

## What Might Be on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, May 01 2011 7:55 AM - Last Updated Sunday, May 01 2011 7:58 AM

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A baseball season is a marathon.

It is a 162-game grind.

You have heard them all and realize that a baseball season is not won or lost on one particular day or night.

However, baseball seasons – marathons that they are – are made up of particular at-bats and specific innings that shape the summer and are comprised of moments in time that adjust expectation, perception, and outcome for any team. There are seminal moments in any baseball season, when fans are given a glimpse into what's coming, whether they want to pay attention to them or not, because these seminal moments can be both good and bad.

In the 90's, everyone remembers Manny, Eck, and "WOW" cementing that the upstart Indians were not just a mirage, but a freight train about to start running downhill, a feeling that was justified when Albert Belle deposited a Lee Smith fastball into the CF picnic area a few days later. In the matter of a couple of days in the middle of July of 1995, the Indians of the mid-1990s established themselves as an offensive juggernaut and as a force to be reckoned with whose future looked limitless.

Think back to those halcyon days and realize that those moments exist and that they provide a glimpse into what's coming in a season, whether the revelation comes in April, May, June, or even July. Regardless of when they show up on our doorstep, they portend success or failure as they set the mood for a season, for a team, or an organization as the moments becomes harbingers of events still to come.

Remember when Hafner wrapped a Keith Foulke offering around Pesky Pole in Fenway in 2005 for [a game-winning Grand Slam](#) to finish off an epic comeback for an Indians team that nobody was quite sure about?

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How about [when Kelly Shoppach provided the late-inning magic in late June of 2007](#) that left no doubt that the Indians were in the AL Central race to stay, providing the spark that would carry the Indians all the way to the ALCS?

Of course, not all of these moments that provide that “glimpse” are good memories...

To wit, remember when [Joe Borowski's 83 MPH “fastball” was served up to Manny Ramirez in mid-April of 2008](#), setting the tone for a 2008 season that would result with CC leading his team to the playoffs...as a Brewer?

Maybe you prefer [Granderson robbery of a game-winning HR off of Sizemore's bat](#) in 2009 that put the Indians into a freefall that would claim both El Capitan and their reigning Cy Young Award winner as an example of a season-changing moment in time...

Done with the history lesson, does everyone realize that what happened on Friday night could be looked back upon as THAT moment when the 2011 Indians grew up from a “pleasant surprise” to a legitimate contender in the AL Central...and maybe more?

With the (now fully healthy) face of their franchise on 2nd base and with their highest paid player nursing an ankle/foot injury, the Indians survived a bases-loaded strikeout from Choo to see the most exciting young hitter since Manny Ramirez to don the Chief provide the “WOW” moment for a new decade. The Indians came into the 2011 season in need of a fast start, in need of some momentum, in need of some believers to realize that the tear-down from 2008 to 2010 was not in vain and that it was not the beginning of another 40-year walk through the desert that older fans remembered all too well.



Fears of that were silenced with one crack of the bat on a chilly April night in front 15,568 of the loudest fans to ever pass through the turnstiles at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. While some have been slow to acknowledge that the Indians are winning these games in a sustainable manner – strong starting pitching, lockdown bullpen, timely and dynamic hitting – Carlos Santana's moonshot into the April night ended all doubt.

This Indians team is for real...

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This Indians team is not a mirage and it is not simply providing a tease to a city that has been teased for too long. Instead, it is providing a compelling reason to love sports and to love baseball to a town in need of a reason to hope and a reason to love sports (and particularly baseball) once again. If you're here and reading this, you probably don't need to be told this, but the seeds sewn by this organization over the last few years have started to bear fruit...and it's looking like a bumper crop.

And yet, this is a team that the city does not know as the casual fan on the North Coast is still more consumed by the NFL Draft for a team that has only broken their collective heart in a league that may not be playing their upcoming season instead of realizing that the Indians team playing in front of their own noses is maturing and evolving into the most enjoyable Tribe team in recent memory. The bitterness of the tear-downs that decimated the team (and added the players we're now seeing lead an exciting team) have left most Cleveland fans waiting for the other shoe to drop (or the next player to be traded) for the Tribe...all while debating the wisdom of the 21st pick in the NFL Draft.

