

## Mending Hearts on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, April 10 2011 8:10 AM - Last Updated Monday, April 11 2011 7:59 AM

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With their sixth straight, YOUR Cleveland Indians find themselves alone atop the AL Central and while the final turn around Amen Corner hasn't even been made here in early April, the beginning to the 2011 season couldn't be going much better for the Indians. Between sweeping the Red Sox and taking the first two in Seattle (against a team of former Indians led by their former manager), the Tribe has won with offense, won with defense, won with starting pitching, and won with the bullpen or some amalgamation of all of those components as the Indians are winning consistently in the early going, something not even the most optimistic among us would have guessed just two weeks ago.

Just 1 ½ years from the heartbreak of the CP Lee and Victor trades, the Indians saw Carlos Carrasco and Justin Masterson (occupying the 2nd and 3rd spots in their rotation) lead the Indians to two victories by combining to strike out FIFTEEN batters in 12 1/3 innings while only allowing 8 hits, 4 walks, and 2 earned runs between them. Two starts is just two starts (particularly in April), but Carrasco is three weeks removed from turning 24 in late May and has shown the flashes of top-of-the-rotation repertoire that was hoped for at the time of the deal while the just-turned-26 Masterson has, in his last 13 starts going back to last August, posted a 2.25 ERA and a 1.10 WHIP while whiffing 46 and walking just 16 in his last 60 innings pitched.

But those Lee and Martinez deals were total busts, right?

Doesn't the first couple of weeks feel like finally moving past those crushing couple of weeks in late July of 2009, when the Indians moved their stars for a bunch of young prospects, with no promise that they'd ever come close to returning to the level of success achieved (albeit inconsistently) in the mid-to-late-2000s?

Perhaps it's premature to assume that this young Indians' team has turned any kind of corner, but the positive signs are practically blinding in the early going and, given from where this organization has come from as recently as that fateful July in 2009, it feels good to watch a young team (once again) mature and...you know, win...because it feels like something that

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hasn't happened in a while as that mid-to-late-2000s teams eventually evolved into a team that became too frustrating to watch (and [this is cathartic to read](#) if only to remember that 2009 team, prior to the trades) as a talented team struggled out of the gate regularly and never found themselves after the 2007 season.

The Indians turned the page and, while most Indians' fans decided to simply walk away from the book, the truth is that the new page that is just now starting to be revealed looks like it could be one that could hold fans' rapt attention. But to truly appreciate this quick start, maybe it's time to take a quick look back, or at least a look South to realize the difficult decision the Indians made and why the situation they faced in 2008 and 2009 was far from unique as it's one that seems to be playing out again in MLB before our very eyes.

As a roundabout way of getting to that, let's acknowledge that the big news of the week (other than the Indians sitting in 1st place) was the retirement of Manny Ramirez, whose once certain HOF career has ended both unceremoniously and unexpectedly. While ESPN's coverage of the announcement showed exactly two shots of Manny as an Indian, he will forever be remembered in Cleveland as a hitting savant, for causing Eck to be caught in a mid-WOW by the cameras in his walk of the mound, and for being the best RH hitter ever to don a Tribe uniform.

Both [Castro](#) and [JoePos](#) have terrific columns on Manny, his career, and his legacy, so I'm not going to attempt to best those efforts. Instead, using Manny's retirement as the segue, let's take a little detour before moving back to the Indians as Manny retired as a Tampa Bay Ray, even if his tenure as a Ray will be remembered as well as Johnny Unitas in San Diego or Willie Mays in Queens.

