

Holding Out Hope

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, June 10 2008 7:00 PM -

You can always count on good 'ole Paulie Cousineau for a blast of optimism when it's needed most, and that's what he provides us today in his latest column amidst all the gloom and doom we've been running on this site as of late. Paulie says that this season is not over. He remembers the attitude at this time in 2005. And he points out that the Indians schedule features nothing but teams under .500 for the next three weeks. I mean really, how many games is this White Sox team going to win this season?



While most people probably have a similar story of where they were when they heard of the extent of Jake Westbrook's elbow injury, I was sitting in the 3rd base boxes of Comerica Park on Saturday afternoon, sipping some adult beverages and readying myself for what was once thought to be a 'must-see' game in the AL Central, if not the whole Major Leagues. The cell phone in my pocket vibrated and the text simply read 'westbrook out for year'. After asking (via text) whether or not the surgery that would put him out for the year had any connection to a former Yankees pitcher with two first names ('tj?'), I believe was the exact text), my phone came back with the words 'probably...who cares'. And I think those final two words get to the crux of the way that a lot of people are feeling about the Indians these days - who cares?

Between sports talk radio-fueled conjecture that the whole team should be blown up because 'everyone outside of Sizemore and Carmona should be fair game...and the Indians should entertain offers for them because this team is going nowhere as it is currently constructed' (I think I have that flawed logic right) and questions of 'how long until Browns' Training Camp starts', let's hold off on the doom-and-gloom that pervades the Cleveland sports psyche

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for a moment.

Is the news that Jake Westbrook is essentially out for this year, probably most of next year, and may never be the same pitcher a crushing blow in a series of them for the Erie Warriors? Certainly...and it's made worse by the fact that he's getting paid \$33M for this season and the next two seasons.

Does this news, along with the fact that the Indians have endured a nightmare month from C.C., a catastrophic drop in effectiveness from several key cogs in the bullpen, and playing without two of their three best hitters (Victor on one leg does not make a full Victor) have the I-480 bridge filling up? I hope not, but the storm that this team is weathering just picked up some extra steam with the Westbrook news, furthering the unlikelihood that the Tribe can climb its way back into the Central race.

But, contrary to popular belief, all is not lost for this once-promising team or even this once-promising season...even as the White Sox get hot as the Indians tread water in the Central. It is still June and while the White Sox are doing their damndest to pull away in the AL Central, there is a lot of baseball left to play in this season.

Before getting into this, let's get the simple math out of the way in terms of the AL Central. Assuming that the AL Central is going to take about 88 games to win, here's how the Indians and White Sox would have to close out their remaining games to reach 88 wins:

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Indians: 59-39 (.602 winning percentage)

White Sox: 51-48 (.515 winning percentage)

A .602 WINNING PERCENTAGE!?! THIS TEAM!?!

Surely, you jest.

But hear me out on this as I'm not ready or willing to throw in the towel on this thing...yet. The only reason that I'm holding out hope on this (and, yes, I do watch the games every night) is that the Indians figure to play in what SHOULD be some very winnable games for the next three weeks before they head out to face the White Sox in Chicago at the end of June.

The schedule for the next three weeks:

MIN (31-33) @ home
SD (28-37) @ home
COL (24-39) on road
LAD (30-33) on road
SF (29-35) @ home
CIN (31-34) @ home

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Could these teams be licking their lips at the anticipation of facing the 29-35 Tribe?

Sure, but the Indians' offense has shown signs of life (aided admittedly by the launching pad in Texas...but those games and their results still count) as they've scored the 3rd most runs in MLB in June, while their starting pitching remains strong despite the absence of Carmona and Westbrook and figures to get a boost when Carmona returns. The Indians have the opportunity get fat on the NL West while the White Sox are forced to play the suddenly dominant Cubs (40-24, by the by) six times over the next three weeks and attempt to close the gap before their June 30th tussle with the South Siders.

Could the Indians continue to fall on their collective face and be done in by a bullpen that seemingly remains undeterred by escalating gas prices as they always bring their handy gas can to the mound with them or an offense incapable of cobbling together strings of extra-base hits? Of course, but despite reports that the Indians are dead in the water and that the White Sox are running and hiding with the AL Central pennant, it all seems a little premature given the date on the calendar.

Even if the Indians don't make a huge dent in the White Sox lead heading into the month of July, have we all forgotten what happened in 2005 so quickly?

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June 10, 2005

CHI: 41-19
MIN: 35-24 (5.5 GB)
CLE: 29-30 (11.5 GB)

July 31, 2005

CHI: 68-35
MIN: 54-50 (14.5 GB)
CLE: 55-51 (14.5 GB)

September 8, 2005

CHI: 87-52
CLE: 79-61 (8.5 GB)
MIN: 73-66 (14.0 GB)

September 24, 2005

CHI: 93-61

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CLE: 92-63 (1.5 GB)
MIN: 78-76 (15.0 GB)

Obviously, we all know that the Indians fell just short of making the playoffs in 2005 after making one of the more spirited runs at a White Sox team that faded down the stretch. But look at those dates again above and consider where we are today:

June 10, 2008

CHI: 37-26
MIN: 31-33 (6.5 GB)
CLE: 29-35 (8.5 GB)

Not that dissimilar at this point in the season from 2005, and the Indians slipped further out of it before they quickly closed a 7-game gap in a three-week stretch in September of 2005. Surely that represents an exceptional case, but it at least sets a precedent (involving the same two teams a mere three seasons ago) for the Indians to continue to attempt to gradually dig out of a hole that, at this point, seems to be getting deeper by the day.

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Now, if the Indians are sitting as far out as they were in 2005 this year at the Trading Deadline, there's no question that the Tribe would be looking to move some pieces as the construction of the two clubs are at different stages of their maturation. But that date is over seven weeks away and the Indians still have the possibility to make up some ground in the Central prior to that date. Based on how quickly the Indians closed that gap in a three-week stretch in September of 2005, it's not completely outside of the realm of feasibility...as hard as that may be to see given the recent road trip.

As frustrating as it is to watch this team scuffle (and the White Sox thrive), it remains early in a division that could tighten up in the next few weeks, so let's hold off on the concession speeches and declarations of death for this team. With the caveat that if the Indians continue to go as they are (which is, playing about .500 ball against beatable teams and coughing up leads in winnable games) they'll be fitted with a toe tag soon enough as they look to move some pieces (but, PLEASE, nobody not scheduled to become a FA after this season), the Indians are not out of this race based on precedent and what lies ahead.