

A Lazy Sunday Digging Deep

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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After enjoying watching some Saturday baseball under the sun (and I'd like to know why this doesn't happen more often) from Detroit and attempting to get out of the house so multiple realtors can bring through some (hopefully) interested parties, let's get loose on a Lazy Sunday with a day full of Tribe day baseball and the final round of some golf tournament on tap.

And with that, we're off...

Following the series in Chicago, enthusiasm was bubbling over about the way the Indians looked in that they looked like a different team out of the gate and not just because the names are not as well known and the expectations are appreciably lower. While the first two games in Detroit have tempered some of the enthusiasm with some sloppy fielding on Friday and Mitch Talbot looking like a pitcher that had thrown 9 MLB innings in his life, those positive vibes still remain...for me at least.

As soul-crushing as the last two years have been (and more on that later), I'm actually enjoying watching this team play, watching this team compete, and watching this team play with the sense of urgency that seemed to have been missing (whether it was or not) in years past. To me, the way that the team has played has been the most encouraging sign as the days when

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we were reminded over and over again to not take April losses at more than face value look to be over and the declarations that the season is a marathon and not a sprint don't count as excuses for sloppy April baseball. That sense of urgency is evident, and for a young team with some talented players, it's a combination that's been pleasing on the eyes.

While the effort has been pleasing on the eyes, it's no secret that there are some early-season disappointments, regardless of the amount of games having been played. In the first 5 games, the offense (seen as the strength of the team) has struggled as they've only outpaced the Royals in terms of runs scored in the first week or so of the season while averaging over 9 strikeouts a game...yes, 9 K per game as a team.

Twenty-six PLAYERS in the AL have more HR (2) than the Indians' team (1) through 5 games and the entire lineup has struggled to get untracked in the early going, most notably The BLC, who has gone 2 for 18 (both singles) with 9 K in 5 games. Of course, that's not to say that this is what should be expected from the Indians or from Choo, about whom [a scout recently told Baseball Prospectus' John Perrotto](#) that "he's been getting better every year and I really think this is the year he blossoms into a superstar. He has a lot of tools and he's learned how to use them all."

The offense should come around given the talent on hand, with LaPorta and Brantley (who was the subject of [a fascinating prospect comparison with one Andy Marte](#) at B-Pro) and the most frustrating aspect of its inability to find a groove early in the season is that the absence of an offense has wasted the inexplicable fast start of the pitching staff, which has not given up more than 5 runs in any of the first 5 games.

While not completely widespread, there is encouragement from the starters AND the bullpen as Dave Huff looked the pitcher that blazed his way through the Minors in 2008 and not the pitcher that struggled mightily with inconsistency in his first complete on the big league roster in 2009. While the radar gun in Detroit may have overstated his velocity (and remember the 2006 playoffs when the Tigers' relievers seemed to all be throwing in the triple digits), his performance cannot be overlooked as his command looked to tight enough that he could separate himself from the bevy of LHP that the Indians have recently found themselves with.

Though Huff's start was probably the most promising, the most important dose of cautious optimism comes when looking at Fausto Carmona's start on Wednesday. As Terry Pluto writes (in [a piece](#) that mentions a certain little site):

That was a different Fausto Carmona pitching in a cold White Sox park on Wednesday night. It was a Carmona who didn't panic when a few calls went against him, a Carmona who didn't look defeated when he gave up a home run. It was a Carmona who found a way to get through six innings, allowing three runs without his best stuff -- and getting stronger as the game progressed.

--snip--

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New pitching coach Tim Lincecum and personal catcher Mike Redmond are forcing Carmona to throw more sliders and changeups because that forces him to slow down his motion -- and creates better control. Carmona's top fastball was 94 mph, but he averaged between 92-93.

With Carmona not getting the benefit of the doubt on Wednesday night (and Masterson wasn't done any favors by the umps on Thursday), Pluto's absolutely right in his assertion that it was a "different Fausto Carmona", not undone by a couple of bad calls or throwing "get-me-over" fastballs in an attempt to (unsuccessfully) avoid piling up walks, only to be done in by extra-base hits. Carmona looked infinitely more composed and did not give in to the tight strike zone, changing speeds and relying on his slider (which he was throwing for strikes) when the home-plate umpire was not giving Carmona the low strike on his sinker. Whether anything can truly be gleaned from one start in April, Carmona showed a resolve that has been absent since the 2007 ALDS and battled through adversity in the way that he did in his break-out season that he's hoping to prove was not the aberration.

