

A Reflective Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, May 30 2010 7:18 AM - Last Updated Monday, May 31 2010 7:09 AM



After dropping 9 of their last 11 with their starting pitcher on his way to the hospital (for what would turn out to be precautionary tests, thankfully), the Indians' Saturday fate looked grim, not an unsurprising fact given that the combined salaries for the Indians' lineup (approximately \$8.4M) represented just a little over a quarter over what the Yankees' 3B will earn (\$32M) and a just over a third over what their the Bombers' starting pitcher for the game will earn (\$23M) this season.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the loss column as the Indians' youngsters battered Sabathia for 5 runs in 6 IP and overcame some dreadful pitching from the bullpen from Aaron Laffey (way to make your case for the rotation, Bulldog) to eventually take more shine off of Justin Chamberlain's apple (without the help of midges) en route to a 13-10 victory.

It was the kind of game that makes a season like the one that the Indians are currently in the middle of marginally better, where the future looks brighter than it has in weeks. With extra-base hits coming off of the bats of Lou Marson (finally looking comfortable at the plate...just in time to head to AAA), Jason Donald (4 doubles, 1 HR in his last 5 games), and Matt MaTola (who actually looked like he wasn't limping for the first time going around the bases), the offensive future looks a little clearer...even if it was just for a day.

That being said, since there's really not that much that is news-worthy about the Indians in the here-and-now (and thank goodness that Huff has received a clean bill of health), perhaps we'll go a different direction on this Laziest of Sundays, what with tomorrow being Memorial Day and with me about to load up the Family Truckster for a couple of days up in Lake Chautauqua.

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Sure, there are some interesting things out there regarding the trade market (and the Trading Deadline is 2 months away so...get ready for 8 weeks of this excitement) with [Jayson Stark saying that the Blue Jays are scouting Fausto](#)

(which could just be a team trying to find a under-club-control, youngish starter that they could get on the cheap) and with

[Ken Rosenthal listing out some possible destinations for Tribesman](#)

, in an interesting piece that projects that Philly might be interested in both Wood AND Westbrook, that the Indians might have an interest in keeping Westbrook around (something I still haven't really considered and thus don't really have an opinion on), as well as reporting that: *The team is willing to include cash in a trade to land better prospects, just as it did in the Casey Blake-for-Carlos Santana deal in '08. The high salaries of Wood and Westbrook increase the likelihood of such exchanges.*

This last bit of news is good to hear, though I'll be interested to see how that plays out as attendance is still abysmal into July and as apathy reigns supreme on the North Coast regarding the team. All told, there's going to be PLENTY of time to dissect which teams might have an interest in Wood, Westbrook, Kearns, Branyan, Peralta, and Grudzielanek as well as 2 months of performance by each of those players to (hopefully) build up trade value.

Additionally, there's going to be quite a bit of time to assess the trades that have already taken place, and [SI.com's Jon Heymann has an interesting nugget when discussing Cliff Lee's trade value](#) :

*He's been traded twice in the past year already, and while the acquiring teams unloaded a total of seven decent or better prospects, even Lee couldn't bring an upper echelon prospect such as Clay Buchholz last year, a straight-up request that was flat rejected. **"Teams are placing significant value on their young players," one AL GM said.***

Regardless of how that makes you feel about Lou Marson, Donnie Baseball (an attempt at finding a nickname for Jason Donald) and the like, let's go in a different direction this week as the most interesting work on the web this week come from some of our favorite writers, both of whom happen to be Cleveland natives.

While most of the analysis and reporting this week covers ground that's been tread over for the past year in this very space (is Fausto back?, should Masterson be a reliever?, what's wrong with LaPorta?, etc.), let's all get on the couch to examine our psyche here as we seem to be sitting at Ground Zero (Saturday's game still considered) of another rebuild/reload/whatever with no guarantee that it will be any more successful (or even as successful) as the one that just finished.

As the team operates with the odds stacked against the Tribe, and in an environment in which they need to be both lucky and smart (by the by, [here's a great piece from a Padres' minority owner that explains the situation both rationally and in easy-to-understand language](#)

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that should be required reading for anyone that's quick to simply bash the Indians for this precipitous fall), we follow and support the team with the knowledge that the players that we're currently placing our hopes in for that next window of contention won't be around once they hit Free Agency.

It's a cycle that I'm already preparing The DiaTot for, as much as the notion makes my stomach turn. To his credit, he's already made the statement that once Grady's not on the Indians anymore, he'll just pick another Indians' player to be his favorite...which suggests a greater grasp of the current climate in MLB than most paying customers at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

On top of those built-in disadvantages for the Indians within MLB, which played a part in the deconstruction of the team (along with the pipeline of talent running dry, key injuries, and crucial mistakes made in FA), most of us Indians' fans bear the cross of being sports fans, in general, from Cleveland, an identity that is coming into clearer focus as a certain native Northeast Ohioan holds the city hostage.

