

# Tribe Game Vault: A Tribe Fan's 1997 Postseason Memories (Just the Good Stuff), Part I

Written by {ga=googleph2}

Wednesday, March 30 2011 4:00 AM - Last Updated Friday, September 14 2012 3:57 PM



*If you're like me, it's a bit of a struggle, dealing with the weariness over Pittsburgh Steeler fans being all giddy over "Ben", "Heath", and "Troy". First name basis. I mean what is that about? Makes you sick, doesn't it? Sorry to bring it up.*

*One good way to get rid of that visual is to reminisce about a golden era in Cleveland sports-such as the era of Sandy, Omar, Manny and the boys.*

*(What are you smiling about? Was it something I said?)*

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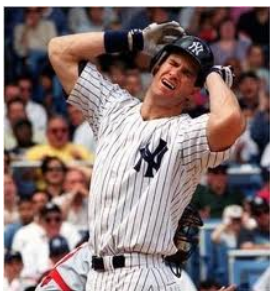
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In 1997, the Tribe had won the American League Central division by 6 games over the Chicago White Sox, although their win total of 86 was relatively modest compared to other seasons they enjoyed in that era. They were also not considered favorites to advance in that post-season.

In Game 1 of the 1997 American League Division Series, Indians' old sage Orel Hershiser had been staked to a 5-run first inning lead. The Tribe was facing the defending World Series Champion New York Yankees' David Cone. Cone's teammate and leading national philosopher David Wells would later offer an injury excuse for Cone's performance. The normally reliable Tribe bullpen imploded in the sixth inning, as Eric Plunk gave up two-out homers to Tim Lincecum and Derek Jeter, before Paul Assenmacher entered the game and completed the trifecta by serving up a gopher ball to the player whom I considered the most fascinating non-Indian of that era, The Petulant One. Paul O'Neill. Game over.



*O'Neill was one of the most dangerous hitters in the game, an underrated player on an overexposed team. He also whined, complained, and slammed his bat and his helmet in disgust whenever he failed to reach base.*

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### ALDS: Tribe 0, Yankees 1.

In Game 2, manager Mike Hargrove threw young Jaret Wright to the wolves in Yankee Stadium.

*The Yankees sometimes seemed solidly inside the head of Wright; the following year, the angelic and lovable Wells would paint various members of the Tribe into a defensive posture. Playing a transparent head game, he accused Wright of throwing at Yankee hitters. Baseball reporters stoked the 'controversy'.*

*Here it was our turn- a time for us to be pumped about the possibilities. We laughed when Cleveland native Drew Carey famously told the country, "Now, it's your team that sucks!"*



*Yet on some level, we fans would shake our heads. Our historic underdogs were reduced to solemnly assuring reporters that no, Jaret Wright is not a head hunter.*

*Wright was a phenom who helped define the John Hart era as GM. Not so much by the way Wright pitched, but by Hart's refusal to trade him to the Montreal Expos for a maturing Pedro Martinez. Wright eventually played his way off of the Tribe after bouts of ineffectiveness and injury- his ex-player father may have played a better brand of hardball negotiating Jaret's contracts than most of what was seen on the field. Ultimately, renowned Atlanta Braves pitching coach Leo Mazzone helped Wright find his groove in 2003 and 2004. At which time he became a free agent, and was offered a huge, ill-conceived deal by ...the New York Yankees. Wright then proceeded to flame out again.*

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After inducing a groundout to start the first inning in Game 2, Wright walked the bases loaded. The dismay among Indians fans was only matched by their lack of surprise over this. Predictably, each runner scored in that first inning. And just as predictably, the Indians did what came naturally in those years: they came storming back, seizing the game with some hitting and solid relief pitching.

So while their hitters could rake, and their bullpen was generally sound, the 1997 Cleveland Indians' starting pitching had issues.

