

Postseason Happenings: Sabathia Needs To Bring It

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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Our consigliere Tony Lastoria gets us all amped for game five tonight with his latest version of Postseason Happenings. In it, Tony talks about this being the most important night in C.C.'s career, and what this start means to him and how he will be perceived going forward. Tony also hits on the Manny theatrics after his solo shot the other night, Peralta's hot bat, and eats some more crow on Paul Byrd. Tony also calls for the team to bring back Kenny next year, and make Betancourt the closer.



Some random thoughts on some of the key moments in the American League Championship Series (ALCS) so far against the Red Sox, as well as looking ahead to tonight's Game Five.

Which Sabathia Will It Be Tonight?

While Boston starter Josh Beckett will dominate almost all of the attention tonight for Game Five, I'm actually more interested in seeing how Indians starter C.C. Sabathia performs. The fact that Beckett will be front and center stage, and Sabathia more in the background, may be a good thing. The focus will not be on Sabathia, which in the past he has had a hard time settling his emotions in such situations.

This is still a closeout game for the Indians, so Sabathia will have to overcome whatever nerves or overexcitement he may have. He cannot let his emotions get the best of him tonight. In the past, Sabathia always had problems controlling his emotions and staying focused mentally. It was what always kept him from becoming a legit #1 starter for his first several years in the big leagues. But, in the

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second half of the season in 2005 he turned a corner and ever since then has almost been unflappable on the mound. Cool and collected.

The pitcher we saw in his two previous starts this postseason is the Sabathia of old prior to that turnaround at the mid-point of 2005. It goes without saying that the Indians need the new Sabathia to show up tonight; the one that evolved into a perennial Cy Young candidate. The key will be strikes, especially strike one. Sabathia threw strikes all year where I recall a stat displayed during one of the postseason games where he was in the top five in the league in strike thrown percentage. Jake Westbrook and Paul Byrd showed that if you throw strikes consistently and get ahead of hitters, you can be successful against this Red Sox lineup. You don't have to nibble and work around them, you can challenge them early in the count and set them up to hit your pitch.

This is a key start tonight for Sabathia in that if he pitches well he can lay to rest any talk of him being a choke artist or not being a big game pitcher. On the other hand, if he goes out and pitches like he did in his two earlier starts, the witch hunt may begin. Does Sabathia blow up into a pumpkin once again, or can he go out and pitch like the ace we aspire him to be? We'll find out in a few hours.

A Tale Of Two Lineups

Consider the following:

Manny Ramirez (7), Mike Lowell (6), Jason Varitek (4), Bobby Kielty (2), David Ortiz (1), Kevin Youkilis (1).

Jhonny Peralta (7), Franklin Gutierrez (4), Asdrubal Cabrera (4), Kenny Lofton (2), Casey Blake (2), Travis Hafner (2), Victor Martinez (2), Trot Nixon (1), Grady Sizemore (1), Ryan Garko (1).

Above is a listing per team of the players who have an RBI in the ALCS. The number in parentheses is their RBI total in the series so far. In four games, the Red Sox have only had six players chip in with an RBI, and after the top three RBI guys are taken out the rest of the team has combined for four RBI in four games. In contrast, the Indians have had ten players chip in with an RBI, and after the top three RBI guys are taken out the rest of the team has combined for 11 RBI in four games.

In addition to the Indians third and fourth starters being better than the Red Sox third and fourth starters, the balanced attack and one through nine approach of the Indians lineup may be the biggest reason the Indians are up 3-1 in this series right now.

Revisiting The Trading Deadline

Take a trip back in time to three months ago as the trade deadline was nearing and how all the talk was centered around how the Indians needed to get a bat and a reliever or two. When the trade deadline came and went, the only move the Indians ended up making was to get Kenny Lofton, although the Indians were in on several other players that ended going elsewhere or remained with their team. Most notably, there was some discontent among the fans in how the Indians did not go out and do what it took to get relievers like Octavio Dotel or Eric Gagne at all costs.

Now, fast forward back to the present. Dotel ended up getting hurt, and Gagne has proven that his numbers in Texas were a façade and he has all but imploded in Boston. Meanwhile, Lofton has been a key piece of the team in the postseason and has filled in nicely in left field providing very good defense, speed on the basepaths, good offense, and probably most important has amazingly become a leader in the clubhouse.

The offense was also helped with the debut of Asdrubal Cabrera in August, and his presence in the #2 spot in the lineup has helped stabilize the lineup. But, most of all, in the end Shapiro was able to find that one missing arm in the bullpen to be a bridge to the Raffy's, and that player came from within in the form of Jensen Lewis. The Indians essentially got three impact players just before or after the deadline in Lofton, Lewis and Cabrera, of which two of them were obtained from within the system. Sometimes the best trades are the ones you don't make.