It's an identity that was articulated recently in an incredible piece at Deadspin from native Clevelander Scott Raab, who normally plies his craft for Esquire (and here's [something he wrote about Shaq](#)

that just appeared in my mailbox), as he examines his relationship with Cleveland sports, crystallized in the context of [his "repentance"](#)

:

...Being a lifelong Indians fan transcends any of the whining from Wrigley Field or, once upon a time, Red Sox Nation. Pussies. For most of my life, the Indians had neither stars nor hope—only agony. With apologies to Bernard Malamud, to be a Cleveland fan is to suffer, and to suffer is to be a Cleveland fan.

--snip--

One of the worst parts of being a devoted fan of any crappy team, in any sport, is the sense that you're truly only rooting for the laundry, that the players in the uniform bearing the name of your town don't care half as much as you do. Nor should they. They may be men playing a boy's game, but they're also men at work at a job defined by its naked difficulty. Their every act is literally numbered, and those numbers—and, in a fan's eyes, the players themselves—are public property. Ultimately, though, they owe us nothing beyond their best effort.

And us? I don't know that fans owe players much of anything. Then again, I'm from Cleveland: I've been suffering all my life. I always figured that since I bought my tickets with my mother's hard-earned money, I was entitled to do pretty much whatever I wanted at the games. And though I realize now how wrong I was, that's merely an intellectual construct that still gets swept away by the flood of feeling that defines my fandom. If you put me, Jose Mesa, and John Elway in a room with a loaded gun, I'm the only one who's walking out alive.

While Raab paints a pretty accurate picture of what my life has been like as a Cleveland fan "rooting for the laundry" (or at least attempting to do so), native South Euclidean Joe Posnanski presents [another angle of Cleveland fandom in a piece about being wrong](#) from Slate in an

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interview with fellow

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:

What I have found about Cleveland fans—and certainly it's been true of me—is that at some point you know you're going to be wrong, so you try to play tricks with yourself. You say, "Well, I know they're going to lose today," in an effort to be wrong in the other direction. The expectation level of a Cleveland fan is so filled with heartbreak that at some point you just try to turn the thing in your favor. But in Cleveland, it never works, because if you say "I know they're going to lose today," you are going to be right, and there's no joy at all in that kind of rightness.

Certainly, both of these pieces have a bit of the doom-and-gloom feel that I try to avoid here, but what's amazing is that Raab accurately describes the feeling that most Clevelanders are feeling about the Indians, particularly after watching our former aCCe take some time off from counting his money to take on the Indians yesterday ("to suffer is to be a Cleveland fan") and Posnanski nails what we're seeing play out this summer, as the city seems to be steeling itself that LeBron James is going to leave.

As Posnanski says, "you try to play tricks with yourself" by almost projecting the worst that can happen so you're prepared if (or is it when) that worst-case-scenario emerges. If you don't think that's what happening with LeBron, then you haven't heard the arguments that "he's never won anything here" or that "he gave up on the team" as people are steeling themselves against disappointment. You expect the worst and if something good happens, you're ecstatic about it. But if the worst-case scenario comes to fruition...well, you've mentally prepared yourself for it.

Truthfully, I've always tried to avoid that thinking with the Indians, whether it be the irrational excitement that I have for Jason Donald or my hope against hope that Fausto v.2007 lurks somewhere under that hat (you know, the one with the sticker still on the underside of the brim)...and those are the things that I feel in a down year.

Regardless, that optimism and that hope has a tendency to set myself up for some monumental disappointment, even if you just put it in the context of Game 5 of the 2007 ALCS, when I met friends at Local Heroes before the game and (since most of us were in college in 1995 and 1997 and had never experienced being in Cleveland for a World Series) vowed that we meet up after the game (presupposing a victory and a WS berth) to celebrate together as we had never done in the past.

Well, we all know what happened in Game 5 and thereafter, but I was with one of those friends at a wedding recently and we were reminiscing about that night...something that we had always avoided. Since we never met up after the game, I told him about the absolutely silent Rapid ride from Tower City to the West Side that The DiaBride and I endured in a packed Rapid car. Despite 2 games remaining in the series (and the Indians still up 3-2), the worry was palpable, even for a pie-eyed optimist like me.

My friend told me that he left the ballpark that night knowing that the ALCS was over, that CC was going to be traded the following year, and that the Indians' opportunity had been missed. While some of that may be embellished (he's not that prescient, regardless of what he says), it

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goes back to that point that Posnanski makes as we're programmed to expect the worst...which is often what happens to us, if you'll remember the FOX graphic – “At Least You Still Have LeBron” – as CC and Lee squared off in Game 1 of the World Series.

