

Sentimental Journey

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, April 14 2009 7:00 PM -

According to a report in Monday's USA Today, Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome were talking recently and were getting positively misty-eyed about the possibility of eventually making their final curtain call as ballplayers with the team that nurtured them through thick and thin, only to see them eventually turn their backs on them when the light shined the brightest. In Gary's latest, he talks about Manny and Thome's time in Cleveland, and their alleged desire to finish their careers on the north coast.



Who knew that Manny Ramirez was such a sentimental fool? Or Jim Thome, for that matter? But fools they are just the same.

According to [a report in Monday's USA Today](#), Ramirez and Thome were talking recently and were getting positively misty-eyed about the possibility of eventually making their final curtain call as ballplayers with the team that nurtured them through thick and thin, like Broadway Danny Rose, only to see them eventually turn their backs on them when the light shined the brightest.

Ramirez and Thome were two key players most responsible for the resurgence of the Indians in the mid-1990s. What made them both so beloved is that they grew up in the Indians' farm system and went on to establish their reputations with the Indians.

Playing together from 1993-2000, collectively the two had 441 home runs and 1485 RBI.

During that stretch, the Indians were 703-525 and were in the playoffs 6 times, going to two World Series.

An impressive run even if it didn't pay off in the ultimate prize.

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But if the Cleveland fans benefited from this golden age, it's not as if the two players didn't realize there was something in it for them. While each professed their great appreciation for Cleveland, and still do, it was hardly enough to convince them to give Cleveland a hometown discount of sorts in order to ensure that each would be here for the remainder of their careers.

Maybe it's awfully naïve anyway to think that a hometown discount was coming from either player or even that it should. What the average fan doesn't appreciate is the enormous pressure that each player (and those similarly situated) is under from both their colleagues and the players union to get that last dollar, the hell with loyalty. It's the essence of free agency and the Marvin Miller Doctrine: the high tide raises all ships.

If players like Thome or Ramirez turn down precedent setting deals then, the theory goes, the rest of the players suffer from depressed salaries as well. As an economic theory, it has some merit.

Setting salaries is at its core an exercise of comparisons and the lower the top, the lower the middle and the lower the bottom.

But it's just these kinds of economic theories that are the reason the sport is in such financial and competitive straits in the first place. I don't need to rehash the same rant, but the truth is that only certain teams can afford to pay top dollar and Cleveland isn't one of them.

And when only certain teams can sustain certain payrolls, the health of the league suffers.

Ah, but the health of the league has never once been a concern for the players union, which is why that never factored into their coercion of Ramirez, Thome and others. It can be argued that when Miller was in charge, the league owners needed to be reigned in. Miller fought against the reserve clause because it basically treated players like indentured servants.

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In that sense, Miller's moves were for the benefit of the league overall.

Free agency, in and of itself, is probably better for a sports league than not.

But the overall good of the sport was hardly Miller's chief concern. As he said on many occasions, he represented the players, not the league and not the fans.

If in making things better for his clients it had the unintended consequence of also making things better for the sport and its fans that was just a happy coincidence.

Miller could have cared less.

Donald Fehr and the rest of the power brokers at the players union are worthy heirs to Miller's legacy. The next time they do something for the good of the league, let alone the fans, will be the first time. Thus, the fact that they pushed players like Ramirez and Thome to turn their backs on a mid-market team like Cleveland for the benefit of the players overall plays into this dynamic.

But that doesn't mean that Ramirez and Thome had to act like lemmings at the behest of the union. There was a middle ground in each case that would have greatly enriched each of them millions of times over without having to turn their back on the Cleveland fans. It just doesn't happen to be a route either chose. It's understandable, certainly, and personally I don't hold any animosity to either for choosing the path they did.

Having chosen that path, now's not the time to express regrets, mild though they may be. Both seem to be looking back at their Cleveland years with the kind of twinkle of some Grandpa Jones rocking on the front porch telling stories about when he was young. If it doesn't strike you as more of a backhanded compliment than anything else, your ability to be offended has been blunted by

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the years of abuse that comes with being an Indians fan.

What's really happening in both cases is that Ramirez and Thome, like Ken Griffey, Jr., are nearing the end of stellar careers. With that they know the days of multi-year contracts at \$15-20 million per season are a thing of the past.

Ramirez, for all his accomplishments last season, struggled to get just a two-year deal out of the Dodgers.

In doing so, he took less pay than he wanted but did get an opt-out clause after this year.

More importantly, the Dodgers were the only bidders.

That might be due to a massive miscalculation on the part of his agents, but it's also due in no small part to his age, 37, and the state of the economy.

Thome is in his final year of his contract that took him from Cleveland to Philadelphia and then to the White Sox.

He may come across as a combination of Woody Boyd and Lil Abner, but even Thome can see what's happened to Ramirez and the free agent market when it comes to aging veterans.

The sentimentality that makes them wistful for Cleveland will no doubt get some fans anxious for a return to those glory years. Who wouldn't want to see Ramirez and that sweet swing back in Cleveland?

Well, for one, me.

I've long since come to grips with the reality that in order to maintain your sanity when it comes to sport, love the game not the players.

Both will break your heart, but the players will do it deliberately.

That's the difference.

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The other thing to remember in all of this is that the reason both can now talk openly about coming to Cleveland is that the union doesn't much care about them anymore. With their prime earning years behind them, the union's interest in maintaining salary integrity (a nice euphuism for pushing for exorbitant salaries) is significantly less. It's a nice bit of freedom for Ramirez and Thome but it's also a freedom that comes too late to really benefit Cleveland fans.

I wanted Ramirez and Thome during their primes, not the ones playing out the string.

If you want to get sentimental about a player, what about Omar Vizquel? He left Cleveland because he was forced to.

General manager Mark Shapiro had no interest in signing him to a 3-year deal like the San Francisco Giants did.

Shapiro was thinking about the development of Peralta and his upside.

It was an understandable business decision.

But Vizquel had two good years in San Francisco and a third when he was hurt. It's what happens when you get older. But Vizquel is still viable in some role, which is why the Texas Rangers signed him to be a bench player and part time sensi

to the younger players on the roster.

It's interesting that only the Texas Rangers bothered to sign this future hall of famer. Maybe he doesn't fit in with the Indians are currently constructed, but it's hard for me to imagine the downside of him doing for Cleveland what he's doing for Texas. Jhonny Peralta and Asdrubal Cabrera and a host of others at the major and minor league levels can do for a little Vizquel in their lives.

Vizquel, come back anytime.

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Stay as long as you'd like.

As Thome said to the USA Today, baseball is a funny sport and anything can happen. Indeed, it's as likely as not that either or both of Ramirez and Thome will make a final stand in Cleveland. And if they do, they'll probably be warmly embraced, like a favorite son returning home.

That may be a nice coda to their careers, but then again every Cleveland fan has a bit of battered spouse syndrome coursing in their veins.

Just once it would be nice for the Cleveland fans to realize that they always deserved better than having to be constantly reminded of why their good players left in the first place.