

Before being traded to Philadelphia, former Tribe ace Cliff Lee compiled a 7-9 record despite having an ERA just over 3.00. Historically speaking, though, there is at least one former Cleveland hurler who would look at Lee's tough luck run support with sheer envy. His name is Rod Nichols, and 18 years ago, his consistently superb efforts on the hill manifested themselves in one of the most deceiving win/loss records in Indians history, and a subsequent ticket straight to the land of obscurity.



For the handful of fans that closely followed the 1991 Indians, belated apologies. This was truly one of the saddest squads in Cleveland sports history. Even with extremely low expectations going into the season, they still managed to underachieve, winding up snugly in the AL East basement with a nauseating 57-105 record. Halfway through the year, manager John McNamara was sent packing, and an old fan favorite, Mike Hargrove, was brought on to "change the culture." Basically, this meant managing a roster full of cast-offs and minor leaguers and turning them into a somewhat competitive ballclub. To succeed, Grover would have to find some production, any production, from some unlikely sources. Enter Rod Nichols, a former top tier prospect whose stock had been plunging like Brook Jacoby's batting average.

A fifth round draft choice of the Indians in 1985, Nichols had excelled at the University of New Mexico, and was soon projected as a potential #2 or #3 starter in the Bigs (of course, in Cleveland, anybody could be a #2 or #3 starter). During his minor league career, Nichols showed flashes of brilliance, but he was soon victimized by his parent club's desperation to hustle young arms through the system as quickly as possible. After an impressive year between

single A and AA in 1987 (8-5, 3.81 ERA), the 23 year-old got a rude awakening in 1988, moving into split time between AAA Colorado Springs and Cleveland. At year's end, he'd finished 2-6 in the Minors and 1-7 with the Indians, a combined 3-13 record that prepared him well for future liaisons with the letter L.

Nichols fans (you're out there somewhere, aren't you?) will recall that their bespeckled hero was nothing if not determined. In 1989, he returned to prospect status by going 8-1 with a 3.58 ERA in AAA and 4-6 with a respectable 4.40 ERA in Cleveland. The yo-yo snapped back again in 1990, though, as he only got 4 starts with the Tribe (0-3, 7.88 ERA) and finished 12-9 with a lackluster 5.13 ERA in Colorado Springs. By this point, Rod Nichols' flirtation with a regular Major League rotation slot appeared to be over. Even in Cleveland, a new batch of youngsters had usurped his place in the prospect pecking order: Charles Nagy, Jeff Mutis, Dave Otto, Tom Kramer, and Mike Walker among them. Still, when it came time for McNamara to piece together his pitching staff for the '91 season, it was Nichols who bounced back yet again.

Veterans Greg Swindell and Tom Candiotti would both be traded within the year, so the Indians were more than happy to let any young (and cheap) pitcher take his crack at being a part of the club's future plans. Nichols, still respected for his baseball IQ and above-average control, took the bull by the horns. Overcoming some early season injuries, he officially joined the Tribe rotation in May. In his first start of the 1991 season, Nichols pitched into the 9th inning, allowing only 2 runs and striking out 7 in a tough luck 2-1 loss to Seattle. The poor guy had no idea that a tone had been set for the rest of his season.

On May 24, Nichols went the distance in a game against Milwaukee at County Stadium, surrendering only 1 run (an unearned run at that, set up by a Mark Lewis throwing error). The Indians lost the game 1-0, blanked by Jaime Navarro. Five days later, Nichols allowed 1 run again, this time in 6 innings of work against Baltimore. He left the game in a 1-1 tie, but Mike Walker gave up the go-ahead run in the 7th and the Orioles prevailed 2-1. Yes, folks, it just keeps getting better.

Nichols wasn't great every outing in 1991. Much like Cliff Lee, he had his off-nights and the deserved L's that come with them. But usually, those games are balanced out by the occasional W, deserved or not. Not so with Rod. On June 25, Nichols tallied yet another quality start, 3 runs in 8 innings against the Orioles. Baltimore won 5-3. After a July 12 loss to Seattle (5 innings, 4 runs, 7-0 final score), Rod Nichols looked in the morning paper to find the following numbers next to his name: 3.91 ERA, 0 Wins, 8 Losses.

Though we weren't in the kitchen with Rod that morning, it's easy to imagine him slamming the paper down and making a new commitment to overcome the pathetic run support his young Tribe teammates had provided him (the club hit .254 for the season). On July 17, he threw another complete game, permitting only 4 men to reach base in a dominating effort at Oakland Coliseum. Even so, the Tribe was still trailing until the 5th inning, when the newly acquired Glenallen Hill slammed a 2-run homer off Bob Welch, helping Nichols finally find the win column in a nail biting 2-1 Indians triumph. His updated numbers: 1-8, 3.59 ERA.

Sadly, the tide was not turning for our hero as he may have hoped. In fact, despite the

convincing evidence of his actual numbers (sans W/L), Nichols was soon fighting for his spot in the rotation with another new arm picked up in the Candiotti trade, Denis Boucher. After losing his next two decisions, Nichols took the mound at home against Chicago on August 25 for what would prove to be his last great plea for justice. The line: 9 innings, 0 runs, 3 hits, 1 walk, 4 strikeouts. It took a 3-hit shutout for Rod Nichols to get his second win of the year. It would also be his last win of 1991.

Hargrove wasn't impressed enough with the shutout to put Nichols back in the regular rotation. He spent the rest of the '91 season in the bullpen, except for one spot start in early October, a shaky outing in which he took the loss (of course) against the Brewers. Easily ranking as one of the great tough luck seasons in Indians history, Nichols finished the year 2-11 with a 3.54 ERA and 1.27 WHIP. Average run support: 2.2 runs (for comparison, Lee's support is currently at 3.64 runs per game in 2009).

The following year, Rod was back on the shuttle from Colorado to Cleveland, no longer considered a legitimate part of what was slowly starting to look like an interesting future for Hargrove's Indians. He went 4-3 with a 4.53 ERA in 1992, working mainly out of the pen. At year's end, he left via free agency for Los Angeles for a fraction of what a friendlier win/loss record might have earned him. After going 0-1 in just four games with the Dodgers in '93, Nichols spent 1994 in the Royals minor league system, then briefly resurfaced in 1995 with the Braves, pitching in 5 games out of the pen and not recording a decision. Rod tried his best to rebound again. He posted a 1.99 ERA in 57 games for the Braves AAA affiliate in 1996, but no phone call was forthcoming. At 32, Nichols' career had come to an end. His career record of 11 wins and 31 losses points to a pitcher hardly worth remembering, but for at least one season, the numbers were very misleading and very unkind to one of the Indians' few consistent performers.

It could be said that Nichols is finally getting some respect these days. He's the pitching coach for the World Champion Phillies' AAA affiliate, the Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs.