

Exhibition Baseball on the Ice Planet Hoth

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Wednesday, March 30 2011 7:59 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, March 30 2011 9:00 PM



It took the Indians roughly six weeks of hard work in the Arizona sun to prepare themselves for the upcoming season.

It took a handful of Columbus Tribe fans about 45 minutes on Wednesday afternoon.

It was cold, it was snowing, and you couldn't feel your testicles. Yup, now we're ready for some Indians baseball.

For almost a full hour, a couple thousand either wildly optimistic or highly disturbed people gathered at Huntington Park in the state capital to watch the Tribe play its Triple-A affiliate, the Columbus Clippers.

Or perhaps more accurately, to watch the 2011 Cleveland Indians play the 2012 Cleveland Indians.

It was 37 degrees at game time, with the thermometer dropping roughly a degree each half-inning. And then there was the snow.

I know watching the Indians in the snow isn't unique. Everybody's got a story of being at an Indians game with the white stuff coming down on opening day or one of those April or May or

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early June nights when flurries swirled through Jacobs Field or Municipal Stadium.

But how many people can say they watched the Indians play an exhibition game in the snow? Since essentially every practice game the Indians participate in is played in places where people could theoretically die from a scorpion sting, I'm guessing not many. And I'm proud to say I'm one of them. Yes sir, my idiot card is in the mail.

The crowd at Huntington Park was bigger than you'd expect, considering we were under a winter weather advisory and there were so many Bob Evans still open. The majority of the seats were empty, but only because most people were either crammed under an overhang for cover or looking for things to set on fire.

Lots of these shivering souls were drawn to the ballpark by the marquee matchup of the best two minor-league teams in baseball. Some came to celebrate the imminent conclusion of winter. Others thought it was the Ohio State spring football game. Whatever the rationale, we all shared an experience that didn't last much longer than an episode of *iCarly* but will be remembered forever.

It had the feeling of an intra-squad game, with maybe just a sprig more tension - more like an older brother and all his friends playing his little brother and all his friends. Everybody knew each other and just maybe was a little pissed at which team they wound up on. For example, Lonnie Chisenhall, the Clippers' starting third baseman and the franchise's latest great white hope, probably longed to be in the other dugout. Conversely, you got the feeling Matt LaPorta felt the same way.

In all seriousness, at one point this really was a good idea. Back in January, when you looked to late March and assumed that meant temperatures in the upper 50s and maybe a chance of clean spring rain showers, the notion of the Indians and Clippers playing one another as an appetizer for the impending season sounded fun, particularly as a way to entice Columbus sports fans out to the ballpark and help them forget the newfound discovery that Jim Tressel is actually a pedophile responsible for the Japanese tsunami.

When the snow first began to fall about 15 minutes before the game, what was really hysterical to consider was that 24 hours earlier, the Indians had been playing in Arizona, where it was

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literally 50 degrees warmer with nary a snow squall in sight. Welcome back from six weeks in paradise, guys! I'm pretty sure this is why Albert Belle was pissed off all the time.

Squinting through the flurries, we watched the Clippers hold a rousing (or it would have been had everyone not been wearing gloves and ski masks) pre-game ring ceremony commemorating their Triple-A national championship last year. Carlos Santana was the first player announced and had to be summoned from the Indians' bullpen to trot out and get his ring - symbolizing the incestuous relationship between the Indians and Clippers the past two seasons. (The Clindians? Wait, no, the Indianippers.)

Hold on, you may wonder. A ring for a minor-league championship? Is that something these aspiring major-league stars are really going to cherish?

Probably not. Consequently, I heard Terrelle Pryor sent in a standing offer to any of the Clippers to sell their rings for them.

As the wind picked up and the flurries grew as thick as the waistline of any Ohio high school football coach, they tried to raise a trio of flags commemorating the Clippers' titles won last September, but it didn't quite work out. I think the pulleys on the flagpoles were frozen.

Put me in, Coach, I'm ready to play (clap, clap-clap-clap) - today!

As the watery snot leaked out of our red-tipped noses, down the canal of our philtrums, and onto our cracked lips, we could see it coming. Things got silly very fast. The warning track, usually the color of a two-year-old's poop the morning after a trip to Skyline Chili, was an ivory sheen by the time the Clippers came to bat. Outfielders, trying to catch a white ball against a white sky with millions of little white specks swirling around, would be running one way and then suddenly realize they had to reach back to catch the ball behind them. (Allowing them to get a taste of what it's like to be Manny Ramirez.)

From the stands, you couldn't see the baseball when it was hit - too quickly it was lost in the snow and you'd try to figure out where it went by watching the players on the field.

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Unfortunately, it looked like the players on the field were trying to figure out where it went by watching the crowd, hence the multiple Manny-Being-Manny moments.

As the game went on, there were even more obvious indications that this should just be called off.



In the bottom of the first, Austin Kearns was shivering in left field when Han Solo rode up on a tauntaun and offered him a ride back to the dugout. When the tauntaun suddenly dropped dead, he used Kearns' lightsaber to cut open its belly and shoved the veteran outfielder inside it until help could arrive.

Between the first and the second, White Fang came sprinting out of the Clippers' bullpen and chased a caribou across the outfield.

In the top of the second, Orlando Cabrera caught frostbite and had three toes amputated, while Clippers infielder Cord Phelps died of exposure.

Then VCU made it to the Final Four.

And finally, things became utterly absurd in the top of the third when Travis Hafner hit an honest-to-God double off the wall in left center. Enough was enough - the madness had to stop. This just wasn't baseball.

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Two minutes later, with the score tied 1-1, Columbus GM Ken Schnacke snowshoed out to home plate with a microphone. His body language screamed, "Holy crap, this was a bad idea" - kind of like LeBron James every time he takes the floor.

Schnacke explained that we were going to cut our losses and give up the 47 minutes we'd invested in the contest because it was just too dangerous for the players to play in these conditions.

And he was right. Downtown Columbus can be scary. Plus, there was all that snow.

To his credit, he apologized and took responsibility for the weather - a Biblical load of blame to heap onto your own shoulders. (Big difference between Columbus and Cleveland: nobody from Cleveland, not even Dick Goddard, would EVER take responsibility for the weather). Schnacke, in addition to sporting the snappiest front-office name in the minors, offered everybody free admission to another Clippers game with their ticket stubs. Or a bag of corn chips - your choice.

All the players came out and graciously lifted their caps to the fans, thanking them for coming out, though exposing further their Arizona-soft skin to the elements. A nice gesture, but I can't help but imagine what they were thinking as they looked out at us: "We're being paid to put up with this crap, but you're here voluntarily. What the hell is wrong with *you*?"

The good news was the Indians didn't have to face the very real possibility of returning to Cleveland for opening day 48 hours after losing to a minor-league team. I, for one, wondered if the stakes were higher than we really knew. Like whichever team won got to be the Indians and the loser stayed in Columbus as the Triple-A affiliate.

But thankfully, we'll never know. The Indians will go back to Cleveland and be the Indians, and the Clippers will stay here and serve as the Tribe's savings account - to be dipped into the first time Jack Hannah grounds into a double play.

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All in all, it was a memorable experience. The Indians made a nice gesture to their Columbus fans and the Clippers got to sit at the big kids' table. Everybody's ready for the season and can feel their testicles again.

Let's play ball.