

Worry Warts

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, October 02 2007 7:00 PM -

Worry, worry, worry. It's almost as if we haven't won a title in 43 years. Judging by the climate in our message forums, fans are worried about this looming series with the Yankees, and eager for it to begin. In Gary Benz's latest, he says Yankee fans have just as much if not more to worry about, and that this series should be an interesting case study in the good hitting vs. good pitching debate.



We live in such a time of scandal and uncertainty, of fear and insecurity, it's fair to ask: what worries you more, the Indians' upcoming series against the Yankees or the Browns' upcoming game against the New England Patriots?

Fans of Cleveland sports can recount all the horrors that accompany their status. It's an endless checklist of the dues we all have paid over the years to wear a badge that few outside the metro area care to wear anyway. And while the inability of any of the major professional teams to close the deal in most folks' lifetimes will forever hang like a yoke around our necks, it sometimes obscures some of the actual success that has been experienced.

In the last 10 years there has been much to root for in Cleveland. The Indians by and large have been competitive for the last 12 years. There have been some down times and missed opportunities, to be sure, but it's not like they've been the perennial bottomfeeders of our youth. The return of the Browns in 1999 was a significant event even if it's been mostly a disappointment since. Still, in the big picture, there is a team to talk about and if there's one thing that this town likes to do, it's talk about its football team.

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The Cavs, at least since the arrival of LeBron James, have been transformed into one of the “it” teams of the NBA. They get substantial national attention for mostly the right reasons and they were in the NBA finals last year. And don’t forget about Ohio State. Most in this town will confess to being Buckeye fans and the teams that Jim Tressel continues to assemble in football and the promise of Thad Matta in basketball help ensure a sports environment in this town that is incredibly positive even if not as successful as any of us would like.

Still, this being Cleveland it would be hard to ignore what passes as our favorite hobby, worrying. Thus it is fair to ask with the Indians about to re-enter the American League playoffs and the Browns having just played their single best game in recent memory, whether you’re more worried about the Yankees series or the Patriots game.

The fact that Cleveland fans can even have both issues on their minds at the same time, as if they are of equal importance, probably reveals more about us than anyone would care to admit. After all, the upcoming Browns game against the Patriots is largely meaningless while the Yankees series has something substantial at stake. But to state that is merely stating the obvious yet doesn’t change the fact that this is a Browns town first and so their fate, even at this moment, is of equal importance to the fact that the Indians have the World Series justifiably in their sights.

Dispensing thus with the incongruity of it all, each presents their own boatloads of worry. Looking at the upcoming Browns/Patriots match-up, it would seem that this presents about the least likely of the handful of opportunities the Browns have had to break their nearly four-year inability to win two straight games.

One could look at the wildly disparate statistics between the two teams and draw any number of conclusions, none of them good.

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At first blush, the season thus far for the Patriots has been a clinic in how to run a buzzsaw franchise. They are second in the NFL in offense and first in the league in defense. And it is every bit as lopsided as that would imply in a vacuum and by comparison. As a team they have 105 first downs while yielding only 60. They are 20/39 on third down while teams are only 12/60 on third down against them. They have gained almost twice as many yards as they have given up. They've sacked opposing quarterbacks 11 times while Tom Brady has been sacked only three times. And if all that wasn't good enough, they average holding on to the ball a full 10 minutes more per game than the opposition. Feel free to manipulate the statistics any way you want. There is no good news in them if you're a Browns fan.

While the Browns/Patriot match-up wouldn't necessarily be the most lopsided contest you could find in the league, it's pretty close, particularly when you factor in the play of the Browns defense. But given the predilection of Cleveland fans to worry about things they can't control, you might as well factor in the unwarranted swagger that some of the players have gained as a result of the win over the Ravens last Sunday.

In this regard, it's nice to see receiver Braylon Edwards coming out of his shell a bit. In a fit of unbridled enthusiasm, he said yesterday that "the offense is sound. When you execute it, it's easy. We have so much at our disposal, it's scary." Well, maybe.

The Browns offensive line is playing as well, remarkably well in fact. But it's still not nearly as good as the Patriots line. Moreover and more to the point, Edwards description actually fits the Patriots much better. If any team in the league has so much at their disposal, it's the Patriots. The Browns, not quite so much. But if they have one advantage, it's the chance that New England may take the game too lightly, particularly coming off of a Monday night game on the road. Not exactly a counterpoint to much of anything, but it's something nonetheless. Right now, though, it would be nice for Edwards and the rest of his

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teammates to remember that at most, their two victories thus far just got them upright. They still need to walk steady before they even consider running.

As for the Indians/Yankees series, statistically it's a mess as well and it has nothing to do with the fact that the Indians are 0-6 against the Yankees this year. Offensively, the disparity is significant. There's a sizeable gulf between the teams in on-base percentage, runs scored, total bases, walks and strikeouts. In other words, the Yankees get on base far more often, hit better, score more runs, take more walks and strike out far less. If offense decides the series, it will be a short postseason for the Indians.

But the counterbalance to the offense is pitching. The Indians give up almost a half run less per game than the Yankees and have walked 100 less batters. Opposing teams have a .322 on-base percentage against Indians pitchers while opposing teams have an on-base percentage of .340, which owes much, again, to the disparity in walks since both staffs are otherwise holding opponents to the same overall batting average, .268.

But the difference in on-base percentage really shows up in the clutch statistics, meaning how well the teams are pitching, for example, with runners in scoring position and less than two outs, when the teams are within one run of each other and the like. Across the board, the Indians are far superior in this regard, meaning that when it really matters Tribe pitchers are better at keeping opponents off the bases than the Yankees.

But as good as that news is overall, the one cautionary note is that the pitching advantage starts to shrink when you consider that a playoff match-up is much more about the top five or six pitchers on the staff than the 10 or 11 that got you through the whole season. Chien-Ming Wang vs. C.C. Sabathia in game one is basically a wash. At this juncture Fausto Carmona has a huge advantage

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statistically over Andy Petite in everything but experience, something not easily discounted. The same can be said of a potential Jake Westbrook/Roger Clemens match-up in game 3.

The difference then will likely come down to the bullpen, where the Indians have the clear advantage in set-up (Kyle Farnsworth, Luis Vicaino both of whom have had health issues of late and Joba Chamberlain vs. Rafael Bentancort and Rafael Perez) but, with all due respect to the season he's had, Joe Borowski as a closer is no Mariano Rivera.

What this hodgepodge really tells you is that while there is much to worry about if you're an Indians fan, and they will, it's not as if the Yankees fans enter this series with clear heads either. Despite the disparity in head-to-head match-ups this season, this series is really an intriguing contest. And given the near impossibly high standards of Yankees fans in light of their relative failures in recent years, it is fair to say that maybe, just maybe, Cleveland fans won't hold the franchise on angst in this series.