Now, with the Indians at the bottom of the AL Central and in light of the consternation across the Gateway Plaza, I am reminded of [a piece that I wrote back in the late summer of 2007](#), when the Cavs were headed to the NBA Finals and the Indians were steamrolling their way to the playoffs:

The Cleveland sports teams are trending upwards and they're doing it together. This ascent is not automatic nor is it immediate. Growing pains and disappointment promise to litter the road. But, for once, the road represents an ascent, not a descent into the mediocrity and indifference, to which we've grown accustomed.

None of the Cleveland teams are taking that “one last chance” or trying to slip through the closing window, as we saw the Pistons attempt and are currently watching the Yankees struggle to do. They're all on the rise (to borrow from the Cavaliers' playoff motto) and show no signs of taking a precipitous, unexpected tumble back to mediocrity.

Now, less than 3 years later, it looks myopic and absurd in light of what's happened since then and what looks to be happening. What's happened since that time (at least in terms of the Indians) was encapsulated recently by Eric Wedge, [who told The Buffalo News' Mike Harrington last week](#) that “Key guys got hurt and then there was the economics of it all. If we could have kept it together, I still believe we could have been one helluva team. It's just tough to ride that all out in that market.”

While that description of what transpired represents a cursory look at everything that went wrong (and having probably gone too far in depth into what did go wrong already), we find ourselves about to go into June watching a bad baseball team with no guarantee that the current group of youngsters are going to congeal and mature simultaneously, which represents the hope. Thus, fully realizing the flaws within the game and our inherent “Cleveland-ness”, what are we doing here?

The Indians are in a rebuilding/reloading/whatever year and while this regime proved that they are able to build a contender quickly (go look at the makeup of [the 2003 team](#), then the [2005](#) and [2007](#) teams), they've also proven that the house of cards that they built in short order can come down just as quickly, if not quicker.

If we're at the 2002/2003 stage with this current team and contention is a few years off (and that certainly looks to be the case now), what is it that brings me back to watch this team and let it occupy so much of my time?

This may be a topic that's been discussed, but in the context of the last month of Indians' baseball in particular, why do I allow myself to love a team that operates within the confines of an imbalanced system, one in which they're unlikely to ever consistently produce a contender?

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Why?

Because it is baseball and, more accurately, because it is Indians' baseball.

Because looking at that 2003 team and the 2005 team gives one pause in terms of what can happen when young talent congeals and puts a team on the winning track in short order. That's not to say that the turnaround will be identical, but it does throw water on the argument that the Indians are on the verge of another 40-year walk through the desert that some people seem to think.

Yes, "to suffer is to be a Cleveland fan" and my college friends (not from Cleveland) deride me for bringing up my sons as fans of the Indians, leading them into a life that promises to be full of heartbreak and disappointment. Most Clevelanders will play that "worst-case scenario" game that Posnanski describes so as not to put their hearts into it, for fear of more heartache, but I refuse to fall into that chasm. Perhaps it is because I haven't yet experienced the full force of Cleveland sports yet (though it certainly feels like it) that I haven't grown jaded and skeptical...but I just don't see the enjoyment in that approach to following sports.

Ultimately, it is just a game and a pleasant diversion and it is "rooting for laundry", but I want to have that moment of "I went through the tough times" if this thing ever turns into a championship. I want to see that light at the end of the tunnel and I want it to shine brightly upon my face. Whether that means that I go irrationally looking for it, getting there is half the fun and I'd rather pick up my half-full glass and enjoy a game that was meant to be enjoyed, as difficult as that is in the current economic environment and with the events on the North Coast of the past 2+ years.

A game like Saturday brings into perfect focus why following Indians' baseball remains a part of my life. It may just be the [little victories that look hollow in hindsight](#) (and please click on that link, if only for the pictures), but it makes the light of hope burn bright, even if that light is only a flicker.

This season was coming (and more like it may be on its heels) and a season like this causes some reflection as to why we Indians' fans subject ourselves to this suffering, why we set ourselves up for the pending disappointment and heartbreak.

For someone like me, who got inexplicably hooked on baseball rooting for Pat Tabler, Brook Jacoby, and Cory Snyder, when [Sports Illustrated cruelly gave me my first dose of hope that was destined to be dashed](#), that answer isn't that hard. For others, it may not be that easy and the 2010 season certainly looks to be the one that will test the mettle (and the patience) of the greater fanbase.

However, on a Sunday morning, with the sun shining on the North Coast on a holiday weekend and with the Erie Warriors having defeated their former aCCe in the Bronx because of the contributions of some of the youngsters who may (or may not) play a role in what is hoped to be the next contender on the shores of Lake Erie, let's take a moment to simply enjoy being Indians' fans (as difficult as that may be at certain times this season) having knocked off the big, bad Yankees.

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The rest of the season figures to be painful and the next couple of seasons may follow suit; but for a day, things are sunnier in WahooLand and, really, isn't that why we keep coming back as Clevelanders, as baseball fans, to this game that we all love?