

The Road To Nowhere

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Friday, June 27 2008 7:00 PM -

Six weeks ago, the Indians sat atop the AL Central with a six and a half game lead. At the time, Paul Cousineau wrote a piece that looked at the Indians coming schedule leading into the All Star break, suggesting it was soft enough to the point where the Indians may be able to separate themselves from the pack. In his latest, Paul now takes a look back at the past 37 games, and talks about where things skidded off the track this season for the Indians.



Once upon a time, in what feels like a galaxy far, far away, the Indians sat atop the AL Central with a 1 ½ game lead after sweeping the A's in the friendly confines. The date was May 15th, a mere 6 weeks ago, and [some hack decided to look at the upcoming schedule of the Indians](#), decided that it was relatively easy with the opponents on queue, and made the determination that the 53 games separating mid-May from the All Star Break would be the time that the Indians ran away with the Central by beating up on lesser opponents.

Um...are we playing with mulligans?

While that Indians are still in the midst of that 53 game stretch, the early returns (though the first 37 games) shows that the INDIANS were the lesser competition on the schedule as the Tribe has posted a 13-24 record (a .351 winning percentage) as they have sunk to the bottom of the AL Central, looking up at the (gulp) KC Royals.

So what in the wide, wide world of sports happened here?

The team, as it stood on May 15th, was still with an effective Fausto Carmona and at least contained Hafner and Martinez (however impotent their bats were) in the middle of the lineup as their aCCe showed signs of returning to his Cy Cy form and Cliff Lee and Aaron Laffey were in the process of vying for the AL ERA lead.

Now, six weeks later, the team puts a lineup against the worst (and most overpaid) pitcher in MLB by "featuring" a player (by his own admission) whose best role is that of a utility player in the #2 hole, a player that started the season in AAA in the #3 hole, a #4 hitter with a .719 OPS whose Lasik may or may not have taken, a #5 hitter with a .693 OPS on the season who runs like he has a refrigerator on his back, and a 33-year-old SS who didn't play in MLB from 2004 to 2007 when he was signed (then cut) by the Rays.

Is it any surprise that Barry Zito shut down the Tribe offense?

Instead of just focusing on one frustrating game, though, let's focus on a whole mess of them, starting with the series opener in Cincinnati after the Tribe swept the Athletics out of town on May 17th. Here is how the Indians have performed against the "weak" part of their schedule with the records of the

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teams at the start of the series indicated:

@ CIN (18-23): 0-3

@ CHI (23-20): 0-3

vs. TEX (24-25): 1-2

vs. CHI (27-22): 1-2

@ KC (21-32): 1-2

@ TEX (29-29): 2-2

@ DET (24-35): 2-2

vs. MIN (31-33): 2-1

vs. SDP (30-38): 2-1

@ COL (28-41): 0-3

@ LAD (34-38): 2-1

vs. SFG (32-45): 1-2

Against ONE team (though they faced the White Sox twice) that had a record above .500 when the series started among ten opponents, the Indians have played .351 baseball as they've seen their record drop from 22-19 to 35-43 over a course of time that has seen the rest of the AL Central do precisely what the Indians SHOULD have been doing. In fact, here's how the AL Central has fared since that magical May 15th date, which looks, unfortunately, to be the high-water mark of the season for the Tribe:

CHI: 22-15

MIN: 22-16

DET: 21-15

KC: 17-22

CLE: 13-24

OK, OK...stop banging your head against the desk.

Let's try to figure out what's going on here without getting too deeply into individual performances, as that discussion is for another day and another

couple thousand words.

Surprisingly, the offense has not been the primary culprit, as anemic as it has looked as they've averaged 4.6 runs per game. Not an overwhelming number, but certainly an improvement over the first few months of the season when the Indians were actually winning games due to their pitching. The offense has posted a .739 OPS over those 37 games, which doesn't remind anyone of the glory days of Jacobs Field, but falls in the middle of the pack in terms of offensive production in the AL. The offense has been fair, if inconsistent, over this stretch that has caused the season to circle the drain with the only stat jumping off the page is the disproportionate amount of K (averaging nearly 7 ½ per game) to the amount of BB (a little over 3 a game).

So, it's not the offense's fault on its own...then it must be the bullpen, right?

Over the 37-game stretch, the Indians bullpen has collectively posted 5.48 ERA with a 1.61 WHIP while compiling a 3-14 record with only 4 saves in the 13 wins that the team has won since May 15th. Scary numbers, for sure...so that must be the reason, right? Fix the bullpen and the mediocre offense combines with the strength of the team, the starting pitching, to allow this team to go on a run.

Ah, the starting pitching...

Not using injuries as any sort of excuse as the Indians' depth at starting pitcher was thought to be (and probably is) the strength of this organization. However, over this 37-game stretch that is under the bright lights, the starters don't come out much better than the relievers as they've posted a 4.90 ERA as a group while allowing 1.49 walks and hits per inning pitched. A far cry from the month of

April, when 3 of their 5 starters had ERA under 3.00 (and C.C. and Laffey, the two most consistent starters currently, weren't among those three), is it not?

And herein lies the rub - its not ONE thing that has caused this team to go belly-up, so it's not as if ONE thing is going to magically fix what has gone awfully wrong. Would a settled and efficient bullpen help? Sure, but the starters have been as much of a problem as the bullpen over the last six weeks, just as the inconsistency of the offense has been a culprit for the team dropping to the cellar in the AL Central.

One would like to think that this team could tread water until they get healthy, but the fact remains that they haven't and the stretch of

games they're coming off of gave them what was likely the best opportunity to stick around the .500 and stay in the AL Central mix. If they had even been able to do that and go 18-19 in this 37-game stretch, they'd be sitting at 40-38, a mere three games back in the Central.

I don't mean to showcase these hard numbers just to ruin everyone's weekend, I just want to provide some empirical evidence that this team is not one improvement of one aspect of the team from getting back into this race. If adding a big bat would solve all the problems of the team or augmenting the bullpen would settle the whole team, then optimism would still exist. But this team, as it stands right now, is simply not good enough to put together a stretch of wins due to the inconsistency of all aspects of the team and the opportunity that was ahead of them six weeks ago lies behind them with regret being the prevailing feeling that remains.

Ultimately, against the worst of MLB, the Indians have been at their worst, allowing the 2008 season to become a casualty on a road that once looked so full of hope that is now going nowhere.