Encouraging signs may abound on parts of the roster, although some perspective is needed as the Indians have faced off against two flawed AL Central rivals in the White Sox and the Tigers, who have failed to impress in any of the early-season battles. Sure, the bullpens for each team look solid (Fat Bobby Jenks excluded), but the White Sox and Tigers don't look appreciably better than the "rebuilding" Indians in the short-term. As the White Sox offense looks atrocious, and could be even worse if they see one of their principals (read – Quentin, Carlos) miss an appreciable amount of time to an injury, while the Tigers line-up looks like a mish-mash of young and old with arms in the rotation that fall under the "wing and a prayer" category. If you had any thought that the Central was going to be surprisingly solid, you should have your answer after watching three of the teams play...even if it is just for a week.

Given that we've only seen 5 games, the question needs to be asked – could the Indians compete in a tremendously weak division if the offense can come around and the positives from the first week from the pitching staff project out going forward?

Sure, anything's possible, but for whatever reason I find myself hesitant to buy into the idea that the team is better than we thought they would be and reticent to fully throw my heart and soul behind this current incarnation. Maybe it has something to do with it just being 5 games or maybe it has something to do with the idea that the game's inherent lack of a competitive balance, but I'm having trouble investing myself fully in this young team, as exciting and as talent-laden as it may be. With the Home Opener at your doorstep (not mine, as I'll be at Game #2 as usual, having pushed away the overtures to join the St. Patrick's Day crowd to be with my people on a Wednesday night with 4,000 of my closest friends), this hesitance to get myself too vested in these guys is too hard to ignore.

To that end, Jay Levin of Let's Go Tribe had [a tremendous quasi-season preview that asked the question that nobody wants to ask](#) in this age of competitive unbalance and standing at the precipice of what looks like a season to build on...at best:

So where does this leave us, as Indians fans heading into the 2010 season? Are we facing a

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season like 2003 or 2004? I don't think so. I think we're looking at 1992, coming off a truly awful season, with a bunch of promising talent in the farm system. Only this time, there is no new stadium around the corner, and there is no economic boom on the horizon. The Indians will not be hip in a few years; if we're lucky, they'll be edgy. Just as surely as Jobu can't hit a curveball, there is no revenue salvation coming in the next few years. We will not have a top-five payroll, probably not even top ten.

So it's gut-check time, my friends. We may well have two 76-win seasons coming our way now, but they won't be followed by a jump that brings us within 10% of the Yankees payroll. If we win, it'll only be because the moves our new GM made worked out really well, and that may or may not happen.

Are you ready for that? Ready to love Indians baseball, just because it's Indians baseball?

While I know that answer for myself, it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile the horrific manner in which the 2008 and 2009 seasons ended and the decisions forced upon the Indians by an uneven playing field in MLB. After getting so close in 2007 and with a bright future purportedly of the team, we're suddenly thrust into what could be a never-ending cycle that Rob Neyer of ESPN.com summed up very nicely [in a piece](#) praising Mr. "See You Soon", Carlos Santana:

"The Indians are essentially playing one game: Prospect Acquisition. Get enough of them, and they can compete in a weak division every year. Don't get enough, and just hope to get lucky every few years. At this point they're doing well with hitters, but the jury's still out (way out) with pitchers. And they have to hit on both."

Reading that, I realized that this "hope" and this "luck" is where the Indians sit in MLB, among the great majority of the teams that are looking for the perfect storm that sat over the corner of Carnegie and Ontario in the mid-1990s and the one that the Twins are hoping to see blow over the Twin Cities with their new ballpark and with young talent. With the Indians possessing as much young talent as any other team in all of baseball, and with the wounds of 2008 and 2009 still so fresh and deep, a feeling has descended upon Indians' fans. I don't know if it necessarily constitutes apathy or indifference as much as it represents a cautious approach to become emotionally invested in a group of players, knowing the fate that is coming down the pike in a couple of years.

Longtime serial poster Cy Slapnicka summed up this feeling very well recently in the comments section:

I don't know the team anymore (mostly) and am not nearly as excited in years past at getting to know them. It's not like the early to mid 2000s or early 90s for me. I've grown tired of this process and clearly understand it is due to a bunch of millionaires (and billionaires) not being able to share and play together. In the past I saw organizational decisions as organizational BASEBALL decisions. Now I understand they are mostly financial decisions infused with SOME baseball logic. I almost lost my mind when we traded Baerga...I defended it when we traded Victor.

