

Three things are for certain in this life: Death, taxes and nobody, but nobody, is picking the Indians to win tonight's Game 7 at Fenway Park. After blowout losses in games five and six, allegations today that Paul Byrd bought 25k in HGH (see our Indians message board), and the Red Sox gelling and at home ... even the most optimistic Indians fans are terrified of letting it all slip away tonight. Erik Cassano tries to make sense of it all in his analysis of tonight's win or go home game seven.



Three things are for certain in this life: Death, taxes and nobody, but nobody, is picking the Indians to win tonight's Game 7 at Fenway Park.

No, I can't say that I blame anyone who is picking against Cleveland.

It's not just that the Indians have lost Games 5 and 6, it's how they've lost. For the entire month of September, all of the Yankees series and the first four games of the ALCS, the Indians have been a nose-to-the-grindstone team with a workmanlike mindset, able to discard the previous game's outcome and focus on the task at hand.

Then, the Indians arrived on the doorstep of the American League pennant. And everything has changed.

The "no excuses, let's get to work" Indians have been replaced by impostors that are in the process of a complete mental and emotional meltdown. In Game 5, Kenny Lofton cleared the benches when he approached the mound after getting into a war of words with Josh Beckett. Travis Hafner and Asdrubal Cabrera screamed expletives as they waved at strike three. Grady Sizemore and Franklin Gutierrez forgot how to communicate in the outfield.

In Game 6, team leader Victor Martinez seemed to think a home run off Curt Schilling was the right time to show up Manny Ramirez with a snail-slow trot around the bases. Even Eric Wedge, the king of the cool demeanor, was found yelling at the home plate umpire from the top step of the dugout.

The fact that the Red Sox have throttled the Indians by a combined score of 19-3 in the last two games is no coincidence. The Indians have played the past two games hot under the collar, irritated at their missed chances to close the series out, frustrated by their inability to come through with the clutch hits that happened so regularly through the first eight games of the playoffs.

If I didn't know better, I'd say the Indians placed all their eggs in the basket of clinching the series at home in Game 5. When it became apparent that wasn't going to happen, they lost their collective composure.

It's a mistake that shows how woefully lacking in experience the Indians are when compared to the Red Sox. It's not so much Boston's experience in rallying from an 0-3 deficit to beat the Yankees three years ago, though that did teach a lot of the Red Sox's holdovers from 2004 that, no matter the deficit, you are never out of a series.

Boston's ability to surgically implant themselves back in the series has a lot more to do with the fact that they had Beckett going in Game 5, and a trip back home awaiting after that. For a team trailing 3-1, you can't ask for the planets to align much better than that.

We all knew the Indians didn't want to head back to Boston, but it wasn't until Saturday night that we knew how much they wanted to avoid the trip. The Indians played like a bunch of middle-management minions who had been told by their boss to come in Saturday at 7 a.m. for an all-morning symposium on [TPS report](#) covers

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Now, with no days of rest to calm down and collect themselves, the Indians must play a winner-take-all Game 7. They must find a way to return to the team that was in control from Games 2 through 4 and do it fast, or you'll be better off spending your Sunday evening watching "Desperate Housewives." Really, you would.

On to the game...

I can't underscore enough how important it is that the Indians jump out to a multiple-run lead early tonight. The way the Red Sox have been swinging the bats the past two games, it guarantees nothing, but falling behind early is really bad news for an Indians team that needs something to build on in a hurry.

If the Red Sox grab an early lead and starter Daisuke Matsuzaka shows any signs of losing his grip on the game, there is always the possibility that Josh Beckett will be summoned from the bullpen on short rest, and we will be treated to flashbacks of 1999, when Pedro Martinez came out of the bullpen to pitch six perfect innings in Game 5 of the division series, eliminating the Indians.

On the Tribe's side, Jake Westbrook isn't the kind of guy you'd think you would want starting a game of this magnitude. But since the golden arms of C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona have come up more than just a little short in this series, that leaves Westbrook and Paul Byrd as your best options.

Westbrook and Byrd have done what the Tribe's big guns haven't been able to do: Throw strikes and work from ahead in the count. If Westbrook can pitch like he did in Game 3, Boston hitters will have a hard time elevating the ball, which is a great recipe for staying away from the doubles and homers that have absolutely killed Indian pitching the past two games.

If Westbrook has any trouble, my first choice out of the bullpen would be Byrd. His double-pump windup and selection of super slo-mo slop seemed to mystify the Red Sox in Game 4. Plus, as a comparative playoff veteran, Byrd might be the Indians reliever most likely to take control of the situation should Westbrook falter.

Of course, if Westbrook falters (read: leaves pitches up in the strike zone), there is a good chance it will be 9-1 Boston in the fourth inning, rendering Byrd's composure a moot point.

I might as well use this as an opportunity to mention [Byrd's implication](#) in the snowballing

HGH

/steroid scandal, because if he enters tonight's game, 35,000 Boston fans will remind him. But that's another column for a later time.

At the plate, Indian hitters have to reverse the trend of the past two games, and do it right away. Their frustration and anxiety has been so thick you could cut it with a knife. Almost to a man, the Tribe's lineup abandoned any form of discipline, expanded the strike zone, pressed to a fault, and took what few scoring chances they had away by getting themselves out.

That putrid approach has to stop, or Game 7 is a mere formality and the offseason has already begun.

It's been said before, and I'm saying it again: The Indians had three cracks at winning the pennant. If they fail in all three, they get what they deserve. In Games 5 and 6, they played like a team not deserving of representing the AL in the World Series. They have one more shot. If they can re-grow a backbone, stop the onrushing tidal wave of Red Sox momentum and win Game 7 on the road, they will most definitely deserve a shot at a championship.