

## Making The Wrong Excuses

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, June 09 2008 7:00 PM -

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The only thing that could be more disappointing than the Cleveland Indians performance thus far is if general manager Mark Shapiro blames it on injuries. With the losses piling up, the talk about the impact a host of injuries allegedly is having on this team is growing louder. Gary Benz says that simply is not the reason this team is vastly underperforming expectations. The real reason? That's the subject of Gary's latest piece for us ...



The only thing that could be more disappointing than the Cleveland Indians performance thus far is if general manager Mark Shapiro blames it on injuries. With the losses piling up, the talk about the impact a host of injuries allegedly is having on this team is growing louder. All that means is that Indians' vice president of public relations, Bob DiBiasio, is doing a good job getting weaving the institutional message into the public conscious via team broadcasters Tom Hamilton, Mike Hegan, Rick Manning and Matt Underwood and the enablers in the main stream press. It doesn't mean it's true.

Injuries can be an excuse or a rallying point. But talk about them enough and the prophecy becomes self-fulfilling. Even the healthy players will use them as an excuse for why they can barely muster enough energy to stay interested in a game for nine innings.

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The Los Angeles Angels have two starters out and several positions players on the disabled list. Vladimir Guerrero has turned into Travis Hafner. Yet, the Angels have the best record in the major leagues. The Indians have been beset by a similar rash of injuries but only Detroit (but not for much longer), Kansas City and Seattle have worse records in the American League.

The Eric Wedge haters will naturally say that the difference lies in the simple fact that Wedge is no Mike Scioscia. If that were only the case. In actuality, the two are quite similar. In one all important category Wedge, like Scioscia, has never been big on making excuses for non-performance. The difference lies in what they had to work with. If the Indians' top management really thinks that the injuries are at the root of this team's problems, then it's time for Shapiro to go into the Cleveland Clinic himself for either a reality transplant or some ego reduction surgery, maybe both.

This team hasn't been right since the opening bell. Shapiro took a tinkering approach to the offseason and it's turning into one of the worst decisions of his career. The sad fact is that going into the season there wasn't enough pop in the lineup anyway to sustain the team through the inevitable valleys of slow starts and 0-22 slumps. Far too much emphasis was placed on Hafner regaining his swing and his confidence without recognizing that even as the best case scenario that still wouldn't have been enough to allow this team to consistently score runs. It wasn't last year.

Short of taking the deposition myself of Hafner's doctors, I'll cynically remain unconvinced that his right shoulder is the source of his issues. It's an injury of convenience, a way for the Indians and Hafner to save face while he quietly re-works his game without having to suffer the indignity of doing so in the minor leagues. The Hafner Indians' fans grew to love disappeared over a year ago and was replaced by a guy that sort of looks like him, but with the swing of Gorman Thomas.

With Hafner's track record, it's easy to get see why folks get caught up in hopes

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and prayers. But what's ailing Hafner is far more serious than a supposedly balky shoulder and the other various aches and pains this guy seems to pick up at an alarming rate considering he doesn't even play defense. Even if there once was a physical reason for his slide, it's far more psychological at this point, a diagnosis I feel safe in making even without having stayed at a Holiday Inn Express last night.

As for Victor Martinez, there has been so much talk about his lack of home runs thus far, you'd think he has been the second coming of Johnny Bench. In his first four full seasons, Martinez has averaged just under 22 home runs per year. Those are good, but not great power numbers. His real value is as a consistent hitting presence in the middle of the lineup, someone to keep rallies going. While Martinez's power numbers are obviously down, his streakiness as a hitter is hurting the team far more. And for the last few weeks, that streakiness has resulted in a precipitous drop in his batting average and hence his effectiveness at a time when because of injuries the Indians really needed him to go in another direction.

The bigger picture to all of this is that the rest of the lineup, and that includes Grady Sizemore and Ryan Garko, doesn't look like they're in slump. Instead, it looks like they are pretty much where they should be, give or take a few percentage points. Unlike what's remained of the Angels' lineup, the Indians don't look to have anyone in their lineup that can be consistently counted on for either power or average, which means rallies will be sporadic and sustained win streaks will be rare, an apt description actually of the 2008 season. It would be nice to think that Wedge could fix this by getting more emotional, but he knows full well by now that you can't yell someone into competence.

Though the injuries haven't defined the season any more than they have defined the Angels' season, what they have done is unsettled the one strength of the team-pitching. A team that now seems bound to have struggled anyway wasn't good enough to overcome weakness elsewhere. Closer Joe Borowski's injury early in the season appears to have been another injury of convenience much the same as Hafner's. What's apparent is that Borowski simply wasn't ready to start the season, a lack of arm strength seemingly brought on by a lack of preparation.

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But the domino effect of Borowski's "injury" early in the season was to expose a bullpen that wasn't quite capable of producing at last year's level. Given slightly different roles for a limited period of time, virtually no one in that bullpen could make the adjustment. Returned to their traditional roles, the bullpen still is struggling, either because of that early season jolt or because they are, well, bullpen pitchers. In the end, what you have is a bullpen with the highest ERA in the majors (4.90) and 10 blown saves and with Rafael Betancourt serving as its poster child.

The injuries to Fausto Carmona and Jake Westbrook haven't quite ravaged the starting pitching rotation in the same way, but those injuries are making it abundantly clear that the real advantage depth gives a team is in its ability to withstand just these sorts of challenges. You could look at Jeremy Sowers' start Sunday against Detroit and conclude it wasn't all that successful. But ask yourself what will have a longer term negative impact on the team: one ineffective start by Sowers or Jhonny Peralta's strike out with the bases loaded in the eighth inning?

Sowers had trouble finishing off hitters Sunday and it cost the team five runs. Peralta had a chance to be the Edgar Renteria of Sunday and failed, again. It may have been too much to ask of Peralta for him to hit a grand slam like Renteria did on Saturday, but it's not too much to note that the next meaningful run Peralta drives in will surely be his first.

It may be that a loss is a loss, but not all of them are created equally. The losses attributable to the unsettled starting rotation should end relatively soon as that situation stabilizes. Carmona will return, C.C. Sabathia will pitch better and Aaron Laffey and/or Sowers will settle in. Far more concerning are the losses attributable to the rest of the team's failures. You could stick Scioscia in for Wedge and it wouldn't make a difference, unless Scoscia also brings a large part of his roster with him. What troubles this team looks to stick around for awhile,

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like an obnoxious dinner party guest who doesn't have to work tomorrow, an apt description actually of the 2008 season.