

## Another Slice Of Irony

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, July 15 2008 7:00 PM -

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In Gary's latest, he talks about the four game sweep of the Rays that led into the break, and some of the encouraging things Tribe fans should take from it. It was a reminder that things aren't usually as bad as they seem or as good as hoped. In a season full of much consternation and contradiction, it was just another nice slice of irony - a team finally getting hot just as a three-day break arrives.



The line between love and hate is paper thin, as is the line between hope and despair. If you're a Cleveland sports fan, though, not to worry. Razor thin or as wide as a bus, it's a line you can walk with one eye closed, playing a banjo in one hand and balancing your checkbook with the other.

To the doubters, meaning those outside Cleveland without any sense of history or perspective, all you needed to do was listen to the reaction of hardcore Indians' fans following their team's improbable four-game sweep of the Tampa Bay Rays this past weekend to understand the inherent contradictions of an Indians fan.

More than a few see great hope in a team even as they secretly admit it was against a team that may be more media-created pretender than legitimate contender. This detail aside, many of these were the same fans alternately bemoaning the trade of CC Sabathia and then putting their best smiley face on it last week. If this all sounds rather oxymoronic, that's because it is. The only thing Cleveland fans, so conditioned to also-ran status, hate worse than a losing team is a winning team. That's life through this looking glass and the Tampa Bay series

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is an object lesson.

It really is rather difficult to figure out just what the Indians rather modest four-game winning streak means, particularly, and naturally, coming as it does on the heels of a 10-game losing streak. The glass half-full (or as George W. would say, the half-glass full) types see this as a portent of things to come, a confirmation of sorts of the inexplicable faith general manager Mark Shapiro had in this crew going into the season. The half-empty folks see it as an aberration. The truth doesn't lie necessarily in the middle somewhere, but it's out there nonetheless.

The weekend did show a few things worth noting, especially for those in the "remain calm" camp. First, shortstop Jhonny Peralta's off-season laser eye surgery seems to finally be kicking in. Or maybe he's drinking more Mountain Dew or getting more sleep. Undoubtedly, though, he's more or less slowly but definitively seizing control of the clean-up spot in the Indians' batting order, making it less of the black hole it's been for over a year.

Second, Ben Francisco can hit. In his last 10 games, he's batting .333 with two home runs and seven RBI in 39 at bats. Of course, it was clear in spring training that Francisco could hit. But the team and the town living as it does in a sort of Bizarro World where down is up and right is left, the Indians deep thinkers needed to make really, really certain that the Jason Michaels/David Dellucci platoon wouldn't work. Here's hoping they're satisfied.

Third, when catcher Victor Martinez returns, nearly half the lineup can actually hit, assuming center fielder Grady Sizemore doesn't misplace his stroke during the All Star Game's Home Run Derby. While that won't fully limit the maddening number of times the team scores two or less runs a game, it should make a serious dent in it.

Fourth, the combination of good starting pitching and scoring runs can cover up a

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healthy number of sins in the bullpen. Even with those sins, it's not as if this year's model is the reincarnation of the Bullpen From Hell, 2003 edition. There is no reason to give up on Rafael Betancourt, for example, even if he looks like he is battling demons on the mound. In actuality, Betancourt looks more like a guy struggling to understand his role than a pitcher struggling generally. Massahide Kobayashi has shown enough promise to keep marching him out there to close out games, at least until Shapiro invests in a legitimate closer. Rafael Perez, Tom Mastny and Jensen Lewis are still decent prospects, if nothing else. We've seen far worse.

For those in the "bring on the Browns" camp, they are nonplussed with the Indians' ability to impose its will on the Rays. It's a turn really on the Groucho Marx joke of not wanting to belong to a club that would have you as a member. If any team can let this Indians team push it around for four straight days, it wasn't a team worth beating in the first place.

Celebrate all you want in Peralta's latest hot streak, but haven't we been here before? In fact, that's the biggest problem with Peralta. He's becoming a baseball version of Kordell Stewart, a player who impresses just often enough to keep around and fails nearly as much. Peralta may not be a coach killer like Stewart, but if Shapiro's not careful, he's on his way to being a GM killer. With intermittent talent spurts, Peralta remains the ultimate tease that keeps Shapiro from finding a more consistent player, ultimately threatening Shapiro's own tenure.

Injuries may have hurt this team, but its problems were more fundamental in the first place. Even if the chance that the team will be bolstered by the return of its injured players is likely, the impact is far from certain. Of the three key players slated for return, Martinez, pitcher Fausto Carmona and designated hitter Travis Hafner, only Martinez is likely to pay immediate dividends. Carmona will need time to round back into form and build up arm strength. As for Hafner, his problems never appeared to be physical in the first place. Easing him back into the lineup in a way that doesn't interfere with Peralta will be tricky under the best of circumstances and this year is hardly the best of circumstances.

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If you want to put a gloss on the future of the bullpen, feel free but that bit of wishful thinking won't magically turn Mastny, Lewis and Kobayashi into reliable, proven veterans. If there is one conclusion that can reasonably be drawn from the present administration, it's that its history of actually developing players is uneven. Neither Mastny, Lewis nor Kobayashi, among others, come with the pedigree of Sabathia. Until manager Eric Wedge actually can eke out the last drop of talent from these borderline kinds of players that dot this roster, mid-level prospects will stay in the suspect corner.

The case is easily made either way. But in actuality, what really took place this past weekend was a little bit of sunshine in an otherwise dismal season. It was a reminder that things aren't usually as bad as they seem or as good as hoped. In a season full of much consternation and contradiction, it was just another nice slice of irony - a team finally getting hot just as a three-day break arrives.