### ALDS: Tribe 1, Yankees 1.

The Game Three matchup pitted the gentlemanly scholar, David Wells, against long-time Indians starter Charles Nagy. New York touched up Nagy in the first on a walk, and then a fielder's choice to Nagy. On the play, he threw wildly to second, allowing the guy he'd walked to advance to third. The Peppery One, Paul O'Neill, singled him home. (Now, isn't it just wrong that Nagy doesn't get charged an earned run on that? It was he who'd made the error. Shoot, I'd have given it to him for the pout he produced as he walked to the dugout when the inning was over.) Tony Fernandez pushed a run home in the second on a groundout, and the Yankees singled in their second run in the third. 2-1 Yankees. Very entertaining, tense, playoff baseball.

Until the fourth inning. Charles Nagy walked the bases loaded (sensing a theme?). With one out, he gave Joe Girardi a free pass. After a groundout moved Girardi to second, he intentionally walked Tim Lincecum. Nagy worked the count full against Derek Jeter, then missed down and in to the right-handed hitter. That made six walks in 3 2/3 innings from the Tribe's ace. Out of the dugout came Hargrove. Into the game came Chad Ogea. He'd been a starter all season and was without a defined role as the fourth starter on a three-man rotation for this best-of-five series. Ogea's job was to throw his array of changeups and curveballs and get the final out of the inning. To the Peevish One, Paul O'Neill.

Ogea ran the count full on O'Neill, who then fouled off a changeup. They say what a pitcher throws on a 3-2 count once, is what he'll throw again. Sure enough- Ogea threw another change, only this time he left it up in the strike zone. O'Neill stayed back on the ball, and

Ka-BOOM. Grand Salami. Game. Over.

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Chad Ogea actually pitched well in that Game 3, after giving up the fourth-inning gopher ball. Finishing the game, his line read 5 1/3 pitched, with the one earned run. Problem was, the Indians were now down 2 games to 1 in the best-of-five, to the New York Yankees. Ogea seemed destined to be forever remembered as the pitcher who coughed up the grand slam which shut the door on the 1997 baseball season for the Cleveland Indians.

### ALDS: Tribe 1, Yankees 2.

Wait- what?

Again, these Indians had a lot of fight in them. Of course, in Game 4, it was as if Hershiser had dutifully marked off the mandatory 'bad starting pitcher effort' on the checklist early; he gakked up two runs on four hits in the first inning. The Jacobs Field faithful were wondering if they were about to have to watch a Yankees Division Series celebration play out in front of them. Not good.

However, David Justice homered off of Dwight Gooden in the bottom of the second inning. This pulled the Tribe to within a run of the Yankees. Old-timers Hershiser and Gooden then willed the game into a classic playoffs pitchers' duel. Amidst the anxiety of the partisan faithful, the magic of Jacobs Field from that era blossomed once again.

Top of the eighth, the Tribe down a run. The crowd nervously showered some deep appreciation on Paul Assenmacher. The reliever had allowed a single to the Pernicious One, Paul O'Neill - then struck out Bernie Williams, Tino Martinez and Cecil Fielder in order. Each went down swinging. In the bottom of the eighth, future Hall of Fame closer Mariano Rivera entered the game with one out and a one run lead. Even at this early point in his career, he

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seemed automatic. He retired Matt Williams, and with the Tribe's season in jeopardy, catcher Sandy Alomar, Jr. stepped to the plate - and just cuh-rushed an opposite-field home run to right. Un. Believable. What a season for Alomar, who'd won the All-Star MVP award earlier that year by homering at The Jake.



Game tied; crowd in a frenzy. Mike Jackson came in to pitch the ninth for the Tribe. Cap tugged low over his eyes, all business. He set the Yankees down 1-2-3, and the stage was set. Marquis Grissom started the Tribe's ninth with a bloop single to right-center, and he was moved to second on a Bip Roberts bunt. Omar Vizquel then rocketed a drive off of pitcher Mario Mendoza's glove that shot out to left field past Derek Jeter. GAME OVER!!!! The crowd ROCKED. What a great memory.

### **ALDS: Tribe 2, Yankees 2.**

In the decisive Game Five, Jaret Wright pitched well enough and the Indians flashed some fancy defense. Notably, Jim Thome made a great play on a ground ball off the bat of The Pistol, Paul O'Neill - forcing Jeter at second for the first out. Assenmacher then induced Williams into a double play, preserving a one-run lead. Tribe reliever Jose Mesa put a couple runners on in the eighth, before surviving an O'Neill double in the ninth for the series win.

