

Holding Onto The Ladder

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, June 09 2009 7:00 PM -

Out of the basement! That's right kiddies, the Indians win over the Royals last night moved them out of last place in the division, and just three games out of second place. It hasn't always been pretty, but over the course of the last three weeks, this Indians team is somehow making up some ground in the AL Central. Now 60 games into the 162 game schedule, and winners of three of their last four ... Paulie C checks in to take stock of where this Indians team stands as we head into the heart of June.



Is anyone else finding themselves going from soaring highs to abysmal lows with this Indians' team from day to day, with very little in-between ground? After a solid win in which the team puts it all together, the thought process enters my mind that the eminently winnable AL Central looks feasible to take, only to be replaced by the thought that all is lost the very next day after a loss in which the bats go silent or the starter implodes to questioning the whole season and, even deeper than that, the whole organization?

Obviously, an MLB season is not a nice straight line in terms of game to game emotion, but watching this team every game is a struggle - from the frustration of seeing the lineup posted and seeing which amalgamation of complementary and fringe players are playing where, to gripping every pitch thrown by a "retread" reliever, to just waiting for the other shoe to drop in any game - basically, waiting for the dirt to be thrown on the grave that the 2009 feels like on those down days.

But, guess what?

Despite that sickening feeling and despite that the fact that the team is limping and flawed, this Indians team is somehow making up some ground in the AL Central. No, the "ascent" has certainly not been pretty or a pleasure to watch, but since the Indians' low-water mark of 14-26 (which they "achieved" after the Kerry Wood implosion in KC), here are the records for the AL Central:

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Cleveland - 12-8 (.600 winning percentage)
Minnesota - 10-9 (.526 winning percentage)
Chicago - 11-10 (.523 winning percentage)
Detroit - 11-10 (.523 winning percentage)
Kansas City - 3-15 (.167 winning percentage)

The Indians, playing through injuries and dealing with the loss of ineffective players, demoted to work through their issues, are slowly making their way up the ladder in the AL Central, the only thing that really matters right now. Step one was accomplished on Tuesday night, working out of the cellar and seeing the Tigers get rolled by the Red Sox and Angels and seeing the broken down (and seemingly already beaten) White Sox up close and personal this past weekend, one realizes that the Indians have been playing just as well (or poorly, depending upon how you look at it) as the rest of the division...and that none of these teams is going to run away and hide with the AL Central.

Essentially, all the teams have come back to the pack in terms of playing at or near .500 baseball and the Indians, as imperfect as they are and as unimpressive as they look on paper, are putting together some quality baseball games to close the gap in the Central.

The thin rotation has shown signs of stability with Lee and Pavano leading the way and Huff and Sowers showing promise in their last few starts. Yes, Tomo Ohka is in the rotation, but Ohka will only get a few more starts before Jake Westbrook is allegedly ready to return to the rotation, with Aaron Laffey following closely behind to either replace the pitcher who has proven himself to be less effective between Huff and Sowers or to return to the bullpen if a greater need is found there and Huff and Sowers are able to cobble together consistency over the next month. Could the Indians simply hang on in their rotation until the cavalry arrives and keep it close in the Central until the rotation becomes whole with Lee, Pavano, Westbrook, Laffey, and Huff?

Who knows, but even if the rotation has their off days, the Indians' offense may be able to carry the load. Inexplicably, the team is third in MLB in runs scored with only three offensive players with an OPS over .800 with 75 or more AB (El Capitan, The BLC, and Asdrubal) and won a game on Sunday, scoring 8 runs (!) with a lineup that looked like this:

Francisco - RF

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Carroll - 2B
Martinez - DH
Choo - LF
DeRosa - 3B
Shoppach - C
Gimenez - 1B
Valbuena - SS
Crowe - CF

See what I mean now by the players designed to be complementary pieces being asked to fill key roles on the team and the AAA players being asked to step in immediately to become complementary pieces?

But, the results are there and can't be argued with as the Indians offense, somehow...some way, is putting together an impressive body of work with Sizemore out (and really not 100% to begin with), Cabrera out, Hafner not being able to play everyday, Garko revealing himself to be a platoon player who is a defensive liability, and Shoppach striking out an alarming rate. Is the augmentation of this lineup happening from the minors saving the season?

I wouldn't go that far yet, but some of the players contributing like Gimenez and Valbuena (and even to a lesser extent Crowe) are playing the roles of the complementary players pretty well. Rather than giving too much credit to the youngsters, the onus is being carried by the heart of the lineup, namely Martinez and Choo, who are providing stability while players like Carroll and DeRosa are stepping up, in terms of production, at a time when their contributions are badly needed. If they can continue to excel until Hafner can get into a groove, and until Cabrera can come back healthy, the Indians may be able to continue this surprising offensive onslaught.

As for the Achilles' heel of the team to date, the bullpen, the group of veteran "retreads" that saved the Indians' relief corps from themselves continues to provide steady and consistent innings. While realizing that Matt Herges is currently the 8th inning set-up guy (and is doing one whale of a job doing it) and seeing guys like Aquino and Vizcaino come into games to protect a lead and succeed, it's time to acknowledge that these vets have saved the bullpen. While the "save" may not have been expected and while it may not last, Rafael Perez has returned with some semblance of his former self and Joe Smith has now returned, so the bullpen may finally be getting right and

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deep.

All told, the Indians are hanging on ever so loosely and, while it may not be according to plan, but the kinks are getting worked out and the Indians are keeping pace (and even climbing the divisional ladder) because they're in the AL Central and not the AL East or AL West

Prior to Tuesday's game, the Indians were 3 games back of 2nd in the AL Central with the rest of the division running in place and allowing the Indians to not become buried in this swampy mess of a division. With players potentially returning to the rotation (Westbrook and Laffey) and the lineup (Cabrera and Sizemore) from injury and perhaps more help coming from the minors to help the bullpen (Sipp, assuming he returns, and Putnam) and the lineup (LaPorta and perhaps even Brantley or Santana), the Indians find themselves attempting to stay close in the AL Central until they can get healthy and, let's face it, get better.

Until that happens though, the Indians will continue to attempt to win games, or at least play .500, with a team that may not look pretty or merit much optimism; but they've been doing it for about three weeks now, much to the surprise of...well, everyone.