

ALD-Day

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If this column from Paulie C doesn't get you fired up this morning, prick yourself and make sure you have blood coarsing through your veins. Paul is sick and tired of hearing what a dark horse we are. How we're such huge underdogs that can't compete with the mighty Yankees. Paul says screw ESPN. Screw the Vegas odds. WE'RE the favorites! Let everyone think that the Yankees still have that mystique, that they're one of the "greatest offenses in history" while ignoring their reliance on A-Rod, deficiencies in the bullpen and the age of the starting rotation.



It's here.

All of the waiting, all of the hand-wringing, all of the over-analysis becomes moot at 6:37 tonight as the first pitch of the ALDS between the Indians and the Yankees is thrown and we finally ... play baseball.

The series promises, at the very least to be entertaining as the Yankees look to capture their "birthright" (a World Series trophy) for the first time since 2000 and the Tribe looks to right the wrong of 59 years of having extra shelf space in the trophy case.

While the series has been analyzed ad nauseum (truthfully, by me), here's just a little final taste of what to watch for and what to expect as the two teams go toe-to-toe:

The Yankees, with all of their bravado and momentum, remain a flawed team, mainly due to their rotation consisting of Chien-Ming Wang and three guys who wish it was still 2003 (when Clemens, Pettitte, and Mussina all finished in the top 7

in wins in the AL that year). But, it is not 2003 and the idea that these pitchers are still among the truly elite in the AL, in the same class as C.C. or Fausto, is an outdated premise and simply not true. Don't give me the "big-game pitcher" talk and how they'll "find a way to get it done" - Clemens and Mussina (Petitite to a lesser degree) are not what they were and are reachable.

Past their rotation, they rely on an increasingly-hittable Mo Rivera (about whom Yankees' fans have the same fears as Tribe fans do about JoeBo) and surefire first-ballot HOFer (at least according to Bristol, CT) Joba Chamberlain, who has performed phenomenally since his promotion and saved the Yankee bullpen, to carry the 8th and 9th innings. But, after those two, question marks abound in the bullpen. Luis Vizcaino has filled the 7th inning role admirably, but he is far from a lockdown reliever and Kyle Farnsworth, Ross Ohlendorf, and Jose Veras (right...who?) certainly aren't going to evoke any memories of Jeff Nelson, Mike Stanton, or Graeme Lloyd setting the table for Rivera or John Wetteland.

With their shallow pitching staff, the Yankees figure to rely on their MVP-led offense and hope to get embroiled in some games where their run total tops 5 or 6 runs, giving their pitching a fighting chance of keeping the team in the game. If A-Rod fades under the bright lights of Broadway, the Indians have a legitimate shot at getting the series over in a hurry; however, if he translates his regular season success into October, the Tribe needs to figure out a way to neutralize his effect on the series and not let this ALDS become the week that A-Rod goes from reviled to beloved in the Bronx.

Removing A-Rod from the equation and limiting the damage that the professional lineup that the Yankees trot out on a nightly basis will primarily fall in the collective lap of the spectacular Tribe starters, led by Cy Young candidates C.C. and Fausto. If Sabathia and Carmona can shut down the Yankees' offense for Games 1 and 2, giving the Indians offense a chance to get to the New York pitchers, and specifically their middle relief, it would go a long way to building an insurmountable lead by the time that Westbrook (no slouch, but not in the same class as the preceding pitchers) toes the rubber in Game 3. Game 4 is too wrought with possibilities (does C.C. go on three days rest, does Laffey play the role of Jaret Wright and get the nod over Byrd, etc.) to delve into too much more of the rotation beyond the first three starters.

As long as the Tribe starters can get through the 6th (and it's not out of the

question to almost expect the Pair of Aces to go 7, 8, or even the full 9), the Atomic Wedgie can turn the ball over to some combination of The Scarecrow, Senor Slo-Mo, and JoeBo. Whatever the feelings are out there about Borowski and his ability to close out a game, the fact that he has more of that "closer's mentality" than the other two merits his getting the ball in the 9th...45 saves doesn't hurt the argument either. More important than The Big Borowski, perhaps though, will be how Perez and Betancourt (and even Jensen Lewis, who would likely pitch the 6th with Aaron Fultz if need be), who have been marvelous in shortening the game for the Tribe, handle their appearances in the ALDS. Neither has ever seen the postseason and their reaction to a new stage could be something to watch as their dominance of the 7th and 8th innings is as vital to the team as Borowski holding onto the ledge with his fingernails to get the 27th out squeezed.

The Indians lineup, as long as the team doesn't press and help the Yankees' pitchers by getting themselves out while limiting their pitch count, should score runs as the Yankees are essentially built to allow runs, just not as many as they score. If one of their main cogs (Travis, it's time to get in that phone booth and have Pronk emerge) can produce runs from the middle of the lineup (or the top in Grady's case), the pressure on the secondary part of the lineup (Blake, Frank the Tank, Peralta) will be reduced and the bottom of the lineup could cobble together as many run-scoring opportunities as the top. The reaction of the youngsters (Asdrubal and Gutz) will be interesting to watch as both have transitioned nicely into the teeth of a pennant race and could continue to be the offensive sparkplugs (that production from an unlikely source) that usually emerge when a team makes an extended playoff run.

Despite the factors in the Tribe's favor (good pitching beats good hitting, the possibility of throwing two Cy Young candidates for three or four of the five games, the weaknesses and age of the Yankees' pitching staff), [Las Vegas still lists the Yankees as 3-1 to win the trophy as the prohibitive favorite as the Tribe comes in at 11/2](#)

How can that be? Why so little respect?

Who cares?

All of this underdog garbage (flying in the face of common sense and logic) is fine.

