

Lazy Sunday with A New Hope

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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The dog days of summer are upon us and, during the time of the baseball season in which ennui and distraction usually rule the day, different winds are blowing at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. They are the winds of change and (despite the fact that they've been blowing for a little over two years) they're bringing a breath of fresh air to a team and an organization that grew quickly stagnant as recently as last year, done in by poor decisions, poor performance, and the organizational actions that came as a result of those two factors.

After the horrific disappointment that has pervaded the North Coast since October of 2007 the fresh air is intoxicating to some, even if it does lead to the use of "hope" as a verb, a noun, and an adjective when describing the future of the Cleveland Indians.

Perhaps however, that "hope" is not as misplaced as it would seem as this Indians' team is 21-17 since breaking their 7 game losing streak on June 27th and, while some could certainly accuse me of cherry-picking dates to make that record all that more impressive, here's what is actually the most impressive thing about that 38 game stretch – the Indians' opponents while they ran up that record and their winning percentage to date:

Reds - .564

Blue Jays (twice) - .523

A's - .500

Rangers - .587

Rays - .615

Tigers - .486

Twins (twice) - .555

Yankees - .620

Red Sox - .573

For the record, that would be the top 4 teams in the AL East (all above .500), the 2nd and 3rd place teams in the AL Central, and the top 2 teams in the AL West and that list represents every team in the AL with a winning record, with the exception of the White Sox.

Running through that gauntlet, this Indians' team that many fans dismiss (while taking shots at ownership and the Front Office) has posted a .553 winning percentage as their young pitching staff has an ERA of 3.64 in that stretch of 38 games.

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While this is a healthy dose of optimism, particularly in terms of how the Indians are essentially playing a group of youngsters out there night after night after the veterans found their way off of the roster (which gets to [the point that Steve Buffum made so eloquently recently](#)), what's even more exciting is to look at which teams they're going to play after the Twins' series in the month of August, with their winning percentages as such:

Orioles - .330

Mariners - .373

Royals (twice) - .422

Tigers - .486

A's - .500

White Sox - .569

That's right, prior to the team welcoming the White Sox to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario for the final weekend in August, the Indians do not have a team with a record above .500 on their schedule.

Of course, we all remember the frantic, and ultimately hollow, finish in 2008 (the team went 44-28 from July 10th to the end of the season) that allowed the Indians to amazingly finish with an 81-81 record, which only created the illusion that everything would be just fine to start the 2009 season. However, the manner in which the current Indians are winning games – decent to solid starting pitching, a surprisingly good bullpen, and a relatively balanced offense motored by Choo – with their young players (the only current Indian over the age of 28 is Shelley Duncan) draw some optimism for the future...and by that I mean “near future”.

As I said, we've all fallen into this trap before and Craig Calcaterra nailed it when [he wrote this after Wednesday's win](#)

against the Red Sox:

The Indians are 12-8 since the All-Star break. This is good. It will cause people to once again make them their “frisky pick” next spring, however. This is bad. For the sake of prognosticators and spring training optimists everywhere, Manny Acta, tank the rest of the season! Cleveland sports fans can't afford to have their hopes -- however irrational they may be -- crushed again!

While it's difficult to argue with that idea that the team could be a simply be a “frisky pick” that will be made in vain and that a solid finish is going to raise hopes (perhaps irrationally), there's something that's been creeping up on me the last couple of weeks...the realization that I think that I like this team.

Call me a sucker (as I've been called worse), but I enjoy seeing the young guys playing out there, seeing glimpses of what could be and dreaming on some of these players. It may be myopic and irrationally hopeful, and in the interest of full disclosure this is coming from a guy who bought season tickets prior to the 2004 season (coming off of a 97-loss season in 2003) because I was excited about the seeds being sown in the system and could actually see that the team back then could develop into something special, but I can see those seeds being sown again.

While the fruit that was borne from those seeds ultimately came up a little short in their quest to

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deliver a World Series title, watching the development of players like CC, Victor, Sizemore, Hafner, Lee, and even Peralta into a championship contender in the span of a couple of years was certainly gratifying, even if their “limitless future” was limited to a couple of months to start the 2008 season.

Now in August of 2010, we’re back to the building stage and while a good number of fans don’t want to go through this process again because they realize the eventuality of the situation as dictated by the economics of MLB (that these players we’re watching develop are eventually going to end up wearing other uniforms), reader Amit Asoyla absolutely nailed it when he wrote to me that the Indians are “like the Matrix, where we reboot every few years”.

