

## Sweeping with Tomahawks

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Friday, April 08 2011 8:00 AM - Last Updated Friday, April 08 2011 8:06 AM

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Fresh off of the sweep of the 2011 AL Champion Boston Red Sox...what's that, they actually play games to decide that stuff and don't award pennants in the off-season...I mean the lowly, cellar-dwelling, can't buy a win 0-6 Boston Red Sox, the folks in Cooperstown are readying the spot in their beloved museum for the bust of Manny Acta, who has pressed every button at the exact right moment and made every correct call in the young season.

Just when Opening Day had the doom-and-gloomers preparing their "Minor League team" ammunition while polishing up their "it's going to be a long season for the Indians" fodder, the Indians have won 4 in a row and (while 4 games is just 4 games) have some momentum heading off to the West Coast to square off against the M's (while missing King Felix) and the San Jose Athletics.

Maybe it's the Sawxenfraude kicking in, but the last three Tribe games have those juices flowing again and hope brimming for this still-young, if unquestionably exciting team. The top of the lineup looks strong, the defense has been drastically improved, the starting pitching continues to show glimpses of brilliance, and the bullpen has continued the success that it experienced in the 2nd half of 2010, all while Acta pulls the strings perfectly just off-stage.

With Thursday's victory, the Indians move to 2 games over .500, a margin over .500 that they haven't been since September 22nd of 2008, with two full season played in that time. Seriously...

In fact, the 2008 team made it to 3 games over .500 for all of one day that season – (with a hat tip to FredOx) on May 15th and that 2009 team – flush with CP Lee and Victor and all the guys

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that are now drawing paychecks elsewhere – never even made it to 1 game over .500 two years ago.

So, with all of that out there let's get some Tomahawks in the air, because we all feel like we're flying among them after the sweep of the Sawx...

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Before this epic sweep and realizing that much of the conversations in the early going have been regarding the Indians' attendance (or lack thereof), I had every intention of weighing in on the topic that has burned up these Interwebs in the past week. After my initial thought about how this furor has become a regular Game 2 to Game...whatever topic on the North Coast and starting to write about the 2008 attendance after the ALCS appearance, the fact that the Reds drew only 11,821 fans to see a Reds' team coming off of their first playoff season since 1995, and on and on and on, I realized something...I'm done with it.

People are going to do what they want to do in terms of attending Indians' games this year and forever into the future and frankly, I'm tired of attempting to crawl inside the head of the Cleveland fan. Additionally, it's not as if the topic isn't one that's been delved into right here as it was a topic covered extensively in October both [here](#) and [here](#) and really, nothing has changed from that time. As much as there have been a couple of pieces that have been noteworthy on the topic, much of it is treading over trodden ground and encapsulating the things that have been [written since](#)

[the middle of 2007](#)

...and that final link is worth a read to see the discussion about attendance in July of 2007 and how it sounds the same today, even if the team on the field looks a tad bit different.

Are the Indians ever going to draw again with consistency?

Nobody really knows and it all becomes a he said/he said debate of who is to blame and why the attendance is where it is with nobody coming off their preconceived notions as it is, regardless of compelling arguments for every side (and there are more than just two sides to this) on the attendance "debate".

In the past week, the "debate" has devolved (even more so) into an easy punch line for those that don't want to put much more thought into the situation than to get a quick laugh while giving the folks who seem to take glee at the failure of the Indians at the Box Office one more chance (or more) to step on their soapbox, with fingers pointing and voices raised.

If that's your thing...fine, enjoy the "debate" while you take another swipe at that dead horse over there that you just can't help yourself with, much less move past.

If you remain stuck on that topic, I've got a couple of bits news for you –there's actually baseball to watch and analyze as opinions are being formulated (albeit prematurely) about this 2011 team and (as if it needed to be re-inforced by Thursday afternoon's tilt) watching baseball is pretty fun, particularly when you're watching a young team congeal in front of your eyes while playing smart, hard-nosed, entertaining baseball.

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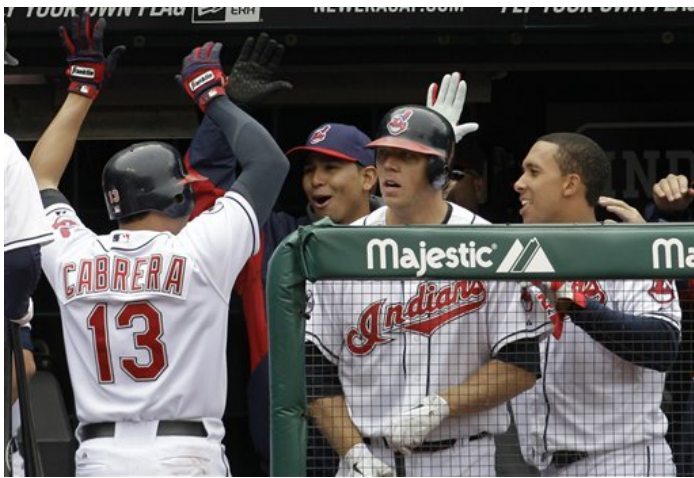
Keep up the debate on the attendance, I'm going to be watching the game...

