

A Tale of Two Cities

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Saturday, June 26 2010 12:01 AM - Last Updated Friday, June 25 2010 4:17 PM



After spending a lovely Thursday afternoon watching some baseball (not involving the Indians) as the Brewers completed a three-game sweep of the Twins here in Milwaukee, one aspect of the game was particularly striking to me in the context of following the Indians. No, it wasn't that Yovani Gallardo was perfect through 5 or that the AL Central leading Twins looked eminently beatable all series, unable to match the Brewers in NL baseball strategy. No, one thing stood out...35,898.

That was the attendance for a Thursday afternoon game in Milwaukee on the first day of SummerFest (and if you don't know what that is, Google it) for a team that went into the game with a 31-40 record, 9 games out of the NL Central race. The Brewers won the game, their 4th in a row, raising their record to 32-40, not quite good enough to lift their projected loss total for the year above 90 as they're now on pace for a 72-90 season.

And yet, 35,898 came to see it at 1:00 on a weekday.

Thing is, that attendance number is no great surprise in Southeast Wisconsin as the Brewers are averaging 34,833, good for 10th highest in MLB. What's worth noting here as the immediate response that "yeah, well the Brewers are good and have been good" is that the Brewers finished 80-82 last season and are now two years removed from their only 90-win season since 1993, when they went 90-72 in 2008, making it to the NL Playoffs as the Wild Card before bowing out in the LDS.

What's so interesting about this in the context of the Indians and their recent history?

Let me move the years around to get these records lined up, but here's where I'm going with this:

Indians 2005: 93-69

Average Attendance: 24,861

Brewers 2006: 75-87

Average Attendance: 28,835

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Indians 2006: 78-84

Average Attendance: 24,666

Brewers 2007: 83-79

Average Attendance: 35,421

Indians 2007: 96-86 (lost in ALCS)

Average Attendance: 28,448

Brewers 2008: 90-72 (lost in NLDS)

Average Attendance: 37,882

Indians 2008: 81-81

Average Attendance: 27,122

Brewers 2009: 80-82

Average Attendance: 37,499

Indians 2009: 65-97

Average Attendance: 22,492

Brewers 2010: 72-90 (projected)

Average Attendance: 34,833

This is not pointed out as any sort of referendum on why individual Indians' fans didn't cause the

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appreciable bump in attendance that was enjoyed in Milwaukee, only to point out that two small-market teams who experienced success in the latter part of the 2000s have had wildly divergent results at their box office.

The Brewers saw a HUGE increase in attendance on the heels of a 75-87 season in 2006, bringing in 25% more fans to the ballpark for a team that would ultimately finish 83-79 in 2007. The Indians experienced no such bump after their 2005 season (93-69) and actually saw a lower average of fans in 2006 for a team that would finish 78-84.

The oft-repeated refrain in response to why the Indians were never able to capture the excitement of the town was because of their inconsistency from season to season and their inability to remain in contention. However, looking at the Brewers' record on the heels of their 2008 playoff season, it shows that the Milwaukee team was just as disappointing on the field, with those disappointments simply not making their way to the box office as they did in Cleveland. Additionally, two years removed from the playoff appearance, the Brewers have continued to draw despite a slow start and despite some particularly soul-crushing losses in early 2010.

That all being said, extenuating factors unquestionably play a role as the late-2000 Brewers represent the first baseball contender for a city in 25 years while the Indians' fans are still largely playing the "show-me" game after the sustained success of the champion-free "Era of Champions" of the late 1990s. To date, the Brewers have been more pro-active than the Indians, firing their manager in the midst of a playoff hunt and trading for Sabathia to spur that playoff hunt. Additionally, the Indians traded their reigning Cy Young Award winners in consecutive years in 2008 and 2009, a fate that has not yet occurred in the Cream City.

Maybe that day is coming for the Brewers, who have yet to conduct a full-scale fire sale as the Indians have for the past two years. However, it is worth mentioning that every fan I spoke to felt that the Brewers should be trading Corey Hart and Prince Fielder this year (2 of the only 3 good hitters on the team) because of "baseball economics". None of them seemed to project that trades of Hart or Fielder would lessen their desire to come to the ballpark in 2011 or beyond.

So what gives in Cleveland?

How did the Indians not get an appreciable bump in attendance after the 2005 season and the 2007 season the way that the Brewers did by hovering around .500 for most of the time and

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putting forth one playoff season?

Of course, it's easy to say that the contempt for the ownership and the Front Office has kept people away, but we're not talking about 2010, where the team slides below rock bottom with each passing day. What factors contributed to the Indians simply not capturing the hearts of a city back in 2005 and 2007 while the Brewers team, with 2 over .500 seasons in the past 5 years has been able to do so may remain unanswered in perpetuity. Maybe the Brewers slide down that slippery small-market slope to the bottom of the mountain once again, joining their former AL East counterparts from Cleveland. Maybe the attendance numbers will drop just as precipitously in Milwaukee once the known names make their way out of town for faceless prospects.

On a Thursday afternoon, making my way through the tailgaters outside of Miller Park, all decked out in Brewers gear, ready to root on a team that sat 9 games back, that startling drop in attendance is hard to see. Even with trades that will affect their offensive output on the horizon and with one good starting pitcher and a bullpen that calls to mind those of the Indians of the past few years, the people keep coming.

As the brats and the beer flowed freely and while that spigot never really got going at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario over the last 5 years, it doesn't look to be turning off any time soon in Milwaukee.