Many Cleveland Indians fans had cheered with emotion in movie theaters when their team beat the long-hated Yankees in the 1989 movie, Major League. This 1997 series wasn't for the American League pennant, but WOW. And they'd won two elimination games to advance.

### **ALDS: Tribe wins, 3 games to 2.**

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An additional reason for the deep satisfaction was highlighted in the American League Championship Series. In two days, the foe would be the favored Orioles. They had beaten Seattle in their Division Series. More importantly, the Orioles were from Baltimore. All northern Ohioans knew that their fans included thousands who'd cheered the airport runway announcement of their theft of the Cleveland Browns in 1995. "Their" Ravens were in their second year, post move. There was as yet no half-baked NFL plan to start a crappy expansion team in Cleveland, either.

So there was no pro football in Cleveland once again, this October of 1997. But there still was baseball.

In a gem of a home ballpark, which years later would still be offered by various Art Modell enablers as a bogus excuse for the Browns' former owner having 'no choice' but to move (sorry, don't get me started).

Chad Ogea was to pitch the opener, in Baltimore. Here was his chance for redemption after helping the Yankees to within one game of defeating the Indians back in the Division Series.

Oops.

The Tribe's Manny Ramirez clobbered a first inning, two-out drive to deep center off of O's starter Scott Erickson. Center fielder Brady Anderson glided back to the wall and leaped, robbing Manny of a home run. The Camden Yards crowd went wild, and was still buzzing when Anderson came to the plate to lead off the



bottom of the inning. Anderson proceeded to jack Ogea's first pitch into the right field stands. Two consecutive pitches, a two-run turnaround. As a leadoff batter, hitting for power wasn't always Anderson's bread-and-butter. But he'd somehow hit 50 the previous season (it being the PED era, 90's celebrity and Cleveland native Arsenio Hall might have offered a, "Hmm").

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To be fair, Ogea pitched a good Game One. Erickson just simply put the Tribe's bats to sleep.

### **ALCS: Tribe 0, Orioles 1.**

In Game 2, Charles Nagy was staked to a two run lead in the first inning over Jimmy Key when Manny Ramirez homered after Omar Vizquel had been hit by a pitch.

In the second, Nagy surrendered a double and a homer to Rafael Palmeiro and Cal Ripken. The game then settled into a tense standoff as each team squandered several scoring opportunities. In the bottom of the sixth, the Orioles broke through with two runs on a bases-loaded single by Mike Bordick. Nagy was sent to the showers, and the Tribe was looking down the barrel of a possible 0-2 series deficit.



In the top of the eighth, Oriole reliever Armando Benitez was sent to the bump with the 4-2 lead. He promptly pitched his way into some deep trouble, recording two strikeouts but allowing two walks. Up stepped Marquis Grissom. After all of those previous tension-building at-bats, Grissom creamed a three-run home run to left. AHHHHH! What a feeling of relief, washing over Tribe fans watching from afar. One can recall Grissom rounding first base with his fist in the air.

Tribe closer Jose Mesa allowed his requisite base runner to start the bottom of the ninth, then retired the side to secure the win.

### **ALCS: Tribe 1, Orioles 1.**

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Back home at the Jake for Game 3. Orel Hershiser locked up with Mike Mussina in a classic pitchers' duel. The two teams combined for 5 hits and no runs into the seventh inning, when Matt Williams singled home Jim Thome. Tribe fans sensed a 2-1 series lead, until Mesa allowed a single to Chris Hoiles and a run-scoring double to Anderson.

Extra innings. And in the eleventh, each team left the bases juiced without scoring. The bottom of the twelfth was when Grissom stormed home from third on a suicide squeeze- which Vizquel missed in a botched bunt attempt. But Grissom was safe when the ball glanced off of catcher Lenny Webster's glove- on a controversial call. The Orioles thought Vizquel's bat ticked the ball. Too damn bad. Originally ruled a passed ball, the call was eventually changed to a stolen base for Grissom.

