

Another Tough Reminder

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Maybe there's no great significance to an opening day loss in baseball. With its interminably long 162-game schedule played on a near daily basis over the next 6 months, major league baseball appears to offer plenty of chances at redemption.

Still, there's something rather depressing about losing the opening game as the Indians did on Monday, 6-0 to the Chicago White Sox.

For one thing, it means that there is no opportunity for the Indians to be wire-to-wire division champions. Of course, the Indians have almost no shot at winning the AL Central anyway, but that's beside the point at the moment. The loss represents just another little goal left unachieved.

It also offers a reminder of how different the game of baseball becomes the moment the regular season starts. The Indians, in many respects, were the surprise of the spring. They went 19-9 with a handful of ties thrown in, which offered some fleeting hope that pre-season predictions might be wrong. Depending on what you're trying to accomplish, though, spring training records can be wildly misleading.

Almost any team outside of the Washington Nationals can end spring training with the best record if that's the goal. Just play all your starters all the time while every other team is

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experimenting with young players and different combinations.

The Indians didn't necessarily follow that directive specifically but manager Manny Acta did make a point of saying how important it would be to play his anticipated starters the latter part of spring training as a way of building cohesion entering the regular season. Translated, Acta was really following the strong wishes of general manager Mark Shapiro who was sick and tired of all the slow April starts under former manager Eric Wedge.

For a team like Cleveland that relies so heavily on attendance in order to fund its operations, a slow April that quickly distances the team from contention is a near death sentence. Combined with April's usually iffy weather, there's nothing that puts Indians fans in a Browns or Cavs state of mind than the potentially miserable experience of watching another April loss when it's 48 degrees with a light mist coming off the lake.

But even that alone doesn't quite explain why an opening day loss in Cleveland and a handful of other cities is so much more meaningful these days. For that you'd have to look at the payroll data released by the USA Today on Monday, the same day when the Indians were being shut out in Chicago, a divisional rival with a payroll that's almost 80% higher.

The Indians now have the lowest payroll in the AL Central at \$61.2 million. That's almost 15% LESS than the Kansas City Royals who are next at \$71.4 million. It's \$200,000 less than the Washington Nationals. Thank goodness that the league still has the San Diego Padres and the Pittsburgh Pirates, with payrolls of \$37.8 million and \$34.9 million respectively. Otherwise there would be even more embarrassment for this once proud franchise.

While the Indians' average salary is listed at \$2.1 million, this is one time where it's far more meaningful to look at the median salary of \$427,500 instead. Of the Indians' \$61.2 million payroll, more than half of it is taken up by three players that enter the season with extremely low expectations: Westbrook, Travis Hafner, and Kerry Wood. All have major question marks. Hafner is supposedly swinging well, whatever that means, Westbrook is trying to come back from major arm surgery and Wood is on the disabled list with either a bad back or an indifferent attitude, take your pick.

Three more players, Jhonny Peralta, Fausto Carmona and Grady Sizemore, take up another

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25% of the payroll. Sizemore is trying to find his way back from injury, Carmona is trying to find his confidence and the strike zone and Peralta is just trying to find himself. Yet as a group they represent potentially far more production than Hafner, Westbrook and Wood.

With more than 75% of the payroll owed to just 6 players, it's a pretty steep fall off from there. The Indians have 16 players on their opening day roster (which includes players on the disabled list) making less than \$500,000 (the league minimum is \$400,000). Only one team, the Oakland Athletics, has more, with a staggering 20. However, there's a bit of a caveat with Oakland. Three of those players are on the disabled list and may be in the minors once they recover.

While this may be a statement about the nature of both the As and the Indians, what it really says is that these two teams are fielding essentially minor league caliber teams and doing so because they don't have enough money to do otherwise. Indeed you can make the case that the same is true of a few other teams who have similarly filled out their rosters, like the Pirates (15), the Rangers (14), the Reds (13) and the Nationals (12).

Some of this is partially explained by the fact that there are some good young players around the league still making barely above the minimum, keeping some team's payrolls lower. That's in keeping with baseball's grand tradition in sticking it to players who have no leverage.

The Indians periodically have tried to be more progressive in their thinking and that's why players like Peralta, Carmona and Sizemore are making so much more than their counterparts at the moment. But that isn't always the answer either as the relative lack of production from these three hardly seems to justify the extra \$13 million or so in payroll they are eating up at the moment.

But the handful of good young players making league minimum only partially explains what's really taking place anyway. The fact is that the major league baseball is broken somewhat neatly into teams in the payroll penthouse and teams in the payroll outhouse and it's time to stop pretending that none of this matters. It's simply delusional to think that teams with a majority of its players barely making the league minimum are going to be able to compete over the course of a season with teams that have only a handful of such players.

If you're a fan of the Indians or the Pirates or the Reds or the Royals, this is just a cold hard

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fact. One loss on opening day may not be particularly meaningful except as the start of losses that will inevitably pile up over the course of a season in which they won't be competitive almost by definition.

If baseball isn't going to address this festering problem through economic parity then at least it should consider complete realignment in a way in which teams aren't grouped by quaint notions of geography and tradition but instead by payroll. Instead of an American and National League, you could have the Haves and the Have Nots with only limited interleague play.

That would at least give fans in cities like Cleveland, Kansas City and Pittsburgh a reason to shrug off a loss more easily. As it is, though, the concept of redemption in baseball is more illusory now than it's ever been because major league baseball prefers to have those teams running its marathon uphill in a headwind with 5-pound weights around each ankle against others who always get to have the wind at their backs.