

Swinging at a Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, May 09 2010 9:45 AM - Last Updated Sunday, May 09 2010 10:01 AM



Being Mother's Day (or "St. Mother's Day" as The DiaTot calls it...and I think he could be onto something here), let's dispense with the pleasantries and get right going on a Lazy Sunday to give you something to read while you're waiting for [your Stadium Mustard and Jobu shirt](#) to arrive and after you've had a chance to see

[Bruce Drennan provide the greatest 5 minutes of TV in recent memory](#)

...

As mentioned for the last couple of weeks, I was fortunate to be able to make it over to the Tribe Social Deck for Friday's (non) game against the Tigers. After ignoring the pleas of meteorologists everywhere, we arrived to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario (after the prerequisite oil can of Miller Lite at Local Heroes) to head over to the [Tribe Social Deck](#), excited to watch some Tribe baseball and with the knowledge that a TV exists in the TSD, which shall heretofore be referred to as "Mom's Basement" (because if this misconception about bloggers is never going to go away, let's embrace it) because the Cavs were facing off with the Celtics in Game 3.

Upon arrival, with the Doppler showing all of the colors of the rainbow, we were told that we wouldn't actually be sitting in "Mom's Basement" due to the weather ("Mom's Basement" is in the front of the bleachers) and were given tix under the overhang behind home plate. While the game didn't ultimately count, the highlight of the game (other than Hafner looking like...dare I say it...I do not) was hanging and sipping some 16 uncuncers with t-bone and Craig Calcaterra, of The Hardball Times and blogger-in-chief of [the terrific NBC Sports' Hardball Talk](#). As the rain started to fall, Craig and I began to chat,

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[as he says](#)

, “for a long time about life, baseball, Mad Dog 20/20 in brown bags at the University of Dayton and everything” as we realized that we had actually attended the same party at UD (confirmed by his memory that the bathroom in the house had autographed 8 x 10’s of Young MC and Joyce DeWitt hanging on the wall...which my college house did) many moons ago.

As the hail started to fall, and with the Cavs’ game no longer on the big screen (yes, [it really was during the rain delay](#)

) with the victory in Boston secured, and we contemplated our drives home (his to Columbus more than mine to the West Side), we decided to leave the friendly confines as the tarp blew around the diamond, a choice that looks even wiser in hindsight as the game would be called 90 minutes later.

Next time, perhaps the experience will actually involve “Mom’s Basement” and I think that our suggestions to Rob Campbell of the Indians (who could not have been more accommodating) that anyone sitting in the Tribe Social Deck should be given bathrobes and have access to an unlimited supply of Hot Pockets may find a toehold in The TSD...er, “Mom’s Basement”.

Nevertheless, it is a Sunday, so moving on is what we do...

Thus, as the debate over what ails the Indians’ offense continues, I thought that it would be interesting to introduce [a piece from Tom Verducci of Sports Illustrated examining the alarming increase in walks and strikeouts all over MLB baseball](#). Verducci says that, “baseball has become a game of attrition -- a kind of passive/aggressive pursuit - and it’s largely because of the way hitting is taught. Wait out the pitcher. Run up his pitch count. Swing early in the count only if the ball is in the middle of the plate. Take your walks.”

Sound like any team you know?

Reading Verducci’s piece however, it would certainly seem that this “swing-and-miss” or “don’t-swing-at-all” mentality doesn’t just exist on the North Coast and has some mind-boggling statistics to back it up:

In April, 28 percent of all major league plate appearances ended in a walk or a strikeout, continuing what has been virtually an unchecked increase in such non-contact plate appearances since the game was invented. Ten years ago, for instance, the rate of plate appearances without the ball being put into play was 26 percent; 20 years ago it was 24 percent; 30 years ago it was 21 percent . . . all the way back to 15 percent in 1920.

--snip--

When you combine strikeouts and walks, teams average 10.8 non-contact plate appearances per nine innings -- up 37 percent from 1980 and 24 percent even from 1968, in what famously became known as The Year of the Pitcher and helped convince baseball owners to lower the mound and adopt the designated hitter rule within the next five years.