### **ALCS: Tribe 2, Orioles 1.**

Game Four: Jaret, Jaret, Jaret. Jaaaaret, Jaret-Jaret-Jaret-Jaret. The young starter allowed 5 runs on three home runs and a double in three innings. The Tribe offense was up to the challenge, and the game seesawed back and forth. In a wild fifth inning, Manny homered, Sandy Alomar singled in a run, and two runs scored on one Arthur Rhoades wild pitch. Then, since the Indians found themselves up 7-6 in the top of the ninth, they were required to bring Jose Mesa into the game to give up the lead. I think it was a 'rule'. Alomar knocked in the winning run in the bottom of the ninth, singling off of Benitez. Ramirez, who had walked to open the inning, scored the winning run. The Tribe was in command of this series.

### **ALCS: Tribe 3, Orioles 1.**

Chad Ogea and Scott Kamieniecki was the Game 5 matchup at the Jake. This was another

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pitchers' duel. In the first, Kamieniecki allowed a line drive double to Roberts before getting a bunting, two-strike-foul strikeout from Vizquel. He then hit Ramirez with a pitch. That didn't seem intentional; what would be his reason? Manny was a dangerous hitter, but he wasn't exactly the Prickly One, Paul O'Neill, at the plate. And you wouldn't play for the force with one out in the first anyway. But Manny hollered at the pitcher (see above for his name- I'm tired of verifying I am typing it correctly), and the umps got in between them. With the camera on the pitcher, he stood atop the mound, ready to face the next batter. As Ramirez jawed at him, he repeatedly mouthed in a dismissive manner, "(Eff) you. (Eff) you." Play resumed without further incident (apparently, this so impressed Tribe GM John Hart that he would sign this pitcher in 2000). Baltimore plated two runs in the third on a Geronimo Berroa single with the bases loaded. On the play, Oriole Roberto Alomar was gunned down trying to go first-to-third (Grissom to Thome to Williams). That was all of the scoring until the ninth inning, when Assenmacher allowed two more runs. In their half of that inning, the Tribe scored a couple off of Randy Myers and had the tying run at second- and the winning run at the plate... but it wasn't to be as Roberts whiffed and Vizquel grounded out. Those two had a terrible ALCS- despite having eventual series MVP Grissom doing all that damage on offense directly in front of them.

Chad Ogea hung tough for his second straight start in the ALCS, but it just didn't work out for him.

### ALCS: Tribe 3, Orioles 2.



This set up another elimination game for the Orioles, in Baltimore. Game 6, Nagy vs. Mussina. Another pitching classic. Nagy battled through scoring threats and escaped each of them, while Mussina just mowed through the Indians' order. The Tribe was in fact hitless until David Justice led off the fifth with a double. Both starters remained in the scoreless game until Nagy was pulled in the eighth after hitting a batter, then allowing a stolen base and a walk. Assenmacher and Jackson got out of the inning without allowing a run to score.

During the Tribe's turn in the eighth, Myers fanned Justice and Williams to retire the side after

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Fernandez and Ramirez reached base. After an uneventful tenth inning in the still scoreless game, Tony Fernandez stepped to home plate. Fernandez, who'd started the game at second base in place of Bip Roberts, sucked all of the air out of Baltimore, Maryland with a home run to deep right field. To say you could hear a pin drop would be to falsely claim that sound can travel in a perfect vacuum.

After allowing his requisite base runner, Mesa shut the Orioles down in their half of the eleventh and the Tribe's celebration had begun. Going to the World Series for the second time in three years!!!!

My brother Roger called me to celebrate. It's our Cleveland Indians pennant-winning 'tradition' (all two of the times we've seen it happen).

Growing up in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, I never thought I'd live through such an era for the Cleveland Indians.

**ALDS: Tribe wins, 4 games to 2.**

*The Orioles were a good team- it just wasn't to be for them. Mussina would remain their ace until 2001, when the Yankees 'won' the 'bidding' when he became a free agent. Translated: The New York Yankees made it clear they intended to sign him, and when they did that, the other major league teams just cleared out of the way rather than engage in a pointless bidding process.*

*Oh, and to the fans of Baltimore, you can go-- uh, never mind.*

*Next week: Tribe Game Vault: A Tribe Fan's 1997 Postseason Memories (Just the Good Stuff), Part II*