

Building a Lead

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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The Cleveland Indians are off to a sizzling start after winning 19 games in the month of April...the most April wins in team history. However, judging from the size of the crowds at Progressive Field recently it appears as if the majority of Clevelanders are not yet sold on the Tribe as being legitimate contenders for the A.L. Central crown.

Yes, the 8,000 walk-up fans that were part of the 14,164 fans that witnessed Sunday's 5-4 win over division rival Detroit were nice, but at this point there is no excuse for Progressive Field to be 66% empty for a Sunday afternoon contest against a division rival. Regardless of the weather, the prices or the fact that the Indians did not re-sign Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez or Jim Thome as well as traded Victor Martinez, Cliff Lee and C.C. Sabathia in previous seasons or years. There are still people in Cleveland upset that the Tribe traded Lee when they had him under contract for another season.

Heck, what am I talking about? There are people still complaining about Frank Lane trading Rocky Colavito for Harvey Kuehn.

This town should be very excited right now. My cousin is among the Dolan haters out there. He calls him a cheapskate and says he does not want to invest any emotional energy in certain Indians players because when they get good they will not be sticking around. Yes, he is part of the "The Indians are nothing but a farm team for the big-market teams in Major League Baseball" crowd.

As pessimistic as he is (and he is very, very pessimistic...I have the texts to prove it), he is starting to get excited about the Indians. Friday night he texted me from the last place on Earth I would have expected him to text me from...Progressive Field. The first round of the NFL Draft was unfolding, an event he annually counts down to months in advance, yet he was in the

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stands to see Carlos Santana deliver his game-winning grand slam home run.

People are starting to come around slowly. However, the stands need to be fuller and I would like to provide some information that just might help people make up their minds and decide that, yes, the 2011 Cleveland Indians are for real.

First off, the emergence of Justin Masterson as one of the top pitchers in the American League has been a pleasant surprise. Masterson is arguably the second-best starting pitcher in the A.L. behind the Angels' Jared Weaver. This year Weaver is 6-0 with a 0.99 ERA. In 45.2 innings pitched he has allowed just 26 hits, 10 walks and five earned runs while striking out 49. Masterson is 5-0 with a 2.25 ERA. In 40.0 innings pitched he has allowed 33 hits, walked 13 and struck out 29. Weaver has been better thus far, but not by a lot.

As a team the Indians have been an offensive force. The team is fourth in team batting average (.272), second in on-base percentage (.344), fourth in slugging (.445), second in home runs (34) and third in runs scored (146). Instead of the wild, impatient at-bats of the Derek Shelton era the Indians are putting together strings of solid at-bats where they actually work the pitcher, get deep into counts and make things difficult on the opposing hurler. They have been fun to watch.

The Indians' pitching has been better than expected as well. The team is eighth in ERA at 3.48 and 10th in batting average allowed at .239. The defense behind the pitcher has been a breath of fresh air as well, sporting a nifty .987 fielding percentage (10th in the Majors).

So, in other words, the team is playing solid, fundamental, winning baseball. And what has that added up to?

Well, heading into Monday's games the Tribe currently sported the best record in baseball at 19-8 (a .704 winning percentage). They were one game ahead of the Philadelphia Phillies (18-9). The Indians' +47 run differential was the best in the Bigs by a wide margin. They have won 13 consecutive home games and, along with the Colorado Rockies, who have a 4.5 game lead over the Dodgers in the NL West, had the biggest division lead in the Majors.

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Think of things this way...the Indians, at 19-8, have won at a .704 clip. Say they went into a bit of a slide and played sub-.500 ball the rest of the way, finishing the final 135 games with 67 wins and 68 losses. To overtake the Indians the Kansas City Royals (currently 15-13) would have to go 71-63 the rest of the way. The Detroit Tigers (12-16) would have to finish the rest of the season 74-60. The White Sox (10-19) would have to go 76-57 the rest of the season while the Twins (9-18) would have to finish their schedule with a 77-58 record the rest of the way. Yes, these are possibilities, but the chances of the Indians finishing the rest of the season with a losing record are very slim.

This is a good baseball team. It is winning and playing the kind of baseball we have not seen in Cleveland in 15+ years. Let's enjoy this run and, whenever possible, get down to Progressive Field to take in a game. The bandwagon is not full yet, but seats are going fast.