

What a Difference 20 Years & 10,000 Fans Makes

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

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When I made the trip up to Cleveland to catch an Indians weekday matinee last week on one of those stunningly beautiful April days in which we cackle inwardly with revenge at the defeated winter that had just made a handful of genuine attempts to kill us, the buzz around the ballpark formerly known as Jacobs Field had nothing to do with the team, good or bad. Yes, the Indians had just lost five straight games and looked pretty crummy doing it, but nobody coming to the park that day seemed to be genuinely concerned with the Tribe's slow start nor curious as to whether or not it would be able to turn things around in time to prevent 2010 from becoming the Belichick-ian disaster that 2009 had turned into.

There was really only one prominent question circling through the loyal fans who slapped down hard-earned money for some hard-discounted tickets that Thursday afternoon: would we be a part of history?

As gametime neared, it looked as though our modest gathering was about to break a record that had stood for almost fourteen hours. The night before, the smallest crowd ever to attend a game in the sixteen-year history of Jacobs/Progressive Field gathered to watch the Indians lose another one. At a little over 10,000 (very little, in fact), it marked the smallest home crowd the Indians had played before since the final week of the 1992 season, when Craig Ehlo was the Cavs' starting shooting guard and everybody was sure "Touchdown Tommy" Vardell was going to restore the Browns to former glory.

After pondering the condition of Shaq's meaty thumb and ruminating over who would be the Browns' "Touchdown Tommy" this year, the attendance at Wednesday night's Indians game was a primary topic of discussion around Cleveland Thursday morning. Didn't it seem like just three days ago that this ballpark was loaded to capacity with 42,000-plus fans excited and energetic, cheering the Indians on with optimism and hope?

Of course, I'm not talking about the glory days of the late 1990s, but literally three days before for the home opener. In a recurrence of a trend that made longtime Tribe fans smirk with understanding, attendance had dropped 75% in forty-eight hours, bringing back memories of

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the 1970s and 1980s, when Cleveland Stadium would be packed to the gills for opening day, then contain more bloated, diseased seagulls than primates for game two.

And yet, the “10,000 Fans Beneath the Progressive Insurance Logo” episode got me thinking. With the upbeat familiarity of a B-52’s song, I can remember a time when getting 10,000 people to sit down at the same place at the same time to watch the Indians was a genuine achievement

The first Indians game I ever attended was the day after Independence Day, 1989, when 11,476 piled into Cleveland Stadium like kids going out for ice cream in Dad’s station wagon to watch the Indians hold off the Chicago White Sox and pull within a half-game of fourth place. And as it happened, we did all ride home afterward in the same station wagon.

The point is, as we made our gradual inning-by-inning odyssey from general admission into the box seats the way you always did at Cleveland Stadium, my father made it clear to me that this actually was a good crowd, especially for a Wednesday night. The previous evening, for example, only a little more than 8,000 had shown up. Two weeks earlier, they’d drawn 32,000 against Minnesota. Not bad, until you realized that the 32,000 was for an entire three-game *series*

So in the days when Nancy Reagan was America’s drug czar and the Indians would rip off one of their epic three-game winning streaks to claw to within 9½ games of first, I would get excited. My father, having been disappointed by the Indians since Alaska became a state, would graciously throw me a bone: “And they had a good crowd – almost 11,000!” Being thirteen and never having come within eighteen inches of physical contact with a girl nor yet having seen Tim Couch play quarterback, my heart would soar with unbridled optimism. I could then understand what all those old-time Brooklyn Dodgers fans were talking about when they waxed nostalgic about the 1950s, envisioning a cool September night in Cleveland with the Indians pulling out all the stops to hit a .487 winning percentage before 15,000 breathless fans at the Stadium. Just like *The Natural*.

I mulled this over that Thursday afternoon as David Huff, born on a day Bert Blyleven won a game for the Indians, mowed down the Texas Rangers and the crisp April sunshine turned my fish-belly white flesh into a shade of pink you generally only see on slabs of uncooked prime rib. Getting 10,000 fans to watch this team used to be something to be proud of. Now it was just one more thing to roll your eyes about and mentally cut out and put in your “Why Larry Dolan is a Cheap Turd” scrapbook. Funny what 455 consecutive sellouts will do to a city.

Yet ironically, I think if we all took a throwback view of drawing 10,000 fans as something to get excited about like we did when Milli Vanilli was cool, we’d have a much healthier appreciation for these Indians. Whine about the Dolans all you want, it’s not the ownership that prevents the Indians from pulling within financial reach of the Yankees and Red Sox. With no salary cap or, better still, television revenue sharing, the Indians and the twenty-five-or-so teams in similar positions as the unfortunate exceptions to the rule that everybody seems to be okay with in this six-team confederacy we know as Major League Baseball, the Indians will never be able to compete on a yearly basis with larger-market teams. Larry Dolan could sell the team to John D.

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Rockefeller, another dead man, and sell out every game for the next hundred years and still not bring in as much coin as the Yankees will in the next three. *Hours*, that is.

So that's why we're despondent these days and show up in crowds the relative equivalent of a "fun size" Snickers. Ironically, it's not unlike it was twenty years ago. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, we knew the Indians had absolutely no shot to contend for anything – not because of the economic climate of the sport, but because the organization was rock stupid from top to bottom. Ah, the good old days.

I propose we celebrate those times and look back with the gentle fondness you get whenever you unwrap a Werther's. Anybody who saw the Indians play in 1989 like I did went with no expectation that anything productive was actually going to result from it. There were no aspirations of contending for a division title, or even watching an exciting product. It was baseball for baseball's sake – coming out to see if Brook Jacoby would ring up fifteen homers this year or if Andy Allanson could catch fire and hit .260. I think there's something utterly romantic about that.

It turns out we didn't set the record that Thursday afternoon. One hundred and twenty-seven more tortured souls rolled through the turnstiles than had the night before, permitting those who'd come Wednesday to keep their ticket stubs someplace special until the time comes to put them up on ebay.

Let's not kid ourselves – we all know there's nothing truly special about this year's Indians. A few nice players here and there, maybe a couple of fun games, perhaps even a run at .500. Expect nothing and this team will deliver.

In other words, it should be a nice, 1980s Indians summer, the kind when getting 10,000 fans into the ballpark was something to get excited about.