With all of the talk of “Windows of Contention”, how apropos is a comparison to the team simply “re-booting” every few years?

If we’re dealing with that, the shutdown from the 2002 to 2009 edition occurred with the trades of Clifton Phifer and El Capitan last July (the way that it did when Colon was dealt in 2002) and now the Indians are a year removed from what actually doesn’t look like a bad decision (last summer’s trades) when you consider that the 2010 incarnation was not going to contend – Lee and Victor or no Lee and Victor.

That’s oversimplifying it more than just a bit as a whole mess of mistakes were made as regressions, poor personnel decisions, cumbersome contracts, and even injuries played a role in this precipitous fall for the Indians, but stacking up where they sit today with where they were a year ago, it has to be asked – which team do you feel better about?

Last May, [I came clean and admitted that I hated the Indians as the team that they had evolved into](#), an obviously flawed team done in by the wrong players being on the field and by the roster being full of pieces and parts that may have made sense in 2006 or 2007, but that were obviously out of place in 2009.

Some would have held onto Lee and Martinez (and Westbrook and Peralta and Garko and...do I need to keep going), but the question that arises is whether it is better to hold on to the last vestiges of past glory and memories or to attempt to create new memories, more vivid and more exciting than the previous ones?

To me, I’ll take the latter and while books could be written about how the Indians quickly devolved from being one game away from the World Series to where we sit today (and I run out of fingers to point), the exercise is futile and exhausting.

That being said, it all takes us (in a long-winded manner) to finally getting off on this Lazy Sunday where Castrovince taking the week off has left us devoid of local flavor (unless you count [Paul Hoynes tweeting out that Carlos CARRASCO was going to have knee surgery](#) and was out for the season...you know, instead of Carlos SANTANA) but not devoid of terrific things to hit on.

Well, mainly one terrific thing to hit on...

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The point of order comes from an old friend who has a new address (that many people still don't even know about) as Sweet Pete Gammons takes some time to assert that there is hope in the heartland for baseball fans, focusing specifically on the situations in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Kansas City. This being a place where people come to read about the Indians ([and not...say, the Rangers](#)

), let's focus on

[what Gammons wrote about the Indians](#)

and try to dissect what he's saying here as Gammons is still the same wildly connected, wildly talented writer that he's always been – it's just that it comes from MLB.com these days and not that 4-letter word in Bristol.

And with that 1,000 word intro out of the way, we're off...

The impetus of the piece is that Gammons hits on the cases of a couple of small-market teams who he feels are positioning themselves well, perhaps not for the second half of the season, but instead for the long(er) haul:

... Oh, ascending general manager Chris Antonetti admits, "Mark [Shapiro] and I hope we can get back to the point where we're buyers, not sellers at the deadline," but they are only three years from winning 96 games and being up 3-1 in the ALCS, and five years from going to the final day of the season against the eventual world champion White Sox.

What Shapiro, Antonetti and the Cleveland organization built worked, but for misfortune, not to mention the fact that two times in three years they were beaten by the world champions. The window then simply closed, and in a market that has lost households and corporate strength as well as its professional sports identity, the window has to be reopened cautiously, gradually, without luxury or immediate solutions. The fact that they were so close in 2005 and 2007, were so good when The Jake was sold out every night in the '90s, just makes it harder when market realities forced CC Sabathia, Cliff Lee and Victor Martinez to be traded fewer than two years after being within a game of the World Series.

The "buyers, not sellers at the deadline" is a canned quote designed to calm Northeast Ohio after feeling like a feeder system for the rest of MLB over the course of the last 3 Trading Deadlines and the "misfortune" is that dead horse on the ground over there that people keep taking swings at, but that idea that "two times in three years they were beaten by the world champions" is truly something that I've never given much thought to.

Obviously, because the Indians were so close in 2007 and watching the Red Sox cut through the Rox like a hot knife through butter is the painful one, but that 2005 White Sox team did, in fact, win the World Series and while the Indians probably choked their way out of that postseason, every time I pass Comiskey (or whatever they call it) on my way through Chicago, I am reminded of it.