That said, since most of the North Coast has been paying more attention to the NFL Draft than to their hometown 1st place team, perhaps it is apropos to include this terrific paragraph from a "draft primer" as Chris Hutchinson from TCF, as he had [a great comparison when discussing the NFL Labor Dispute between the landscape of the NFL and that of MLB](#)

:

*But make no mistake what a perfect NFL world would look like if the Players had their say - it would look like Major League Baseball. Or worse.*

*There would be no Salary Cap (and, consequently, no Salary Floor). There would be no Franchise Tag. Free Agents would have full control and would get paid insane amounts of money. Contracts would be guaranteed, even if said contract turned out to be an unsheddable anchor around the neck of the team that offered it. Teams would turn over with disgusting frequency, and the richest teams would have opportunities every season that the smaller market teams would not. The Dallas Cowboys would be loaded (on paper) every season while the Cincinnati Bengals would become the Pittsburgh Pirates. Less fortunate teams would be forced to draft better than everyone else just to compete, then trade away their most valuable commodities because they have no chance of keeping them long-term.*

As a quick aside, if you're not reading Hutchinson's "Browns Outsider", well...you should be.

But isn't that about right when breaking down the life cycle of the mid-to-small-market teams in MLB? Read this again and give me an instance of a small-to-mid-market team that has been able to bypass this cycle:

*Teams would turn over with disgusting frequency, and the richest teams would have opportunities every season that the smaller market teams would not... Less fortunate teams would be forced to draft better than everyone else just to compete, then trade away their most valuable commodities because they have no chance of keeping them long-term.*

Since 2002, the Indians have "turned over" twice with a tear-down announced with the Bartolo deal, a build-up (that resulted in a team that was one win away from a World Series), and a

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horrible and efficient tear-down that alienated the fans that remained from 2004, all bringing us back to this particular moment in time. While that may not be the best strategy for building, much less maintaining a fan base, the Indians have “turned over” now twice successfully and here they sit at 18-8, with the best record in the AL (tied with the Phillies), with the best run differential in all of MLB (+41 after 26 games) and with a 4 ½ game lead in the Central.

Is it only May 1st?

Of course, but consider [what Castrovince dug up in terms of fast starts to seasons](#) :

*In the last 10 years, from 2001 through 2010, 59 of the 80 teams (or 73.8 percent) that reached the playoffs had at least a .500 record in April. In that same 10-season span, of the 78 teams that finished the season with 90 wins or more, 61 (or 78.2 percent) at least broke even in April. So... there's that.*

While I'll hold off on the “print the playoff tickets” crusade, those findings are not insignificant.

If the 15,568 number to see the Santana walk-off saddens you, realize that [there's a moratorium around these parts about attendance as what I wrote three weeks ago](#) , that “I'm tired of attempting to crawl inside the head of the Cleveland fan” still holds firm. That said, if you're not excited about what's happening at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario or are still shooting arrows at the Dolans or Shapiro or whatever boogie man makes you angry...well, I just feel bad for you. Because you're missing out on the most exciting and fundamentally sound baseball that's been seen on the North Coast since the mid-1990s.

Yes, the Indians had a couple of years (2005 and 2007) in which everything seemed to go right, but not like this...

Not with suicide squeezes to beat the Beaneaters AND with walk-off Grand Slams from their dynamic young catcher against a division rival AND a wild-eyed and wild-haired closer shooting bullets through the opposition's lineup.

Maybe there is still some resistance to this team and to this organization, given the unknown about most of the players, but [the always tremendous Ryan Richards over at LGT had a fantastic line](#) earlier in the week when he wrote that “Cleveland fans laugh at players that they know nothing about, loathe the players they are used to seeing, and fondly remember them after they leave.”