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As the Indians find themselves in 1st place for the first time since they shared the penthouse of the AL Central on May 17th of 2008, the biggest surprise of the year has to be the offensive production that the Indians are getting up and down the lineup. Certainly some optimism existed that the top-to-middle-of-the-order would plate some runs, but realize that going into Thursday's afternoon affair, this is where the "placeholders" for Messrs. Chiz, Kipnis, and Phelps ranked at their respective positions in OPS:

Jack Hannahan had the 3rd highest OPS among AL 3B with a .921 OPS...

Uncle Orlando Cabrera has the 5th highest OPS among AL 2B with an .855 OPS...



Yep...of course, this is not pointed out not to assert that Jack Hannahan or Orlando Cabrera are going to continue these numbers (because they're not) but even if those numbers have been compiled over a 5-game stretch, isn't it nice to have a PLEASANT surprise for the Indians when it comes to signings that are often derided or outright ignored by the local and national media. As I said, certainly I'm not myopic enough to think that this pederast Hannahan or The OC are much more than what we thought we were when they were brought into the organization – veteran defensive specialists who have the ability to raise the level of defensive proficiency while buying some time for the youngsters – but their performance to date has fallen in line with the rest of the lineup, which has been nearly-universally positive.

To that end, realize that Santana (.935 OPS) is 4th among AL C, LaPorta (.820 OPS) is 9th among AL 1B, Asdrubal (.857 OPS) is 3rd among AL SS, Mike Brantley (.812 OPS) is 4th among AL CF, and Travis Hafner (1.008 OPS) ranks 18th in all of the AL in terms of OPS.

Sure, The BLC has come out of the gate a little slowly, but that list above gives the Indians SEVEN players in their everyday lineup with an OPS of .812 or higher and one of those players is not Choo. Those SEVEN players have an OPS+ of 127 or higher (yes, the much-maligned Mr. Matola is included in there at 127) and that doesn't include Choo, Sizemore, or even the Savior himself – Mr. Lonnie D. Chisenhall.

Buck and Kearns haven't hit much of anything, but if the Indians were looking for some momentum coming out of the gate this year, their offense has certainly provided the sparks –

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both like an explosion as the ball jumps off of The Axe Man's bat and as flickering embers like a flurry of bunts – that have led the Indians to victory.

It is just 6 games, I know and certainly this is not to say that this is going to continue up and down the lineup, but if the negativity can be irrational and pervasive, why can't the exuberance when it comes to the early performances of these players?

Right now, there's plenty of reasons to be irrationally exuberant about the Indians and you need to look no further than the spots up and down the lineup to find them.

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Certainly most encouraging cog in that lineup the early going has been Hafner, who apparently just needed to grow out his hair to turn back into the (remember, I'm being irrationally exuberant here) Samson he once was...or at least close to it.

I can hear you from here – they have played SIX games, let's back off the pronouncement that Hafner has recaptured his former self – that monster of a man that terrorized AL pitchers and merited a section of the stadium to be named after him. Let's hold off on referring to him as Pronk because that guy is gone...do I have that right?

Well, from August 15th of last year (when Hafner came off of the DL) to the end of the year, he played in 36 of the Indians' final 44 games, posting a .301 BA / .389 OBP / .492 SLG / .881 OPS in 144 PA with 12 2B and 4 HR. Since the beginning of the 2011 season, he's gotten off to a hot start, posting a .368 BA / .429 OBP / .579 SLG / 1.008 OPS in 21 PA with 1 2B and 1 HR.

That's a lot of numbers to digest in a small paragraph, so what's the point of all of this? Well, if you go from August 15th of 2010 to today, Hafner has played in 39 of the Indians' last 50 games and has posted a cumulative line of .310 BA / .425 OBP / .510 SLG / .935 OPS with 5 HR and 13 2B in the 39 games that he's played among the Tribe's last 50 contests. To say that this is encouraging is a drastic understatement as he's playing in nearly 4 of 5 games and posting a...dare I say...Pronkian line.

Truthfully, he may only play in 130 games this year and he may only hit 20 HR or so, but he's driving the ball with authority and could rack up the doubles while displaying the discerning eye that allowed him to post a cumulative .419 OBP from 2004 to 2006 may be coming back with a little bit of power behind it to strike some fear (albeit intermittently) into opposing teams.

