

Figuring It All Out

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 01 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 01 2010 8:28 AM



When the Cleveland Indians were busy trying to win games in spring training while other, more experienced teams were simply getting in shape, there was more than a few hints of optimism among local fans that perhaps this team was better than anyone anticipated.

Well past the quarter pole of another depressing baseball season and this team is exactly as anticipated. Not better, not worse, but right where a team with these kind of players ought to be. In last place and lucky to win 1 out of every 3 games.

If your glass is half full maybe you can put some of the blame on the injuries to Grady Sizemore and Asdrubal Cabrera, both out several weeks with serious injuries. But it's not like Sizemore was tearing it up before he went down. He looked mostly lost at the plate but at least was playing solid defense. Cabrera was one of the bright spots of the season.

Manager Manny Acta indicated the other day that after the All Star break, the shuttle between Columbus and Cleveland would be running full time and non-stop. That begs the question, of course, of why not now? One of the abiding mysteries of this season is general manager Mark

Figuring It All Out

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 01 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 01 2010 8:28 AM

Shapiro's dogged insistence on trotting out all manner of retreads along side the prospects he collected when raffling off the few good players the Indians used to have. Apparently the few Indians fans willing to pay to see this team will just have to be patient a little bit longer.

There's a tendency when things are going this bad for a team for fans to lose perspective. That's why I suspect more than a few people will think this is maybe the most miserable baseball season they've ever seen. I'm not going to argue with anyone who wants to ponder franchise lows, but in truth all this season feels like is just one of the dozens this franchise has put together in the last 5 decades.

You can pick whatever reference point you'd like, but personally I like to start with 1959, a year in which this team won 89 games and finished second in the American League, 5 games behind the Chicago White Sox. That year the Indians also finished 10 games ahead of the Yankees. It looked like the beginning of something positive.

It would be 6 more seasons before the Indians finished above .500. Their 87-75 record in 1965 was good for a lousy fifth place finish. Three seasons later they finished above .500 again, going 86-75 in 1968 for a third place. It would be another 7 seasons before they'd break .500 again. You get the pattern.

The thing to remember, though, is that in each of those blue moon seasons when the Indians would actually be competitive, the seasons that followed were absolutely horrendous. For example, after the Indians won 86 games in 1968, they won only 62 the next season. Then in 1971 they won only 60. Indeed their best season between 1968 and 1976 was when they went 79-80 in 1975. That's when the league didn't care much about teams actually completely a full 162-game season.

Then, of course, came the even darker ages. Between 1977 and 1991, the Indians lost 90 or more games 6 times and in 3 of those seasons they lost at least 100. There were also seasons of 89 and 87 losses. It was pretty hopeless, desperate times.

Then came the strike-shortened seasons of 1994 and 1995, the move to Jacobs Field and the beginning of what is now known as the golden age of the franchise. Since 1995, the team has been in the playoffs 7 times. In the 94 seasons prior to then, they had only been in the playoffs

Figuring It All Out

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 01 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 01 2010 8:28 AM

three times, winning the world series twice and losing, in devastating fashion, the 1954 in four straight despite having one of the best pitching staffs in baseball history.

It's pretty clear that the golden age was brief and has since ended and the only argument is when. When history is written, most will point to the 2007 season when the Indians collapsed against the Boston Red Sox in the ALCS after holding a 3-1 lead. It's not just that the Indians lost that series but it was the disheartening, soul-sucking manner in which it happened. Seemingly invincible in games 2, 3 and 4, the team collapsed and was never even in any of the next 3 games. I'd say it was a collapse of historic proportions but then I saw the Cavaliers lose to the Celtics this season in a similar manner so it's all perspective I guess.

You could actually make the case though that this franchise really turned in a much different direction as far back as 2001. After losing to Seattle 3-2 in the divisional series, the Indians have had only two winning seasons, 2005 and 2007. With the benefit of hindsight, both look more like an anomaly than a concerted effort to keep this franchise competitive with the top tier of the league.

Consider, for example, that following each of those seasons the Indians almost stubbornly refused to make an additional, but perhaps financially costly move or two to push themselves over the top. Each time the team regressed.

At the time it was just frustrating. But now, in context, you can see more clearly see that those moves would have deviated from the plan.

The plan was launched when Larry and Paul Dolan purchased the team. Hamstrung initially by a payroll they inherited, the Dolans with Shapiro as their implementer have been in a long but steady retreat mode, convinced that baseball's spiraling economics could bankrupt them if they weren't careful.

Having become convinced that they couldn't change baseball's fractured economics, they instead have embraced them by becoming in word and deed a small market team that that would be competitive, if ever, when the moons aligned and prospects all got good at the same time. So far their reach hasn't come close to matching their vision.

Figuring It All Out

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 01 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 01 2010 8:28 AM

Plagued by poor drafting and poor trading, Shapiro has mostly a mess in front of him at the moment and he can't find the his broom.

As you look at this Indians team at the moment is there any player that really excites you and makes you think that perhaps he's the next Evan Longoria or Albert Pujols? Players develop at different rates and perhaps it's not fair to judge players like Lou Marson, Luis Valbuena, Lou Marson, Matt LaPorta and Mike Brantley at the moment, but is there anything about any of their games that makes you think, hey, once this guy gets it figured out watch out?

Jason Donald brings a certain energy to a team in desperate need of some, like a can of Red Bull to a college kid around 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night and Trevor Crowe has had his moments. But right now the only two young players on this team that seem worth getting excited about are Shin-Soo Choo and Cabrera, maybe Fausto Carmona as well. If you want to stretch it, maybe Mitch Talbot, too.

The question is whether this is enough to build a team around. At the moment it hardly looks like it, at least in the hand of the current regime. Shapiro, who has been on his job long enough to be fairly judged, hasn't made the grade. For every one or two decisions that have turned out well, 10 others have been colossal mistakes. As general manager's go, he's essentially Luis Valbuena, meaning that he'd need his next 50 or 60 key decisions to be on the money just to get himself back to the Mendoza line.

Going into today's game against the Yankees, the Indians are 18-30 and already have no chance of finishing at .500. That will make it two straight seasons. One more and they will tie the longest such streak in the so-called golden era. It seems as inevitable as making it four straight the season after that.

Maybe this isn't the most depressing stretch of baseball Cleveland has ever experienced but that's only because this has been a franchise that's been historically depressing. There's simply too much bad baseball in its bloodstream to get all worked up about the current state of affairs.

You could say that the Indians of today are at least better positioned to emerge sooner than

Figuring It All Out

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, June 01 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 01 2010 8:28 AM

their counterparts of the 1970s because at least this team seems to have an overriding plan. But what's really the difference between a good plan poorly executed and a poor plan well executed? To the fans, not much.