Regardless, Manny's retirement prompted [this piece from Jonah Keri over at Fangraphs](#) as Keri attempted to quantify the effect that Manny's retirement would have on the small-market example of what could be, that tour de force that is/was the Rays and their "brilliant" Front Office:

*Given that the Rays already looked the weaker team on Opening Day, and have now lost their best player for what might be all of April, and one of their two best projected hitters forever, Rays management has to be giving serious thought to a change in plans.*

--snip--

*Tampa Bay was always going to face an uphill climb to remain an elite ballclub, given the many factors working against them. Manny Ramirez's retirement by itself doesn't materially change the team's outlook. But combined with all the other challenges the Rays will face, it does set the team back considerably in the here and now.*

*The Rays will rise again. It just might take a while.*

This was written this week, after SIX games had been played and excuse me for a moment, but "break up the Rays" – that shining example of how an organization can overcome market inequities – has already become a talking point before mid-April and the conversation is coming from none other than Keri, who just published [a book on how smart the Rays' Front Office is](#) , presumably given unprecedented access to pen, meaning that he probably has some pretty good insight as to how the Rays' figure to approach this unexpected development. Keri's

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synopsis, after SIX games, is that “the Rays will rise again” and that “it just might take a while”?

So, let me get this straight...injuries, departing FA, and bad luck can derail the best-laid plans for any small-market team, even that beacon of hope and Selig’s favorite team to point out how it “can be done” – the Tampa Bay Rays?

With Crawford, Pena, Garza, and their bullpen gone and Shields and maybe more not far behind, if they really do “break up the Rays”, what will MLB have to say then?

The Rays did everything right (assisted by an unprecedented run of high draft picks) and were set up to compete with the big boys for years to come...or so we were told to believe, and now the retirement of Manny Ramirez on April 9th causes an insightful writer who knows the inner workings of the organization to assume that the white flag is going to go up at some point this season?

Regardless, what’s also interesting is how the Rays could be approaching this, and how Keri, who was presumably unprecedented access to the Rays for his book, in that they’ll look to sell off pieces and parts that don’t fit into their future and live to fight another day rather than playing out the string and hoping (beyond hope) that things may turn around. The Rays had a nice little run (two 90-win seasons...why does that look familiar) and will now turn over their roster in an attempt to create the next incarnation of a winner in Central Florida.

While we certainly don’t know how the coming months of the season are going to go for the Rays, why does this sound so familiar?

It sounds like the Rays are ready to pull off a band-aid in...right off and are willing to endure the sting of the initial action in the hopes that the healing will come sooner.

Do you see where I’m (finally) going here, as what we are likely to see with the Rays this summer is the same thing that we saw the Indians experience in 2008 and, more acutely in 2009?

What happened in Cleveland a few years back and what is happening in Tampa (they of the “impossibly” deep farm system) is the rule, not the exception when it comes to small-market teams and now two-and-a-half years after the brutal disappointment of 2008, some of the fruit borne from the misfortunes of 2008 and 2009 are starting to ripen and what’s emerging is a wholly likable and exciting group of players in Cleveland that is doing something that hasn’t been done too frequently in April for Indians’ teams...they’re winning.

Yes, they’re winning – but it’s HOW they’re winning that is what has generated so much excitement as the starting pitching looks solid, the offense looks balanced, the defense has been tremendous and timely, and the bullpen is full of power arms to dream on, with more to come. But it’s more than that, as [Anthony Castrovine put so succinctly](#) earlier in the week after the Thursday win against the Red Sox:

*I’m trying to think of a more fundamentally sound sequence of events turned in by the Tribe in the last couple seasons than what we witnessed in the eighth and ninth Thursday. Truth is, I can’t, though that might say as much about my memory as it does about the team.*

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I think that AC's being modest here and he later goes on to write that "you love to see a young team do the little things right early on, even if it's not necessarily the young players doing them, because that sets a proper standard" because if he thinks it has something to do with his memory, he should know that it doesn't. The Indians of the last five to six years has been an unquestionably talented group of players that have been done in by injuries and bad luck (for sure) but also questionable usage of said talent and misappropriation of pieces and parts, particularly in the lineup and bullpen. Seeing Aaron Laffey come into the blowout on Friday and seeing Chris Gimenez get called up from AAA (referenced in [the same article as Wedge's issue with Jack Wilson](#) being upset with playing in a new position...ahem...Garko in the OF), and the Front Office backing their manager as imprudent and incomprehensible as it may seem makes one realize what the Indians devolved into and what they should avoid devolving into again at any time.

