of the top teams in all of the Major Leagues, but both have come crashing down to Earth since Early July. On July 1, the Indians enjoyed a one and a half game lead on the Tigers. After losing 15 of 26 games in July, the Indians fell to a game behind the Tigers, who did not light the world on fire in July themselves, on August 1. Now, on August 21, the Indians have regained their one and a half game lead by playing .500 ball in August, while the Tigers have struggled to a six and eleven August.

The importance of this series lies in the fact that both teams have been so bad for the better part of two months that the wild card possibility seems to have gone the way of cassette tapes. The Seattle Mariners and New York Yankees have both turned up their level of play and have left the Indians and Tigers behind.

Tuesday, August 21st, 7:05 PM

Fausto Carmona (14-7, 3.16 ERA) vs. Jair Jurrjens (0-1, 5.14 ERA)

As the saying goes, momentum in baseball is only as good as the next games starting pitcher. In a critical three game series, win number one is crucial to the Indians. When you have your Cy Young candidate on the mound, against a kid making his second major league start, you had better have momentum in your dugout.

Carmona was able to stop a three game losing streak his last time out, when he beat Jurrjens and the Tigers last Wednesday. Trying to find fault in Fausto for that three game losing streak would be pretty futile, but he had lost three straight nonetheless. In those three starts, the Indians managed a mere two runs scored, total. It is kind of hard to win games averaging less than a run per game, but Fausto tried.

In a dominating performance last Wednesday, Carmona allowed an unearned run in the second inning and a RBI triple in the 8th to Curtis Granderson, which seemed to make Fausto mad. He then blew away Marcus Thames, shattered Gary Sheffield's bat into several thousand toothpicks and got Magglio Ordonez to pop out to third to strand Granderson at third. The strikeout of Thames set a new career high for Carmona, as he reached the double-digit strikeout total.

In three starts versus Detroit, Carmona has won twice and

taken a no decision once. In his victories, he has pitched 15 innings, allowed 13 hits, four earned runs and struck out 13 Tigers. In the no decision, this is almost weird to even say, the Indian offense bailed him out of a six inning five run nightmare. The Indians won the game, 12-11, making them 3-0 against Detroit in games started by Carmona.

Jair Jurrjens did a nice job of battling Fausto and the Indians in their last match up. Franklin Gutierrez cam through with a huge two run home run in the second inning, answering Detroit's unearned run from the top of the inning, and Grady and Victor combined to add another run in the third inning but Jurrjens is hardly the first pitcher to be victimized by those two.

Jurrjens worked seven innings in his major league debut, allowing only five base hits and four runs. Some timely hitting by the Indian offense, which is rare this year, was the only thing keeping Jurrjens from matching Carmona frame for frame.

Wednesday, August 22, 7:05 PM

Paul Byrd (11-5, 4.41 ERA) vs. Justin Verlander (13-4, 3.63 ERA)

I am not going to do it Paul. No compliments for you. I tried; you blew it and are now on the restricted list for compliments. You did fine with limiting the Devil Rays to one run in six innings of work, but that is hardly a feat for Guinness.

In fact, how do you give up eight hits to Tampa Bay? You must be a real bad pitcher. I wonder how you even won 11 games this year?

Paul Byrd's success has to have even C.C. Sabathia shaking his head right now. Byrd has the worst wind-up, to go along with the worst "stuff" on the Indians roster, yet the guy churns out wins like they are butter. The Indians are winning at around a 45% clip since early July, yet the Indians win 70% of the time Paul Byrd starts.

Byrd will be making his third start against Detroit this year. The Indians have won both of his starts, with Byrd getting the credit for one of the victories. In both starts, Byrd pitched into the seventh inning, completing the seventh in his win. He has allowed 16 hits and 8 earned runs in the two games, total.

