

## A Double Standard?

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Wednesday, June 25 2008 7:00 PM -

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We interrupt the Omar Vizquel love-fest with an interesting piece from Paulie C today. In it, he takes a look at the departures from the north coast of Omar Vizquel and Jim Thome. Omar is loved, revered, and cheered when he returns. Thome is booed. Paul understands why, it's the perception of why each player left. But after taking a closer look at each situation, Paul wonders aloud ... were that THAT different?



In the midst of the Omar Love Fest that's taken over the North Coast, something keeps bothering me. I have no problem with the outpouring of gratitude and appreciation for Vizquel from Indians' fans and from the organization (though, at a certain point, cheering his RBI squeeze that proved to be the game winner was a bit over the top because...you know...he's not playing for the Indians anymore), but I'm a little confused as to what seems to be a double standard that Omar has been the beneficiary of as he returns to the North Coast for the first time.

Follow me on this, if you will:

A player who was a main cog in the 1990's Tribe juggernauts becomes a Free Agent as the team rebuilds in the early-to-mid 2000's.

The player voices his desire to stay in Cleveland, but leaves for greener pastures.

The player returns for the first time to Cleveland to face off against his old team. How is he received by the fans that adored him for so many years?

If you said, &quot;It depends on the perception of WHY the player left&quot;, you're exactly right.

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If you're seen as a player who was wronged by the organization, passed over despite the fact that a few good years are left in you for a hotshot youngster ready to take your place, you're embraced and cheered upon your return.

If you're seen as a player after nothing more than money, who wronged the organization by leaving after saying that you wanted to end your career as an Indian, then signed for guaranteed money and years that the Indians weren't willing to offer, you're vilified and booed upon your return.

Maybe I'm simplifying things a little too much, but how were the departures of Omar Vizquel and Jim Thome a year apart THAT different?

Both left the rebuilding Indians after both stating that they wanted to retire as Indians, but returned to entirely different reactions as opponents of the Indians. Omar has been given a hero's welcome, a reminder of how marvelous that magical era of Jacobs Field was while fans condemn the Indians for shooing away Little O (despite the fact that Jhonny Peralta had just been named the International League MVP at age 22 in 2004 and was ready for Cleveland) to San Francisco, while Thome came back to the mocking catcalls that his wife was "his rock" and he that he had somehow turned his back on the entire fanbase by accepting the Phillies' offer of more guaranteed years and dollars than the Indians were willing to offer.

Why is this?

Is it really HOW these players leave town instead of what they do while in town?

You won't be able to convince me that Omar was more popular than Thome while both were here as talk of a statue of Thome was actually part of the Tribe's negotiations with him and I don't recall anyone ever mentioning a spot next to Rapid Robert for Vizquel. Both players were THE icons of those teams of the mid-to-late 90's, despite the fact that better players played on the same team as fans marveled at the skill of Belle and Ramirez, but never adopted the surly Albert or the mercurial Manny the way that Omarvelous and The Thomenator had a hold on our collective hearts.

I won't even delve deeply into how deeply Omar's hitting has fallen off since he left the Indians because I don't care to disparage his overall body of work by examining his struggles at the plate as he winds down his career (as most players

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do) or get into the whole debate of Omar staying to play SS because the "Hindsight Is 20/20" axiom is too overwhelming for any rational discourse when you travel back in time to the winter of 2004 and the mitigating factors when the decision was made.

Don't get me wrong, Omar deserves the praise and adulation that has been heaped upon him as he comes back to Cleveland, but be aware of the similarity of the way he left town to the way that Thome left town. Both players wanted to stay (depending upon what you believe) and finish their careers as Indians, but ultimately left for NL destinations. It's true that one left of his own doing, while the other left because there was no spot for him anymore on a rebuilding team. Their returns, however, could not have been more different, mainly based on the perception about their exit from town and who was perceived as greasing their way out of town. In Omar's case, the organization is seen as the bad guy, letting a local treasure escape because of what was expected to be a regression as he aged over the next few years with a ready-made replacement waiting in the wings to be a part of the rebuilding while Thome is seen as the villain in his case, seen as grabbing every last dollar from the Phillies on his way out of town, reneging on his promise for a "hometown discount"; and his repeatedly stated desire to stay in Cleveland.

Maybe the state of the Indians at the time of both players' return shed some light on the situation as Thome arrived as a member of an AL Central rival with the Indians' star on the rise, with Travis Hafner mashing his way through the AL, and with Thome's balky back (which was the reason the Indians wouldn't match the Phillies' contract offer) relegating him to DH for the White Sox. Thome's comments that he left for Philadelphia for a "chance to win" were thrown back in his face as the Indians looked poised for a prolonged run of success, with his replacement (the artist formerly known as Pronk) besting Thome's output. Fans had the idea that the Indians were better off without Thome, given the success of Hafner and the team's "bright" future.

Meanwhile, Omar returns with the Indians' current season (one once so full of hope) teetering on the brink, with his replacement looking heavy-footed in the field and underperforming at the plate, and with fans looking for a reason to blame the current regime for the 2008 season - this time inexplicably bringing up the irrational notion that keeping Vizquel in Cleveland for the last 4 years would have improved the current team, despite Vizquel's contributions at the plate (or lack thereof) since he left Cleveland.

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Perhaps the way the two players handled the situation provides the explanation as Thome made comment after comment that he wanted to stay in Cleveland, giving fans hope that FINALLY the player to give that "hometown discount" had arrived and Jimmy would finish his career donning the Chief while Omar simply and quietly went off to San Francisco as the writing was on the wall that the Indians had planned for his departure with Peralta and some kid who called himself "The Franchise" ready to step into the middle infield upon his departure.

What if Thome had simply toed the Players' Union party line and said that he would see how it all played out, never even expressing his love for the area and simply said, "I want to stay...we'll see how it plays out"? What if Omar had been offered a contract to stay in Cleveland, with the idea that Peralta would move to 3B and Vizquel could stay at SS until he retired?

To further the question, why are players like Vizquel, Lofton, Nagy, and Sandy remembered in such reverential tones when recalling the 90's? Is it because the perception that these players were forced to leave on the organization's terms, which is in stark contrast to Thome, Manny, and Belle, who left of their own volition and signed larger contracts elsewhere?

Were those players that have been received warmly (to say the least) greater contributors than those that have had their names besmirched for the manner in which they left town? I'd like to see an argument that says that the former list of players was more instrumental in the success of the 90's than the latter three names.

I suppose the lesson is for a player to leave in good standing with the fans, regardless of past contributions, as the last action before your foot steps out the door is the action for which you will be remembered rather than the years that you spent with the team.

Back to Omar and Thome, we'll never know how the two may be thought of in Cleveland had things sorted out in a different manner as what's done is done. But "different" is an understatement as to how these two former

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teammates and former torchbearers for the Indians organization are received when they return to Cleveland to face off with their former team in front of Indians fans.

Fair or not, Omar has come out as squeaky clean as memories of his dazzling us playfully while playing a child's game remain as the black that Thome wears when he visits the corner of Carnegie and Ontario as a member of the White Sox is more than symbolic as the role of the greedy player, ready to turn his back on a city for every last zero on a paycheck, has settled on his vast shoulders that carried the city he once professed to love.