Maybe that sounds like sour grapes and hindsight being 20/20, but the juxtaposition of where the Indians seem to be hitting their stride here (and who the opposing team's manager is) should not be underestimated as there is a completely different feel to the start of the Indians' season than any time during The Atomic Wedgie's tenure in Cleveland, 2007 included.

Of course, the easy lines to throw out here are to make fun of the tired lines that become even more tired each time that they were trotted out there by the former Tribe skipper – "bowing your neck", "trusting the process", and...of course "grinding through it" – but the feel around the 2011 Indians' team feels light years away from that, despite nearly everything else in the Tribe organization remaining EXACTLY the same except for the manager.



To that end, watching this Indians team win every which way but loose, it's unquestionably exciting and while the "name" factor may not be there for many Indians' players (save Carmona, Sizemore, and Hafner or, as he may be referred to again, Le Pronque), there is a very real possibility that Acta becomes the focus of this team this year while the Cleveland public learns about guys like Santana, Carrasco, Masterson, Brantley, and C. Perez or gets re-acquainted with The BLC and Asdrubal as more than just good players on a bad team.

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What this 2011 Indians' team looks like is a team with personality, a team that can take on the swagger of their closer or that can be as solid up-the-middle as any team that called the corner of Carnegie and Ontario home.

But truthfully, we're still learning these guys...we're still finding out who fits where and which players legitimately figure into the future. While it may be hard to remember 1992 and 1993 or 2003 and 2004, there were times that we didn't know much more about those players than their potential and their numbers. The personality of those teams didn't reveal themselves until they were winning regularly and the road to winning regularly was both exhilarating and revealing.

In two-and-a-half years, the Indians turned Blake, CC, Victor, Lee, and DeRosa into Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, Masterson, Carrasco, and Chris Perez – or 1/3 of their lineup, 40% of their rotation and their closer. If you want to include the 2006 deals with Benuardo turning into The BLC and Asdrubal, you're now talking about 5 of the 9 spots in the lineup being filled by “fire sale” deals from 2006 to 2009, with all of those players under the Indians' control through 2013.



Maybe The BLC gets his due on a winning (or at least exciting) team or maybe kids across Northeast Ohio start mimicking Santana's habit of resting his mask on top of his helmet with the strap of the mask wrapped around the bill of his backwards helmet, just like they once parroted Victor's kiss to the sky after a HR. Watching Tony Sipp mow down hitters in the 8th and seeing Chris Perez dominate in the 9th gives the sense that the Indians may have the most dominant back-end-of-the-bullpen since...the mid-1990s and these guys are damn fun to watch.

Do you remember the first time you saw CC charge off the mound, pumping his fist or saw Jake

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Westbrook or CP Lee hopping over that third base line at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario?

That's what we're on the precipice on with this group of players.

Sure, there's Hafner and Choo and Asdrubal, who have been around for a while with Grady coming back probably later this month, but looking forward to every Santana AB THIS MUCH is something that I haven't felt about any Indians' player since...well, Manny.

As Indians' fans, we fell in love with young and burgeoning teams in the not-so-distant past and this start for the 2011 Tribe feels like a courtship all over again. This 2011 team is playing like they're having fun and they're hard not to root for, given their potential and the nearly universal dismissal of them, both nationally and locally. By no means am I attempting to minimize the run of the mid-to-late-2000s, as there were moments that few will ever forget, but it feels like this is starting up all over again.

The sting of taking the band-aid coming off in July of 2009 is starting to abate...

We all may know how this may end for the Indians in a couple of years as it did for the Tribe in 2008 and 2009 and as it is currently falling apart in Tampa, with fans left sitting wondering if it really came crumbling down that far that fast in the world of small-market clubs in MLB, but with the Indians sitting in 1st place...I don't care.

It's time to enjoy the ride that a group of young, talented players can take us on...

It's time to fall for this team, full of potential and promise, small sample size considered...

There is a line in a Mark Twain quote that may be applicable to what Indians' fans are experiencing, with the memory of past heartbreaks too close to ignore, when he wrote to, "love like you've never been hurt."

Indians' fans – despite the hurt that you've endured, it's time to fall in love again...