For his career, Byrd is seven and two with a 3.36 ERA versus Detroit. Amazing, huh? I guess we forget that Detroit was a laughingstock just a couple of years ago. Maybe it is more than that though, as Byrd faced the Tigers four times last year and pitched very well in three of them. For those three games in 2006, Byrd limited Detroit to three earned runs in 20 2/3 innings. In the other one, he was not so good, being battered for seven runs in three innings.

If there is an anti-Paul Byrd in the universe, you would probably name him Justin Verlander.

Verlander has been a model of consistency for the Tigers since July. He has not been quite as good as he was last year, but they have managed to win six of his last eight starts. While that may not seem like much for a team's ace, it is credible when that team is struggling to win six out of twelve starts over the same stretch.

Verlander will be making his fourth start of the year against the Tribe. He took a loss and a no decision in back-to-back starts in May and beat the Indians 12-3 on July 5th at Comerica Park. He has allowed 12 runs in 18 innings, but 7 of them came in his lone loss to the Indians.

In his two-year career, Verlander is three and three against the Indians. His has a very un-Verlander like ERA of 5.40 versus the Indians. Just like the one terrible outing this year, Verlander had one of those starts against the Indians in 2006 as well, allowing eight earned runs in four and two thirds innings.

We can hope for another one of those, right?

Thursday, August 23rd, 1:05 PM

Jake Westbrook (4-7, 4.75 ERA) vs.

Nate Robertson (7-10, 5.13 ERA)

Ahhh. The Business Man's Special to wrap up this important three game series.

Jake Westbrook has been terrific for the Indians in his last five starts. In those starts, the sinkerball pitcher has won three and lost only once. His lone loss was not even an overly disappointing start, holding the Yankees to four runs in seven innings of work, unless you compare it to his other four. In those four starts, Westbrook allowed four earned runs in 28 innings pitched, he

held the opposition to 13 base hits. He has lowered his season's ERA by almost one and a half runs in this stretch.

Westbrook will be making his second start of the season at Comerica Park. His first start came on the Fourth of July, and there were plenty of fireworks for the Detroit Tigers. Westbrook allowed five earned runs on 10 hits in his six innings of work, taking the loss in the 6-4 Tiger victory.

That start is pretty typical for Westbrook against the Tigers, who own him like almost no one else in the American

League. Westbrook has only four wins versus Detroit in 18 career appearances (15 starts). Only Seattle, amongst AL teams, scores at a higher rate than Detroit versus Westbrook. His 6.59 career mark is even slightly higher when pitching in Detroit, where it is 6.79.

I usually try to keep opinions of opposing players out of the previews but damn Nate Robertson is terrible. After posting a rather remarkable 2.43 ERA in April, his next best month is August, where he has posted a 5.33 ERA in four starts. I guess that means he is pitching as well right now as he has in months, but two of those starts were against Oakland and one against Tampa Bay. Not exactly a

murderer's row of opposing hitters.

This will be Robertson's third start against the Tribe this year, and he is yet to make it through the sixth in either of the first two. His best effort resulted in a no decision, when he kept Cleveland in check, allowing only three runs in five innings. His other start, the Indians got to him for five runs in five and two thirds innings, tagging him with a loss in a seven to four Indians victory at Comerica Park.

Robertson has made 13 starts in his career versus Cleveland, but only has

two wins to show for it. He is usually involved in some slugfests and bullpen battles, because he only has four losses despite a 5.25 ERA. He is one and three with a 5.66 career ERA pitching against Cleveland, in Detroit.

Robertson is a slightly better pitcher this year during the day. He has won four of eight starts with the sun out, and his ERA is one full run lower. That is bad news for the Indians, because Jake Westbrook must be a vampire. He has only won once in six afternoon starts.

Scoreboard Watching

Who cares? This is the only

thing that matters over the next 3 days. Besides Thursday, which is my birthday. All I want for my birthday is for the offense to find its way out of the funk that it is in and the completion of a three game sweep, opening a four and a half game lead over these Motor City Kitties.

Up Next: Three games at Kansas City.