

## Growing Pains

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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Sitting in the RF stands Monday night, actually hearing the whir of the Goodyear blimp hovering above the Gateway Plaza on Monday night (yes, it was quiet enough at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario during the game to make the noise put off by a blimp hundreds of feet overhead audible to all “enjoying” a Tribe game), the thought passed through my mind – this was coming...

This season, frustrating and depressing, was known to be on our doorstep last July when the Indians punted on the 2010 season with the trades of CP Lee and El Capitan. Forget the rest of the ancillary parts that got moved last year, when the team traded Lee and Vic in a stunning acknowledgement that the Front Office didn't think that the Indians could win WITH their reigning Cy Young Award winner and #3 hitter...we knew this season was coming.

The inconsistency, the losses by “this much”, the losses by “THAT much”, they've started and they're going to keep coming. While the glimmers of hope are difficult to discern amongst the frustration, we are left with the knowledge that the 2010 team has little to no chance to contend, even in the AL Central, where the Indians have the 2nd worst record in the AL and are ½ game out of 3rd place in their division.

And yet, this has been bearing down on us for the last 9 months.

Perhaps the frustrating aspects of the team are not where we thought they would be nor are the strengths (to date) of the team, but this inconsistency that's been on display since day one is indicative of any team on the “rebuild/reload/whatever”. As much ink was wasted and breath

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was passed regarding how important that “fast start” was all Spring, the Indians were still a team in transition, a label that still applies today and will continue to apply.

The moves have been made to “manage the cycles” prevalent in the current structure of MLB and more moves are coming. Lest anyone label the moves that are coming as “Fire Sale #3” when the likes of Westbrook, Peralta (does anyone know which team is currently cutting a paycheck to former Seattle GM Bill Bavasi so I can let him know that Jhonny has a .987 OPS in his last 11 games?), and Wood ( [um...yeah](#) ) are sent on their way, it will essentially complete the overhaul that was started nearly 24 months ago when CC found his way to Milwaukee.

In July of last year, there was no pretense that 2010 represented much more than the first year of the Indians attempting to rebuild a contending team as they attempted to foster the young talent in the organization while trying to resurrect lost careers of veterans, either for trade purposes or for contractual purposes. That assumption that 2010 begins the transition is easy to lose sight of (particularly with the calendar just flipping to May), but it is a reality nonetheless.

Thus, as mind-numbing as it is to watch Rusty Bryan and Peralta flail away at pitches, there has to be a realization that those aren't the guys that are going to shoulder the load for the Indians in the next few years and aren't seen as viable candidates to be on the Indians' roster even three months from now. Fans can get worked up about the failures of Bryan and Peralta and wring their hands over Wood, but that narrow view is not the one in play this year. The gaze is past this year (already) and, while the Indians would probably like to win some games in the process, the development and maturation of the players that do project to shoulder the load past 2010 is where the focus should remain.

Perhaps that focus is what gets blurry, made wavy and ugly by watching an obviously flawed team night after night. Night in and night out, it's not Jamey Wright and Peralta and Bryan that should draw ire or concern...instead it's Choo, Cabrera, Carmona and Sizemore that should be receiving the lion's share of attention as those are the players that are most important to this team when it will matter...but that just isn't this year.

Certainly, the first month of 2010 has already contained some surprises (Fausto and The Fury, which sounds like the name of a band) and some disappointments, most notably Hafner's health and ineffectiveness after a Spring of optimistic, albeit prematurely optimistic, reports. All told however, the season to date has been dreadful and while some may be ready to throw dirt on the grave of most of the current players, notably Grady Sizemore's career (something I'm not quite ready to do, unlike that of the Indians former SS/current 3B), if 2010 can be used to pull some of these veterans out of their tailspins (however unlikely they may seem at certain times), then the season will have provided blocks to build upon.

All winter, the cry among most was to “let the kids play” and with a month gone in the season, that's what we're getting. The young players are out there, taking their lumps and attempting to adjust to MLB, which means that there will be the bad to go hand-in-hand with the good. To wit, Dave Huff has gone from potential pillar to pariah in a matter of weeks as Lou Marson has gone from laughingstock to one of the better hitters in the lineup (not that the competition in the group is stiff) in the same timeframe.

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If you're expecting a different path to be taken throughout the season, get ready for some disappointment because that's not going to change. As great as it would be to have an Austin Jackson burst onto the scene, remember that the last young Indians' hitter to burst on the scene was Ben Francisco, who just as famously fizzled out and now finds himself tethered to the Phillies' bench as a 28-year-old 4th OF. That being said, there's no question that some signs of life from the Matt LaPorta/Mike Brantley/Luis Valbuena portion of the roster would be a welcome respite from wondering if the veterans will be able to carry any weight on the roster when (or is it if?) the young talent develops.

At the risk of beating that dead horse, that development is the crux of the season and, more specifically, flattening out the learning curve for the young talent currently in the organization from Cleveland to Kinston.

The season quickly becomes a series of "ifs"...

"If" C.F. Perez can establish himself as a viable closer and one to two more young relievers (let's say Sipp and Jenny Lewis, just to put names on it) can assert themselves into the team legitimately having some confidence in a bullpen mix going for...

"If" Carmona can return to even a close facsimile of his former self while Huff or Talbot (or both) prove that they can legitimately lay claim to a rotational spot in 2011 and beyond...

"If" some semblance of a consistent everyday lineup can be achieved with the troika of The BLC, Cabrera, and Sizemore leading the way and the quartet of LaPorta, Santana, Donald/Valbuena, and Brantley following close behind...

"If" Travis Hafner can...well, that one doesn't really have a sunny outlook to even dream on, but you get the idea.

That's what this season is for, to answer those "ifs" because not all of them will come down on the positive side of the ledger. To ascertain answers to those questions, this roster needs to flesh itself out and reveal itself over the course of a season, not just over the course of a month. It's horrible to witness every day...I know, but the individual results will dictate how near or how far away this organization is from making legitimate steps back up that mountain that looms ahead of them, so tall and so foreboding.

Truth be told, expectations weren't that high to begin with for the season and the start has borne out those expectations. That's not pointed out to absolve the state of the organization, only that this season likely represents the low point after the rapid descent down from near the mountain top in 2007.

We knew that this season was coming, the question that would be best served to find an answer in 2010 would be – how many more similar seasons are coming on its heels?