The likelihood that the monster that occupied the #48 jersey for the better part of 3 ½ years as an Indian is still rather slim (just because Hafner was putting up such HUGE numbers), but if Hafner can come back and play 80% of the Indians' games and provide some protection in the lineup for Santana, the Indians' offense looks much more balanced and powerful. Don't forget that over 28% of the Indians' 2011 payroll is tied to Hafner and after seeing him play only 268 games over the last 3 years (with a cumulative .783 OPS in that timeframe), any good news becomes great news in terms of Hafner's role on this year's team and next.

Now excuse me as I find anything in sight made of wood to knock madly upon and as I slink

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away saying nothing more...

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If we're talking payroll and the team that the Indians just swept back to the East Coast, a visit from the Red Sox wouldn't be complete without some context into exactly how much money they're spending as they have eight players who are paid more than \$10M a year and that doesn't include Adrian Gonzalez who is about to sign a giant deal or Lester and Pedroia, who will both earn more than \$10M next year.

They are paying their 5th starter (Dice-K) and their 4th OF (Cameron) a total of \$18.08M this year and it is possible that Dice-K finds himself out of the rotation at some point this year while Cameron may find himself stapled to the bench or elsewhere if the Red Sox go looking for a spark.

In light of the events of the last three days, I'm not going to let up on this as their rotation is being paid \$49,588,333 this year and that includes Clay Buchholz, who is being paid \$555K. In case you forgot, the Indians' total payroll is about \$48 million dollars, or less than the rotation of the Red Sox, who just left town with their collective tail between their legs.

Yeah, I'm going to relish this sweep for a while...

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In terms of things that I have not relished in the early going, the Indians can stop wearing those red hats any time they'd like, particularly so my eyes can stop bleeding on the weekends.

Is this just a resistance to change?



Not at all as I have nothing against red hats per se as a number of teams wear them – the Cardinals, the Diamondbacks, and the Rangers just to name a few. The red hats that those teams wear look good in the context of the overall uniform, meaning that red hats can be done well. However, the Indians failed in a basic design feature for the hats...they didn't trim the blue "C" in white to make it stand out.

This is [old news if you've been around these parts for a while](#), but after seeing these red hats in games, the issue is that the blue of the "C" bleeds into the red of the cap and makes the distinction between the two colors hard to see, particularly from a distance.

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Forget that the red in the hat doesn't seem to match the red in the "INDIANS" on the front of the jersey for a moment and take a look at this and notice what the difference is between the 3 red hats shown to the right.



It's that the Indians' hat lacks the trim of the other hats that sets apart the letter that is supposed to be the focus of the hat is completely lost in the background of the main color of the hat. I'm all for a different look on Sunday and something that goes with the Sunday Creams, but the Indians made one mistake with the block "C" hats (the same issue exists with the blue block "C", obvious when you compare the dark hats of the Cardinals to those of the Tribe.

Nevertheless, we'll endure the red hats for the season and hope that the tweak comes in the off-season while wondering again, why is it that [the Indians' helmets are a completely different blue than their home blue jerseys](#) ?

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Taking my Mr. Blackwell hat off for a moment and getting this back to baseball, the other aspect of the Indians' that has come out and impressed in the early going is unquestionably the bullpen. Check these numbers through Wednesday's game for the Tribe bullpen:

.565 OPS against (3rd best in the AL)

8.47 K/9 rate (4th best in the AL)

0.94 WHIP (3rd best in the AL)

Yes, it's only 6 games (and those numbers don't include Thursday's afternoon in which the bullpen came out to close the 8th and 9th innings for Fausto), but there have been a couple of games in which the bullpen has had to come in and keep games close or eat innings due to poor starts, meaning that the Indians' bullpen has been solid from top to bottom.

It remains to be seen who is going to be consistently setting up for CF Perez from the right side (as Sipp has looked like a DOMINANT LH set-up man) and a clue may have come when Pestano was warming in the bullpen in the 7th inning of the Red Sox game on Wednesday when the Indians had a lead, so if you're looking for which RH pitcher is first in line to get the opportunity as a late-inning RH arm to set-up C.F. Perez, it could be Pestano.

Regardless, Acta is managing his bullpen in the early going brilliantly, playing the match-up game early and late, utilizing his relievers in the spots of the game that fit them best instead of

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which innings “belong” to them. Throughout the Red Sox series, Acta outmanaged Boston’s skipper, thinking one (or two) moves ahead of Francona, strategizing at key points and putting the Indians’ pitchers and hitters in the best positions for the Indians to win each and every one of the games.

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And win “each and every one of the games” is exactly what they did as the fast start that has eluded this club since 2007 (and yes, it is only 6 games) seems to be within reach as the team has the opportunity to get some momentum going in the right direction in April instead of finding themselves buried by the end of April.

Perhaps the exuberance is irrational, but the 2011 season is upon us and the Indians are winning and the “long season of baseball for the Tribe” is looking like it’s going to be a lot of fun...