This idea of "windows" is nothing new and leave it to Gammons to put the visual of opening it "cautiously, gradually, without luxury or immediate solutions" to paint the picture, but what amazes me is how many fans this point is lost on. To them, CC, Lee, and Vic should still be Indians (or maybe Kenny, Thome, Omar, and Manny, depending upon who you listen to, "market realities" be damned) and the Indians should not have to go through these painful tear-downs and these painstaking build-ups.

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Why...I don't know, but I would like to see somebody refute what Gammons writes in those final 3 sentences, particularly the part that "what the Cleveland organization built worked" as evidenced by the 2005 and 2007 seasons.

Is it short-sighted to continually point out those two seasons when the other seasons from 2002 to 2009 were filled with such pain and anguish?

Maybe, but the current Front Office DID build a contender in short order as Colon was dealt in July of 2002, the Indians were in contention in August of 2004 and in the final weekend of 2005, making it to the ALCS in 2007.

Yes, they tore it down quickly...so quickly that some people are still wondering what the hell happened in 2+ years down at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, but that leads into the next idea that Gammons addresses:

But as Shapiro and Antonetti know, part of the problem with the small markets is that they require bringing groups of players along at the same time so that the window allows them to win before the reality of fattening frogs for snakes hits, free agency arrives for star players, agents ring up the big-market teams and it becomes impossible to even think about retaining Sabathia or Lee.

--snip--

The Indians are probably the closest to getting back to competitiveness. "We've looked back at where we started in the rebuilding process in 2002," says Antonetti. That season, they traded Bartolo Colon to the Expos for Sizemore, Lee and Brandon Phillips, a rebuilding trade rivaled only by the Mark Teixeira deal between Texas and Atlanta, which sent five good players, including Neftali Feliz and Elvis Andrus, to the Rangers.

"Looking at what we had then and what we have now, I think we're probably deeper along time."

Remember the old "we'll contend by 2005" that Shapiro uttered after the Colon deal (something that he probably wished never passed through his lips in the next 2 ½ years), which meant that he was "promising" (in the eyes of some fans) that the rebuild would take only 2 ½ years?

Well, regardless of what the last weekend of 2005 showed, that team did win 93 games, a total that no Indians team from 1956 to 1994 even came close to (they won 89 in 1959) and the 2007 team won the 7th most games (96) in franchise history. To put that another way, instead of 40 years in the desert (1954 to 1994), the Indians' in the early-to-mid-2000s spent only 4 years looking for that oasis in the desert. While the 1994 to 2001 run a lot of fun and generally unprecedented in Tribe history, realize that the build-up for that run started in 1989 when Joe Carter was traded to San Diego, and didn't produce a winning team until that 1994 squad. In comparison, the tear down in 2002 and build up in 2005 looked to be on fast forward.

So, yeah...these guys have done this before and while there's obviously no guarantee that this group of players is going to succeed, much less surpass what the first incarnation in the mid-to-late-2000s accomplished, according to Antonetti they are "deeper along time" (and that is odd phrasing) now then they were back in 2002

But what does that mean...back to Sweet Pete for the best of the best-case scenarios that I

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think I've ever seen and one that I think even I would have trouble replicating in terms of glass-half full thinking:

Sizemore is only 28 and returns next year to an outfield with All-Star Choo, Michael Brantley and Trevor Crowe. Nick Weglarz, all 240 pounds of him, has an .893 OPS in Triple-A at the age of 22. Cabrera is an outstanding shortstop. Matt LaPorta is a developing bat at first. Santana has a chance to be a star; he had 82 walks and 68 strikeouts between Columbus and Cleveland. At Akron, 21-year old Lonnie Chisenhall is a potential middle-order hitter, Jason Donald has played very well for the Indians, while they have three other second base prospects: Jason Kipnis (.908 OPS, 13 HR between Kinston and Akron), Cord Phelps (.316 between Akron and Columbus) and Josh Rodriguez, who can play short and third and has a .902 OPS.

OK...everyone just relax and realize that while we'd all like to think that this is 1993 all over again, the induction of Kenny Lofton into the Indians' HOF (and [here's a great retrospective by the immensely talented Ryan Richards at LGT](#)

) should give us all pause that the mid-1990's lineup included 4 likely Hall of Famers (Manny, Thome, Omar, and Murray) and that quartet doesn't include their leadoff hitter (Lofton), the #3 hitter (Baerga), or their best hitter (Belle), so to compare the lineup that looks to be on the horizon is akin to comparing it to one of the truly historically great lineups in MLB history...so, it feels a little presumptuous.