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I can only assume I'm not alone. Baseball can't afford to lose fans like me. I regularly attend games, I buy their merchandise, I sign up for the baseball TV package, I follow the team year round. This is the first year where I really feel like this. And as each small to mid-market team goes through their rebuilding cycle, more will join my ranks. And by the time MLB gets their act together, we may have found other things to do with our summers.

This is very well-said and its one of the reasons that I find myself lacking the enthusiasm that I did in the early 90s or back in 2004 (when I actually began my tenure as a season-ticket holder, coming off of the 2003 season because I saw promise on the team), in that even if the light of the tunnel is visible for this team as it undergoes a “rebuild/reload/whatever”, I know that there’s a brick wall lurking somewhere out there. That brick wall lies somewhere past the light at the end of the tunnel and it waits for me, hoping to see my face plastered against it once again as it was when CC made his way to Milwaukee or when CP Lee and Victor found themselves in another uniform last July. The current arrangement in MLB creates that brick wall for me, waiting in the shadows until my hopes are built up just so and ready to dash them away again.

Perhaps something changes in MLB before this current batch of Indians’ matures and approaches Free Agency (though I’m not looking forward to the day when I explain to The DiaTot that Grady’s not an Indian anymore), but the recent tone taken by the large-market teams doesn’t present a lot of hope. That all being said, there’s a fascinating read from Bob Nightengale at USA Today (found in a roundabout way [via a link from Vince at '64 and Counting](#) on [how Dick Jacobs had to be talked out of joining the AL East](#)) on the [competitive imbalance in MLB](#) that has been the hot topic all off-season here.

Nightengale hits on both sides of the argument, but the most interesting parts of the article come in the form of quotes and, more notably, the source of those quotes:

Brewers’ Owner Mark Attanasio – *“I get it that the Yankees are good for baseball, and they’ve done a great job getting new revenues with their ballpark. But we have to make sure the playing field is level, and it’s not. The gap is getting bigger and bigger. How would you like to be Tampa Bay and have New York and Boston in your division? How do you compete with that?”*

Rays’ President Matt Silverman – *“I’m glad people are talking about it, because we live it. The Yankees and Red Sox can put a product on the field every year that’s competitive. We can’t realistically compete for the playoffs 10 years in a row.”*

Orioles’ President Andy McPhail – *“There’s no baseball executive that thinks things should all be even, but when payrolls are three times yours, it can become insurmountable.”*

Braves’ SP Tim Hudson – *“The frustrating part is that when you’re on a small-market (team) and the players get good, you get traded once you make the big money. You can have that one good year once in a while, but for the next four or five years, you’re going to get your brains beat in.”*

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Rockies' GM Dan O'Dowd – *“You can't really make any short-term decisions. You don't have to have a \$200 million payroll to win the World Series, but to sustain success, your scouting and development has to be exceptional.”*

Player Agent Ron Shapiro – *“I know the cycle is difficult to overcome in small markets, but if it can happen in Minnesota, it can happen anywhere.”*

Maybe the lines are finally be drawn in the sand by the small-and-mid market teams, no longer willing to play the role of the Washington Generals to the Harlem Globetrotters of the East Coast.

Maybe real changes will come about (and I'm still waiting for someone to tell me why [this isn't a good jumping off point](#)) in the next collective bargaining agreement.

Truthfully, I'm not holding out much hope for that to happen and knowing that I'll eventually be answering questions from the now-3-month old “new” DiaperTribe about Choo (who The DiaTot claims is the baby's favorite player because he says his name when he sneezes) until Scott Boras takes him away to Los Angeles or some other large market city, I'll get sucked into this current and burgeoning incarnation of the Indians with hope springing eternal every Spring and enjoying baseball with my family because it is just that...baseball with my family.

Alas, it is the lot that I have drawn in life as an Indians' fan standing at the bottom of another hill to climb with the 2010 season ahead of me, knowing that there's a cliff out there somewhere to fall off of before I reach the summit.

But I keep climbing, against all odds and against all logic that the Indians and MLB will right this ship heading for the rocks. The only reason that I know as to why is something that was inexplicably drilled into my head before the age of 10 – “Indians Fever...Be a Believer”...and I am, and I always will be, sometimes leading with my heart instead of my head and ready to buy into the idea that if a couple of things break right for the Indians in a given year, all will be right with the world and the Indians will find themselves on the top.

After all, I am an Indians' fan ...