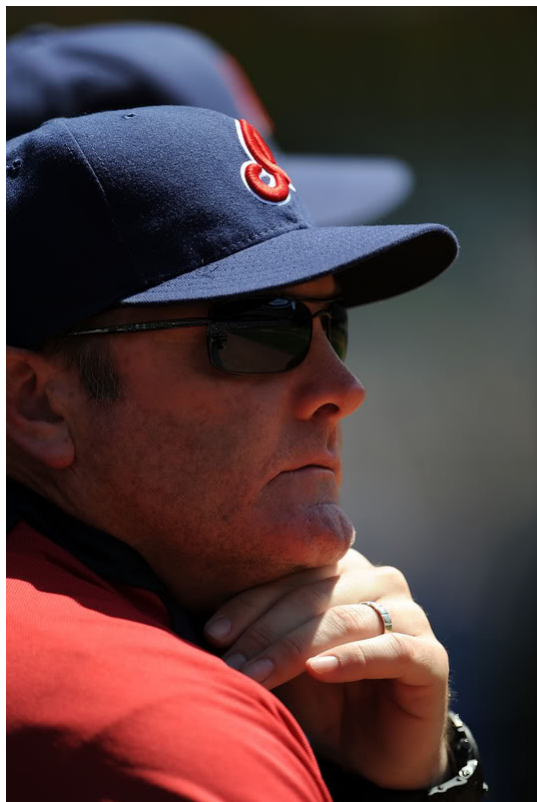


Lazy Easter Sunday Looking For A New Start

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Saturday, April 11 2009 7:00 PM -

This is like a bad dream. I keep waking up every morning thinking the season really hasn't started, and that this first week of baseball was just a terrible nightmare. 0-5, the Tribe's worst start since 1985, the starters giving up 30 earned runs in 20 /13 innings pitched, the offense unable to get a big hit, and on and on and on. Enter Paulie C to try and find a silver lining in this madness. It's a Lazy Easter Sunday, and Paul chimes in with a little therapy for disgruntled Indians fans. Happy Easter everyone!



Another loss and all I can wonder is, "Where, oh where, is that "RESET" button?"

0-5, the Tribe's worst start since 1985, the starters giving up 30 earned runs in 20 /13 innings pitched, the offense unable to get a big hit, and on and on and on...

Before we roll off into the usual Sunday links, I think it's best to first get some things off of my chest on this 5-game start...mainly to see if it makes me feel any better.

Yes, it's early and a 5-game losing streak is magnified by it occurring at the beginning of the season, meaning that we all need to sit back, relax, and let the season get into the rhythm that a baseball season does, right?

Well, sort of, as certainly 5 games a season does not make, regardless of when it occurs on the calendar; but there are some serious concerns about this team that

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are starting to reveal themselves, 5 games or not.

Right off the bat, the Indians have been outscored by a total of 22 runs with 47 runs allowed...the most in MLB (10 more than the Nationals) against 25 runs scored. This is important because, usually over the course of a season, the number of runs scored against the number of runs allowed usually gives a pretty good indication of a team's final record. It's not an exact science, but it is close enough that it's found some footing as an [indicator of how a team's winning percentage shakes out](#). The fact that they're already 22 runs in the hole in run differential after 5 games speaks to the fact that the Indians aren't just losing...they're getting blown out and that multiple aspects of the team are faltering.

The starters have been otherworldly bad (that much is obvious at even a cursory glance) and Cliff Lee has now given up 11 earned runs, a number he didn't compile until May 24th of last year in his 9th start of the year. While most people thought that Lee was due for a bit of a downturn from his magical 2008, "a bit of a downturn" is an awfully kind way to describe what he's done thus far. The caveat that "it's still early" still applies, but the command on Lee's fastball simply isn't there and (at least according to [Fangraphs](#)), the frequency of him throwing that fastball that dictated his success last year has gone from him throwing 70.1% of his pitches as fastballs last year to suddenly only throwing 57.0% of his pitches as fastballs in his two starts this year. Is that because he knows that his fastball command is not as sharp and is trying, suddenly, to mix up his pitches because of the lack of command with his fastballs?

I don't know, but it is telling that the percentage of strikes that he's throwing is down considerably as 60.7% of his pitches in 2009 have been strikes versus 69.3% of his pitches in 2008 being strikes. In what is not a very good sign, that 2009 strike percentage is worse than even his 2007 number (64.5% of pitches thrown were strikes), so it bears watching as Lee's success in 2008 was a direct result of him spotting his fastball time after time for strikes, generally early in the count, resulting in low pitch counts, a high percentage of strikes, and longer and usually successful outings. To this point, Lee has been nearly the opposite, struggling with his fastball command, getting behind early in the count, and logging high pitch counts. It is two starts...this, I know...but I also know that those two starts look like a sharp departure from the approach and the results of his 2008 Cy Young season.

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And unfortunately, as bad as Lee has looked, the whole pitching staff has seemed to follow suit as 13 Indians' pitchers have given up runs in 45 innings.

