

## Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1997 Indians

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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*What if... Jose Mesa had saved Game Seven of the 1997 World Series?*

**Background:** Despite winning its third consecutive American League Central Division Championship the Indians were lightly regarded as the '97 postseason began. Faced with token opposition in the Central, [the Tribe](#) drowed through much of the schedule and as late as August 13<sup>th</sup> was just three games over .500 at 59-56. Cleveland played with more precision down the stretch in clinching the division flag; still, their 86-75 record was the worst of the four AL playoff teams.

Most of the media attention entering the postseason centered on [Baltimore](#) and [New York](#) as the teams to beat in the American League. The Orioles and Yankees had met in the 1996 ALCS and with the best records in the league at 98-64 and 96-66 respectively they were expected to put together a sequel to the Maier-marred original. Baltimore handled its end of the ALDS bargain with relative ease, eliminating Seattle and its wretched bullpen in four games. New York expected to serve Cleveland the same way and set about the task with ardor, winning two of the first three in the best-of-five. The Yankees led Game Four 2-1, within four outs of the series, when Sandy Alomar changed everything. Jumping on a 2-0 pitch from Mariano Rivera, Alomar blasted it the opposite way for a home run, tying the game 2-2.

Alomar's blast triggered a reversal of Murphy's Law, as whatever could go right for the Tribe

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usually did. One inning later Omar Vizquel hit a grounder up the middle that caromed off pitcher Ramiro Mendoza and rolled into left field, scoring the game-winning run and tying the series. Cleveland completed their upset with a 4-3 Game Five win, a triumph protected by a brilliant defensive play from, all of all people, Jim Thome. They then moved on through an improbable [Championship Series win](#) over Baltimore, winning all four games by a run apiece, two in extra innings. They clinched their second American League pennant in three years when Tony Fernandez broke up a scoreless game with a home run off Armando Benitez in the top of the eleventh inning of Game Six.

Tribe closer Jose Mesa blew two saves in the Baltimore series- both in games the Tribe eventually won- and he looked shaky in the bottom of the eleventh of Game Six, giving up a ringing single to Brady Anderson after retiring the first two batters. He nailed down the win and the pennant when Roberto Alomar was called out on strikes on a pitch that was nowhere near the zone. It was a fortunate escape, but the Indians had had plenty of those in the first two rounds, and would need only four more over the [Florida Marlins](#) in the World Series to clinch their first World Championship since 1948.

It was at that point that Cleveland's fortunes began to go south. The Indians split the first two in Miami to steal home-field advantage and promptly lost it by dropping two of three amongst the flying snowflakes in Jacobs Field. Both losses featured squandered double-digit leads, shaky pitching and uncharacteristically sloppy defense by the Indians. Florida's 8-7 Game Five win was Cleveland's first one-run loss of the postseason and gave the Marlins a 3-2 series lead heading back to Dade County.

Chad Ogea, one of Cleveland's World Series heroes, stepped up to save the day in Game Six. He outmatched Florida ace Kevin Brown for the second time and knocked in the Tribe's first two runs with a line single down the right-field line as the Indians snarled the series one last time, 4-1. Now it was on to Game Seven, the first in the World Series since 1991.

The game was as dramatic as a Game Seven should be. With rookie phenom Jaret Wright shutting down Florida's offense, the Indians crept ahead 2-0 in the third on a Tony Fernandez single. Wright sustained the shutout until the seventh, when Bobby Bonilla's leadoff home run cut the Cleveland lead to 2-1. Wright, Mike Jackson and Brian Anderson nursed the slim lead through the seventh and eighth, putting the Indians three outs from the crown. The Indians put men on first and third with one out in the top of the ninth but failed to score an insurance run, putting the smallest of margins in the uncertain right hand of Jose Mesa.

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We all know how that turned out. Mesa gave up the tying run in the bottom of the ninth, giving the Indians the not-so-honorable distinction of being the first club in World Series history to blow a ninth-inning lead in Game Seven. Two innings later Edgar Renteria's line single off Charles Nagy gave Florida a 3-2 win and the World Championship. The Indians had dethroned the reigning World Champions. They had knocked out the top two teams in the American League. They hit .291 in the World Series, scored 44 runs, pounded Florida's ace twice, and led in all seven games. They did everything except get the last two outs they needed. And they lost to an expansion team wearing teal uniforms and playing in a city that was a swampy little village when the Cleveland Indians were knocking the dead ball around League Park. For shame.

**What If?** Obviously if Joe Mauer gets those three outs without giving up a run the Indians win it all. So with little room to speculate on that front, the natural digression is to Mike Hargrove's handling of that fatal ninth inning.

First off, regardless of whispers to the contrary over the years, Mesa was Hargrove's only choice to save the game. Mike Jackson, Cleveland's closer in the first half of the season, was unavailable- he'd been pulled for left-handed Brian Anderson with two outs in the bottom of the eighth and lefty Jeff Conine at the plate for the Marlins. Anderson himself was a match-up specialist and a spot starter- not a closer. He was also ineffective against right-hand hitters, two of whom- Moises Alou and Charles Johnson- were among Florida's first three batters in the ninth. Jeff Juden and Alvin Mormon were not viable options. Mesa had been the closer throughout the second half of the season and the playoff run. There were no other alternatives at that point.

Put it this way: had Mike Hargrove rolled the dice on Brian Anderson in the ninth, and lost, he might not have kept his job as far as the clubhouse door at the Stadium Formerly Known as Joe Robbie. Or at least, he ought not to have. Not even Gene Mauch would have over-managed in a clutch situation to that degree. Think about it- in the seventh game of the World Series, you expect a manager to pass on his closer for a lefty specialist with zero career saves? Against a Florida lineup laden with right-handed power hitters? Really?

It's in the top of the ninth inning that Hargrove's decision-making can be called into question. Leading 2-1, Cleveland had put Sandy Alomar on third and Jim Thome on first with one out and Marquis Grissom at the plate. Bip Roberts was available to pinch-run for Alomar, but Hargrove elected to leave his slow-footed catcher (and to be fair, arguably best player that season) in the game. Alomar was thrown out at home on Grissom's grounder to short and when Brian Giles flied out harmlessly to left-center Cleveland's opportunity to pad the lead was by the boards.

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Hargrove had an excellent backup catcher in Pat Borders, a veteran of two World Championship clubs in Toronto. He could have handled backstop duties in the bottom of the ninth. The Indians simply had to score in that situation, given Mesa's recent trouble in cleanly nailing down one-run games. Removing Alomar was a risk in itself, but it was a risk that should have been taken. The speedy Roberts likely would have scored on Grissom's bouncer to short, giving the Tribe a 3-1 lead, and Jose Mesa would have had that much more margin for error. Not scoring there was the killer. Grover avoided over-managing the bottom of the ninth. But he under-managed the top of the inning and it cost his team a World Championship.