That's not to take away from the potential, but we've learned in Cleveland that the best laid plans go awry...and generally go awry again before the time for action even comes, but if you want what the Indians' lineup should look like, there it is from Peter Gammons.

Maybe he's overstating the potential of (more than) a few of these players, but even with Santana, Choo, Cabrera, and LaPorta (.849 OPS since returning) with Chisenhall and Weglarz on the way as potential impact bats with the periphery of Brantley, Donald, Kipnis, and Phelps (you'll notice that I refuse to include Crowe or Rodriguez here and Jordan Brown and others don't even enter the conversation) providing the complementary support around the presumed middle of the lineup...um, yeah...that's kind of the idea with the offense.

As has been said time and again since last July, however, the offense and the manner in which the lineup projects doesn't look to the problem. For that, you need merely to look at the future of the pitching staff, with Gammons attempting to debunk the idea that the arms will be the issue thusly:

Finding power arms has been a problem. Since Adam Miller's promising career was cut short by a finger injury, the Indians have found a number of command lefties, but have lacked strikeout pitchers. Last year's top pick, Alex White, moved up to Akron and has dominated with a mid-90s fastball that has helped produce a 1.84 ERA.

"What helps make him special is that he is hyper-competitive," says Antonetti, who would not be surprised if White jumped into the big leagues sometime next season.

Carlos Carrasco throws in the 90s with three pitches, is 9-4 in Columbus and is only 23. Jason Knapp, who also came from Philadelphia in the Lee trade, is throwing in the high 90s in the lower Minors. Last year's third-round pick after White and Kipnis, Joe Gardner, is 10-5, 2.92 with a 123-48 strikeouts-to-walks ratio between Lake County and Kinston. Jeanmar Gomez threw well in his brief stint in Cleveland. Hector Rondon is a big arm. And they got Kluber from

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the Padres and will know in the next 10 days if they can sign this June's No.1 pick, Mississippi left-hander Drew Pomerantz, or whether they'll take the same pick in the deeper and more talented 2011 Draft.

If the Indians can develop a couple of their pitchers and avoid the plague of physical misfortune that has made 2010 so difficult, they can quickly be back in the competitive AL Central.

Again, this is about as gleaming as a best-case scenario can look with the names and the numbers coming flying at us from all directions, but Gammons pretty much has it nailed in terms of what is SUPPOSED to happen for the Indians, both in the rotation and the bullpen when he asserts that the key is to “develop a couple of pitchers”, which is (as we all know) what it takes to contend consistently.

Truth be told, this sunny outlook is largely unsurprising as Gammons has long been a fan of the Indians' Front Office and the glowing reports of how rosy the outlook looks in Cleveland have been coming from his keyboard and his lips since the 2004 season or so.

However, his words speak to the optimist in all of us...

Even if your optimism on the Indians now only occupies the deepest, darkest recesses of your mind, reading this (and hopefully what's been written in this space) gives you some comfort in terms of seeing a plan line up. While I debated on using that exact phrasing – “a plan” – the Indians' Front Office has shown that they can build a contender in short order by, in effect tearing one down in short order, as they evolved from a 91-win team in 2001 to a 93-win team in 2005 with the years in between representing the nature of that transition as 3 players (CC, Jake, and Wickman) were on both teams.

The 2007 team is now three years in the rearview mirror and the future is clearly in front of the organization, with 2008 and 2009 representing unsuccessful attempts to sustain the momentum generated in 2007. Regardless, that momentum ground to a slow halt with the final few feet ending with the trades of Westbrook, Peralta, and others last weekend.

Now, the momentum begins to build anew as the Indians have essentially made their moves in an attempt to shorten that timeframe of “rebuilding/reloading/whatever” again and attempt to bring, as Gammons says, “groups of players along at the same time so that the window allows them to win before the reality” of MLB economics hits and causes the tumultuous slide down the mountain again.

That mountain is still one that the current Indians team still has yet to climb and while “hope” is a hollow word to some, after the stretch of baseball that we've seen over the last 40 games, it may represent more than simply “hope”.

After taking some wrong and varied turns while alternately stalling and outright stopping, this ride is beginning again, fueled by youth, talent, hunger, and...yes, “hope”.