Read that again, and yes, the fact that Scott Lewis is on now the DL means that there's been 13 pitchers on the roster after 5 games, but EVERY single pitcher who has thrown for the Tribe this year has given up at least one earned run.

Every. Single. One.

In 2008, during their bad start last year, they didn't give up 47 runs until their 10th game (a loss, which ran their record to 4-6...a record that looks awfully good right now) and the Indians didn't have 13 pitchers with an earned run last year until their 26th game of the season on April 28th in New York.

The struggles are significant and they are widespread.

Now, throw into the hopper that the starter who, at least on paper, had the best start is [off to the DL with that horrible "elbow strain"](#); that could go in so many different directions and it means that the evolution of this team (which is a topic that I'll share some thoughts on early this week) is on already.

We all knew that this rotation was going to be a work in progress with different names and arms sharing innings until the right mix of players was found, but not this early and not with the Indians ALREADY skipping Anthony Reyes in the rotation as a ["precautionary measure."](#)

But even past the rotation, the bullpen has been spotty at best as they've been unable to stop the bleeding initiated by the Tribe starters or have been unable to hold the opposition in check long enough for a comeback to materialize, much less hold a lead. To date, Zach Jackson, Masa Kobayashi, and The Incredible Chulk have been the best relievers...does that even look right? There are two pitchers on the pitching staff with WHIP's under 1.70 and only one pitcher (Masa) who is holding the opposition to a batting average lower than .250 in their brief appearances.

If the rotation is a concern, the bullpen's performance thus far constitutes a bit of worry as, while they haven't been able to really pitch with a lead and go into the progression that figures to define their roles, they've collectively looked bad.

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That "collectively looking bad", though is the worrisome part of all of this is that the Indians, with the possible exception of the Saturday game when Peralta's 2B was nearly a HR and Shoppach's drop on the tag of Millar cost the Indians a run, aren't losing because of luck or a bad bounce. Rather, they're losing because they simply never find themselves in a position to win or to make any real threat of victory as the performance of the pitching staff has sabotaged every game thus far.

Sure, there are some bright spots (and I say this cautiously... "Is that you... Pronk?") and it is still extremely early, but the manner in which the Indians are losing doesn't translate into just having one or two players pick up the slack.

Widespread Panic may be premature, but the feeling is mounting.

With that unpleasantness finally out of the way, and it didn't feel real good to get that off of my chest, let's finally get rolling on a bit of a Lazy Sunday before I have to go pick up all of those thin green plastic strips masquerading as "grass" that fill Easter baskets as The DiaperTribe thought it would be fun to decorate the first floor with them.

Nevertheless we're off:

Terry Pluto starts us off with [some random thoughts](#) on slow starts, Cliff Lee, the offense and correctly summarizing that "It is still early, but the Indians must turn things around soon, or it really will be too late."

Castrovince keeps the ball rolling with [a myriad of stats that can ruin anyone's day](#) and throws this beauty of a line out there - "Lee insisted his fastball location was fine today. And it's times like these when I wonder why we even bother interviewing guys after games."

Courtesy of [64 and Counting](#), here's [Mark Shapiro on WCPN last week talking Tribe](#) (he shows up @ the 37 minute mark), taking phone calls from listeners and talking about DiamondView, the Indians' oft-discussed computer database that they rely on to assist them in their personnel decisions.

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I'm not sure why, but everytime I hear about DiamondView, I think of [that guy standing next to the Super Computer in "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory"](#),

which has been programmed to reveal the location of three remaining golden tickets.

"I am now telling the computer EXACTLY what he can do with a lifetime supply of chocolate..."

Don't ask me why so many things I encounter remind me of "Willy Wonka"...just don't.

One of the guys I imagine to be standing around this giant computer in a white lab coat, Keith Woolner, had [a revealing chat with Baseball Prospectus](#) (his former employer), even if he didn't get into any specific players. Woolner lets loose a couple of very insightful quotes in the chat saying, "Ticket revenue is still a huge part of our business, and anything that affects it has ripple effects on the rest of our decision making. It's an area of great concern" as well as saying that, "The sabermetric community has a lot of wonderful ideas, and we're not averse to cherry-picking the best of them. The biggest difference is that clubs have data that the public doesn't have access to, so there are practical limits to what the community can help with".

But the line of the whole chat comes when Woolner is asked how he likes living in Cleveland and concludes that, "I like to tell people that Cleveland is a great product with bad marketing."

That's pretty solid.

If you're looking for some good news related to the Indians, it's not much but Joe Posnanski's Indians' all-time team defeated Bill James' Red Sox all-time team in the [Seamheads Historical League to win the World Series](#). It's something that [Pos has been talking about, in terms of where it ranks with Cleveland Sports History](#)

, and not unlike

[my unsuccessful attempt to improve on the Indians' 1986 season](#)

a few years ago on The Sporting News...but, let's face it - we need something positive these days to stave off our worry.

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Enjoy your Sunday, be it Easter or just a beautiful Spring Sunday, and let's hope that this start is something we all look back on one day and laugh about in a few months...because I need a good laugh when thinking about the Tribe these days.

A good laugh and one win...is that really too much to ask for?