

Winning 20 games shouldn't be this big of a deal. But when Cliff Lee toed the rubber on Monday night with a 19-2 record, it was a big deal. A really big deal. A pins-and-needles in the ninth inning big deal. It's been 34 years since an Indians starting pitcher has won 20 games, and doing it in today's environment for starters is a much more impressive feat. Erik Cassano talks about Cliff Lee's landmark season in his latest column for us.



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Chalk it up to the typical Cleveland Sports Drought That Has Gone On For Way Too Long. You know it by heart: No 1,000-yard rushers for the Browns from 1985 to 2005, no Indians player hit for the cycle from 1978 to 2003, no Indians pitcher has thrown a no-hitter since 1981 -- heck, the Indians haven't even been no-hit since 1993. And I did all of that without even broaching the subject of championships.

The specialization of baseball pitchers has eaten into decision totals for starters. Gaylord Perry's 21-13 record in 1974 marked the last time a Tribe pitcher won 20 games in a regular season. In eras past, Perry's '74 performance would have been viewed as something far less spectacular than the pomp and circumstance that normally surrounds a 21-win season in the 21st Century. Perry was the ace of the staff, so he pitched the most and racked up the most decisions.

It's been so long between 20-game winners for the Indians, comparing Perry's '74 season to Lee's 2008 season is like comparing a Model T to a gas-electric hybrid. Perry's '74 totals came in 37 starts. He threw complete games in all but nine of

those starts, amassing 322 innings pitched.

So far this year, Lee has totaled 27 starts, with four complete games, pitching 194 innings in the process. That's a little over seven innings a start. Assuming Lee keeps his current pace of innings pitched per start, making six more starts for a season total of 33, he'll rack up 236 innings pitched for the year. In 2008, that makes him an ironman. C.C. Sabathia pitched 241 innings last year, and there was much debate among the professional and amateur pundits over whether the heavy workload was a factor in his postseason tank job.

It seems like every trend in baseball is working against the 20-win season. But it's still mind boggling that the Indians -- a franchise that, once upon a time, was the gold standard in pitching -- could go more than three-tenths of a century without cranking out one 20-game winner.

There were the close calls in recent years. Bartolo Colon won 20 in 2002, but 10 wins in, he was traded to the Expos. In 2005, Lee won 18 and finished fourth in Cy Young Award voting. In '07, both Sabathia and Fausto Carmona won 19, and there is reason to believe that if not for a midsummer power outage by the offense, both might have won 20.

But even if the Indians had ended up with two 20-game winners a year ago, their achievements would have been a footnote to a hot-and-heavy race to the postseason. When any Cleveland fan younger than 40 doesn't have a reasonably good recollection of the last Indians 20-game winner, maybe the drought-breaking occasion should be a bit more special than a means to a playoff end.

So Lee took the opportunity to inject some meaning into an otherwise-meaningless season. With the Indians hopelessly buried in the AL Central standings, there is now plenty of opportunity to meditate on what a truly special season Lee has given us.

The cynic says that Lee's great season has been wasted by a non-contending ballclub. That is true, to an extent. Everyone -- Lee included -- would rather his wins propel the Indians toward the playoffs. But if compromises must be made, to put words in the mouth of the late, great Bill Veeck, it's better to have a losing season with a 20-game winner than a losing season and a long, still silence.

Lee's season is certainly good enough to take the spotlight by itself. His .909

winning percentage is the best since Roger Clemens started the 2001 season 20-1. Clemens finished that season 20-3 with a 3.51 ERA, winning the Cy Young Award with an ERA nearly half a run higher than that year's AL ERA champ, Freddy Garcia (3.05).

Lee's 2.32 ERA not only leads the AL, it would be the lowest among starting pitchers in the league since Pedro Martinez finished the 2003 season with a 2.22 ERA. And Lee still has potentially six more starts to keep (hopefully) knocking his ERA down.

If Lee wins four of his estimated six remaining starts, he'll become the first 24-game winner in the majors since Randy Johnson in 2004, and the first in the AL since Bob Welch won 27 for Oakland in 1990.

All the statistics say Lee is having one of the greatest seasons by a starting pitcher in this decade, and quite possibly the greatest season by an Indians starting pitcher since the 1950s.

Lee should breeze to the Cy Young Award, giving the Tribe back-to-back Cy Young winners for the first time ever. But, this being Cleveland, there is always a catch, always reason to nibble on your fingernails until the envelope is opened.

Out in Los Angeles, Angels closer Francisco Rodriguez is putting together his own historic season, on pace to obliterate Bobby Thigpen's 1990 single-season saves record of 57. Entering play on Tuesday, K-Rod had 53 saves. It would take a major dip in production for him to not reach the 60-save plateau in the season's final month.

K-Rod will certainly steal some Cy Young votes from Lee. But if he steals the award from Lee based solely on his save total, it will be one of the greatest hose jobs in baseball history, for one simple reason: Lee has performed at a superlative level for longer than K-Rod this year.

To me, it comes down to the simple argument that Lee has pitched 194 innings to K-Rod's 58. No matter how dominant K-Rod has been, he's dominating one, maybe two, innings each time out. Lee is dominating seven-to-nine innings each time out. In other words, Lee gets wins and K-Rod saves wins. That's the difference that should tilt the Cy Young voting heavily in Lee's favor.

It's amazing that we can talk about the idea of Lee not winning the Cy Young as a travesty. His 20th win came on the one-year anniversary of his '07 September call-up -- a tag he probably figured he'd never wear again after winning double-digit games each year from 2004-06. But his 2007 season derailed early and never got back on track. Last winter, he was a spare part with an uncertain future in the Indians organization. He appeared to have more value as a piece of trade bait than as a working member of the starting rotation.

This year, after showing flashes of brilliance in seasons past, he finally seized the opportunity presented him in spring training and never let go, rising from the fifth starter on opening day to not just the ace of the staff, but the best pitcher in an entire league. From a piece of organizational flotsam to a pitcher who Mark Shapiro will now rely on as a central part of his 2009 rotation.

The guy who sarcastically doffed his cap to a Cleveland Bronx cheer after a miserable outing last summer has now given us a historically-significant season that we'll remember for years. Lee's 20-win season was a ridiculously long time in coming, both for the player and the city.