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If you've been watching the Indians, who are 5th in MLB with a 10.2 BB% and are 4th in MLB with a 24.4 K%, you're quite familiar with this trend. Combining those two numbers means that 34.6% of Indians' AB either ended with a walk or a strikeout, or more than 1/3 of the AB in any given game.

For some perspective on that, that percentage of Indians' AB that either ended with a walk or a strikeout over the past 20 years (in 5 year increments) goes like this:

2005 – 27.5%

2000 – 29.1%

1995 – 24.7%

1990 – 22.7%

While those numbers are certainly interesting and seeing that number increase two-fold in a twenty year window is shocking, it's likely that they're more of a league-wide trend and the higher the number doesn't necessarily equate into a worse offense. To wit, the two teams that have a higher percentage of AB that have had ended in a K or a BB are the Diamondback (35.5%) and the Padres (34.7%), and the Diamondbacks have scored the 2nd most runs in MLB with the Padres ranking (19th of 30 MLB teams) still making the Indians look positively toothless.

Perhaps the Indians are swinging and missing at pitches they shouldn't be as [Jon Steiner over at WFNY asserts](#)

. His conclusion (which isn't surprising if you've been watching the games) that he backs up with some great leg work is that the most culpable players in wasting AB in the early going (most notably Sizemore, Hafner and, to a lesser extent, Peralta and Branyan) by chasing pitches are the very players that the offense is designed to rely on for run production.

It's been said here before, but the onus of the offense does not fall onto the shoulders of the Lou Marsons, [Matt Matolas](#), Luis Valbuenas of the world, but very squarely on those of Sizemore, Choo, and Cabrera with Peralta, Hafner, and Rusty designed to complement those three while the youngsters get their sea legs under them. Since Sizemore, Peralta, Hafner, and Rusty have all been wildly inconsistent and, at times, downright putrid, the offense has been...wait for it...wildly inconsistent and, at times, downright putrid. Again, this is taking a couple more swipes at that dead horse on the ground over there, but until those players (most notably Sizemore) turn things around, that inconsistency and propensity for putridness (if that's not a word, I've just created one to describe the Tribe offense) will continue.

On the topic of Sizemore, [Terry Pluto points out](#) (among other juicy nuggets) "that something has happened to his power. Even playing with an elbow that would require surgery, Sizemore had 18 homers in 436 at-bats in 2009...So either there is an injury problem, or Sizemore has lost some power because of problems with his swing."

For an answer to that, let's turn to the beacon of light among the Tribe beat writers, one Mr. Anthony Castrovine, who addresses that very topic (amongst many) in [the latest "Inbox"](#) :

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Sizemore used to generate a lot of topspin when he made contact, but he was strong enough and his hands were fast enough that he could get away with it and still drive the ball. Trouble is, such a swing can put a great deal of stress on the elbow upon contact, and all that stress caught up to Sizemore last year, prompting arthroscopic surgery.

What you're seeing this year could be a byproduct of Sizemore attempting to shorten his swing and get more backspin on the ball. It's proving to be a difficult adjustment for Sizemore to make, but it would certainly help his career, long-term. His old approach causes more strikeouts and more stress on the elbow, and his power numbers would have diminished with age. A shortened swing could allow him to raise that batting average over time and become a more consistent hitter.

That certainly makes more sense than the idea that Sizemore has completely fallen off of the map as a hitter as the adjustment may change his game and bears watching as the season continues.

Given the insight from both Pluto and Castrovince, I know that this gets hammered away at in this space, but isn't it amazing the way that the coverage from those two have made nearly all other mainstream media forms of communication (other than Stephanie Storm, who is woefully underutilized at the ABJ) obsolete?