Manny Being Manny: Episode 143

A lot has been said about the home run Manny Ramirez hit off Jensen Lewis in the 6th inning of Game Four. At the time, the home run was the third in a set of back-to-back-to-back home runs hit by the Red Sox, yet still only brought the Red Sox to within four runs. What set off the firestorm on the talk shows and message board forums in Cleveland on Wednesday night and all through Thursday was Ramirez's ridiculous showboating act where he stood at home plate for several seconds, threw his arms up over his head as if to signal victory, and then proceeded to make one of the slowest home run trots around the bases in history. All for a solo home run which brought the Red Sox within four runs.

Look, I get where fans feel Ramirez is acting like a punk there (he was) and that it can be perceived that he is showing up the Indians (he was not). I found it to be pure comedy, and yet another reason why Manny has to be one of the dumbest players ever to play professional sports. He was born to hit, and hit he does. He was my all-time player when he was with the Indians, and he is still up there even after he left. Bottom line, Manny already made a fool of himself as it is with that ridiculous display, so why acknowledge it even further with retaliation?

Ramirez did not show up the Indians, he showed up himself. It is hard to show up another team or pitcher when you are losing by four runs late in the game. Also, of course, Manny is on another planet anyway, so is it really a surprise? If the situation were different, like say what he did to the Angels after his walkoff home run in Game Two of that series, it would be completely different. But, that home run he hit Tuesday night was meaningless in the grand scheme of things, and just another episode of Manny Being Manny.

Besides, it would be really hard to retaliate anyway. For starters, you risk a suspension of your manager and the pitcher who hit him for a

game or more, although I believe this typically is not enforced in the playoffs and the punishment carries over to the start of the next season.

Also, with the Red Sox looking all but dead, why give them a possible jolt they need to wake them up? And, heck, Happy Manny is much more preferred to face than Pissed Off Manny. Just let it go, file it away, and maybe stick one in his ribs when we meet up with the Red Sox in the regular season next year.

A Serious Series Turn

What a serious turn of events in this series back in the 10th inning of Game Two. Raise your hand if you thought the Indians would make it to the 11th inning when Tom Mastny came strolling to the mound in the bottom of the 10th inning to face Ortiz-Manny-Lowell? That's what I thought. It all seemed certain to be 2-0 Red Sox in the series at that point, especially considering how much that trio had killed us up to that point, yet here we stand today leading the series 3-1.

This is what makes postseason baseball so great. Here you have Mastny - who had otherwise been ineffective and delegated to mop up duty most of the year - pitching in one of the biggest innings of the Indians season. He gets out of the inning 1-2-3, which is something stalwarts in our rotation like Sabathia and Carmona could not do in the series up to that point. Then, in the top of the 11th, fan whipping boy Trot Nixon had the game winning hit. The Indians ended up winning that game in arguably the defining moment of the series because of key heroic contributions from essentially the 24th and 25th guys on the roster. You gotta love postseason baseball.

Jhonny Be Good

I have harped and harped on Jhonny Peralta's defensive play at shortstop just about since he became the everyday guy there in 2005. He looks slow and has limited range, but makes up for it a lot of times because of a very strong arm and quick, effortless throwing motion. I have always liked him as a hitter, and still only 25 years old (bet you had a double take at that) he still has room to grow as a run producer.

His play to date this postseason has been riveting, most notably on offense. In eight playoff games, Peralta is hitting a blistering .406 with 2 HR, 9 RBI and a 1.236 OPS. He has had several big hits, and a few crushing blows. He still scares me defensively at shortstop, especially on plays in the hole between shortstop and third base, but I have grown to appreciate him much more this postseason. He never met a slider low and away he did not like, but he still is a good hitter and should be a fixture in this Indians lineup hitting fifth or sixth for the next several years. That said, I would absolutely love him to do that at third base starting next year, a position where his range issues are neutralized somewhat and where his arm strength and fielding abilities would flourish.

Betancourt For Closer

Joe Borowski had a very good season for the Indians in racking up 45 saves. But, once this season is over, it may be best for the Indians to part ways with Borowski and turn to Rafael Betancourt as the closer in 2008 and

beyond.

The Indians hold a \$4 million option on Borowski, which they would have no problem picking up since it is a bargain for a proven, veteran reliever such as Borowski, even one with a 5.07 ERA. No, the reason they should or will part ways with Borowski is that he will not get those breaks he got throughout 2007. The 45 saves are nice, but the blown saves and all his peripheral numbers suggest an implosion is looming and that he was extremely lucky this year. The Indians have done their due diligence in the past in researching reliever trends and know this and have commented on such scenarios like this in the past, and with that it seems likely they let Borowski go.

With Borowski out of the picture, it allows Rafael Betancourt to step in as the closer in 2008 and beyond. This season Betancourt has stepped his game up to an elite level as a reliever, and in key spots all year and during the postseason he has proven to pitch well with excellent composure in tough situations. Betancourt had a short go around as the closer back in 2004 during a season where the bullpen was a disaster, and Betancourt struggled. But, he is a much different pitcher now, and seems ready to take over in the role.

Another thing that plays into this is Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro is not a big fan of paying setup men \$4 million a year on multi-year deals. That may change now that the Indians are bringing in extra revenues by being in the postseason and drawing more fans during the regular season, but I doubt it. Betancourt is a year two arbitration eligible player this coming offseason, and after the season he has had he likely will get a substantial increase in salary to around \$3 to \$5 million in 2008.