Truer words may not exist in terms of the Cleveland Indians “fan” psyche and the whole brilliant sentence played out before our eyes leading up to the season as Justin Masterson and Matt LaPorta and (fill in the blank) were downplayed by nearly everyone (present company included) as flawed players who would contribute to a 4th place team and who would come to represent an organizational failure to capitalize on trading their most valuable assets over the last two years. Going further, Josh Tomlin was just a “AAAA” pitcher and the Indians bullpen was an unproven group of young arms whose value was largely unknown.

While the value of most of these players is still largely unknown and there is the remote possibility that they all still comes crashing down (injuries to 40% of the rotation and the DH are never a good thing), the Indians have now played 26 games and sit atop the AL in [ESPN's](#)

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### [convoluted "RPI" rankings](#)

Maybe that means nothing come July, but what the first month of 2011 has been about is finding out about these players that have led this team to this point – learning about Mike Brantley's bat-to-ball ability, welcoming the Grady we once knew back into the fold, realizing that Matt LaPorta can be more than just a placeholder, seeing Justin Credible's maturation into a legitimate top-of-the-rotation starter, and witnessing an evolution of a bullpen (most notably Vinnie, Tony, and Rage) from a group of talented arms into a lockdown unit capable of preserving a lead or prolonging a tie game – and bearing witness to all of it has been an absolute blast.



After watching a talented group of players that we DID know struggle (notably in 2006 and 2008), with the majority of Indians' fans using the "it's still early" rationale to justify that the Tribe could still climb back into the divisional race (and it should be pointed out that the Twins are now 9-17, 9 games back while the Pale Hose are 10-18, also 9 games back), the 2011 Indians are now the rabbit in this race – setting the pace. Perhaps it's just an odd feeling to see only track in front of us and not the backs of the ones we're trying to catch...but it's an awfully good feeling.

Maybe you want to point to the strength of the Indians' schedule for their good record, but [the Indians' opponents records to date has been middle of the road](#)

, so it's not simply as if the Indians are getting fat on the table scraps of MLB.

But even if they are, does it matter?

Teams that win divisions win them by dominating the lesser lights of the league and largely playing .500 baseball against the better teams. Thus far, the Indians have been in nearly EVERY game and have won games that they shouldn't have won because of their bullpen and their resiliency while remaining close in games (sometimes coming down to an ultimately empty final AB) in games that they have lost.

Certainly the schedule that's coming is going to reveal some truths about this Indians team, with series against the Athletics (in Oakland), the Angels (in Orange County), the Rays, the Red

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Sox and the Reds coming to the North Coast in May, with the Rangers and the Yankees (in the Bronx) coming at the beginning of June, but watching the Indians play baseball over the past month...isn't it time to welcome these challenges?

Over the last two weeks, the Indians have proven that their fast start isn't on par with that of...say, the Royals (and [you should read this from Joe Pos as to why](#) ) in that they have kept with a "Plan" in terms of building this team, despite the catcalls from the local (and national) media, holding true to the belief that the talent that they assembled via trade and draft from 2008 to today would augment the pieces already in place and that they would compete in the AL Central...and maybe more.

Perhaps nobody thought that it would happen this fast, but playing off of the "What If" ad campaign that the Indians have started, [Scott Bricker presents a brilliant sequence of questions and pictures at LGT wondering "What If"](#) for this team...in that "What If" this is the year (and I'll be right here for when you finish hitting that link)?

That may be wildly premature as the calendar flips to May, but this 2011 team is good where it counts, is fun to watch, and is easy to cheer for, particularly for a town in need of a reason to cheer.

Maybe the injuries to the rotation cause them to take a tumble and maybe somebody exposes Supermanahan to Kryptonite...

Maybe Hafner's foot and the elbow injuries to CarCar and The Fury prove to be too much to overcome for a team still building and evolving into a winner...

But in a world full of "maybes", after watching The Axe Man drive a ball deep into the April night, with a group of young players – not aware that they're not supposed to be doing this – waiting for him at home plate, I'm not thinking about those negative "maybes" anymore.

I'm too busy focusing on the "maybes" that are just as possible...like "maybe" this is the start of something special, announced by the crack of the bat from Carlos Santana on a cool April night in Cleveland, that had me thinking, "maybe" this is Tribe Time...Now.