Meanwhile, the troika of beat writers who have covered the team forever claim that the Sabathia and Lee deals are ALREADY failures (I'm not providing the link, just know that it's out there) or that still bemoan the low payroll (in a rebuilding year) as the main reason that attendance is so low, simply inflaming the masses by ignoring the greater issues at hand (both with the organization and with MLB) and content to take the sports-talk radio level potshots at the team.

To that end, with quite a bit of the "Dolan is Cheap" pieces coming out in response to the 2010 season that apparently has taken the city by surprise, I thought I would pass along [a letter penned by one of the readers over at the LGT](#)

. In it, Eric Davis presents some information to the Columbus Dispatch's Rob Oller (who I'm not familiar with) that should be on the fingertips of the media that cover the Indians. The whole letter is worth a read as it doesn't absolve the Indians from culpability in the mess at hand (and rightfully so), but the high points include:

This mantra, oft repeated by the Cleveland.com community, conveniently forgets the widening financial equality gap that exists in Major League Baseball. I ask, would your audience had not been better suited to read an article with deeper insights concerning the frustrations of small to mid market teams to compete on the same level as teams who routinely spend up to \$100 million more on payroll, rather than a simple reduction such as SPEND MORE MONEY?

--snip--

Can the Indians do better? Certainly. They are notoriously lousy at drafting talent, and have failed spectacularly in certain areas of player development (Sowers, Peralta, Carmona, etc.) Can they spend more? Maybe, but the rival Twins payroll is now pushing \$100 million. How

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much more spending would bring about an instant winner? Would \$20 million in additional payroll guarantee 10 more wins? Would that result in an attendance increase of 100,000 fans? How much more should be spent to be 'better'?

--snip--

Isn't the money better put into long-term player development so one, as Mark Shapiro puts it "can more aggressively manage the cycle." The cycle, of course, is the bane of small to mid market teams that they have smaller competitive windows due to the current state of free agency. By trading Sabathia, Lee and Martinez, the Indians acquired a raft of potential big league talent. Growing pains, like those you see in 2010, are to be expected. Who knows, perhaps none of this talent (LaPorta, Brantley, Donald, Hagadone, Knapp, Carrasco, Santana et al) will pan out. But frankly, the Indians might be better positioned than some of their small market brethren to compete and win in 2012 and beyond — or until the next inevitable trading of stars on the cusp of free agency occurs.

Perhaps you see that as the "drinking the Kool-Aid" stance, but the financial realities that are listed in the letter (which have been hammered home here all Winter and Spring, among other places) are very real without much hope for substantive change in the very near future. Maybe people don't want to hear about the disparity in revenue in MLB and tire quickly of the "we're not the Yankees" excuse, but it brings into focus a major issue that I have with the mainstream media (how the majority of sports fans continue to get their news, for better or worse) in how the Indians' season has been presented...by some, at least.

The question that is being missed by the majority of the mainstream media, quick to take the easy road which appeals to the base emotions of the fan base without presenting facts, would be to ask why the Indians (and their "small market brethren") are content to exist in such an economic environment?

Is the power wielded from the large-market teams too large to overcome, even by a coalition of teams like the Indians, the Brewers (who are off to a bad start and are about to see what happened in Cleveland over the last few years happen to them), the Rays, and their ilk?

Why did Game 1 of the World Series pass without much more than a comment from the Indians that "it's tough to see Lee and Sabathia out there, but we're proud of them as players" when the situation was ripe for some soapbox preaching?

Is there simply THAT much money to be made, regardless of performance on the field that they're just happy to have a seat at the adults' table?

Until those questions are asked and answered, there's going to be that ability to quickly deride the Dolans for "buying high" and "not being able to afford to field a competitive team" year in and year out.

Whether the answers to those questions ultimately reinforce the feelings that many fans have on the Dolans and the Indians largely depends on preconceptions coming into the situation, but

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the situation in Cleveland is not unlike one that is likely to develop in Milwaukee over the next year or two as well as perhaps even in Tampa, where the future looks as bright for the organization as the future of an organization back in Fall of 2007.

Today however, 2007 seems like a lifetime ago...