With Betancourt making closer-type money, and showing the moxie to handle the ninth inning job, my feeling is the Indians buyout his last two arbitration years and give him a three to four year deal at \$4 to \$5 million per season and make him our closer in 2008. Also, Jensen Lewis becomes the new right-handed setup man in 2008, and Shapiro stays true to what he has done in the past and goes bargain bin shopping for a late-inning veteran reliever on a one year deal, or possibly use some of his prospects as currency in a deal for an established young late inning reliever.

Bring Back Lofton

Outfielder Kenny Lofton and starter Jake Westbrook were the heroes in the Indians Game Three win

over Boston on Monday night. Lofton's two-run home run in the second inning was a crushing blow, and ultimately the difference in the game.

Since Lofton has returned to Cleveland in late-July, the team has taken off and he has almost taken on a fatherly role with the team as many of these players embark on their first postseason run. The fans have more than welcomed Kenny back with huge applauses every at bat, and chants of "Kenny! Kenny!" when he runs out to his position in left field. Clearly, the fans have fully embraced his return, and he is very happy to be back.

Looking ahead, Lofton will be a free agent (again) this offseason. He is 40 years old, but looks like he is 28 and can easily play another three to four years. Since he has returned, he has openly expressed how much he loves to be back in Cleveland and almost seems at a loss for words and way to express how appreciative he is of the fans.

Lofton should be given every consideration in being

brought back to the Indians next year. With Trot Nixon gone next year, Lofton can fill his payroll slot and spot on the roster. Also, in the short-term there are no young prospects that Lofton would be blocking next year. Ben Francisco would not be blocked by Lofton, but instead by Jason Michaels, but that is another subject to discuss in the offseason.

Before we can entertain the idea of bringing back Lofton, we would have to find a way to dump outfielder David Dellucci who still has two years and \$7 million left on his deal he signed last offseason. If the Indians were able to find a trading partner for Dellucci, I would be surprised if Lofton is not brought back. Even though Dellucci had a forgetful year, he is not as untradeable as some may think. At \$3.5 million a year, and only for two years, he is a valuable left-handed platoon outfielder and veteran presence another team may need. The Indians may have to kick in a couple million to a team that takes him on, but he should be able to be dealt.

Byrd Calling

I was more than vocal about how I wanted no part of Paul Byrd in any starting situation against the New York Yankees in Yankee Stadium, yet he went out and battled his way through five innings to set us up for the win. Yet, going into Game Four against the Red Sox on Tuesday night, I had no problem this time turning to Byrd in what was a key game in the series. Byrd ended up having an even better performance against the Red Sox in that game, going 5+ innings and only allowing two runs before leaving the game in the sixth inning.

Byrd has been a great veteran presence on the pitching staff, and looks all but certain to have his 2008 \$8 million club option picked up by the Indians this offseason. He is worth it, and is better than just about any #4/#5 starter in baseball. (Note: If the Indians make the World Series, he would get one final start this season in Game Four, in Coors Field. I am not sure how the ball travels there in October, but that looks like a bad matchup for Byrd).

Shapiro's Plan

With the Indians on the brink of an American League pennant, a lot of credit goes to the players and the Indians front office. Whether you agree with it or not, Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro's "Plan" he adopted back in the middle of 2002 has come to fruition, and the Indians appear set to be a contender for the next several years. He surely made mistakes along the way, and some bonehead decisions, but in the end his vision has been realized and we are on the brink of another run of good baseball again in Cleveland.

Some may call it ass kissing, as I have mostly always been a huge supporter of Shapiro and to a lesser extent the Dolan's since the plan went into effect, but you have to give credit where it is due. Some will still hate on the team until the end, which happens, but man, it sure was nice to see Shapiro pump his fist and give out a quick "YEAH!" at the end of Game 4. Good for him.

What A Year

Could 2007 go down as the best year in Cleveland sports ever? If the Indians hold on against the Red Sox and win the series to advance to the World Series, I have to say it just might be. While Cleveland has had years in the past where they won a World Series or an NFL Championship, those were different times with smaller leagues and shorter playoffs.

No, this just may be the best year in Cleveland sports ever. Take note:

~ The Cavaliers went on a great playoff run that culminated in an NBA Finals appearance.

~ The Indians are in the midst of a magical postseason run where they are one win away from the World Series.

~ The Indians can dispatch two of the most hated franchises in baseball in the Yankees and Red Sox.

~ If the Indians make the World Series, we could exorcise our demons against the city that - arguably started all the heartbreak (Denver).

~ This year the Browns arguably had their best draft since 1978 when they drafted Clay Matthews and Ozzie Newsome in the first round.

~ The Browns actually are starting to look like a legit football team, and at 3-3 with the schedule they have coming up, playoff talk is not out of the question.

~ And heck, if you are a Buckeye fan both the football and basketball teams played in the national championship game this year, and the football team is ranked #1 again.

~ Oh, and that Kelly Pavlik guy.

Can it get any better?

Go Tribe!