

Caps, Gowns, and the 40-Game Mark

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

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It's the moment in the baseball season that's the equivalent of your high school graduation.



The vast majority of life remains ahead, but as you trudge through that stuffy auditorium wearing a chiffon bathrobe while balancing a miniature serving tray on your head, you've essentially laid the foundation for the person you're going to be.

To be sure, there will be changes and maturing to come. Mistakes will be made. New qualities will develop and old ones will fade. But that moment remains one of life's milestones, and rarely will a person undergo truly dramatic changes from this point forward.

Few, for example, grow antlers after graduating from high school. If you encounter a dude with antlers, odds are they were there before he went off to college.

This is very much like the 40-game mark of a Major League Baseball team's season.

The hiccups of the first few weeks of the season and flashes-in-the-pan of early spring have been absorbed by a voluminous embrace of games, providing an accurate vision of what's to come over the next four months.

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Yet this only holds true in baseball. Trying to project the fortunes of an NFL team at the quarter-turn is generally futile. And while the NBA and NHL are closer to

mirroring the marathon of the baseball season, teams often go through a remarkable metamorphosis after 20 games are in the books.

This evaluation is unique to baseball. And, as it happens, chillingly accurate. Not unlike Sex Panther cologne, 60 percent of the time, it works every time.

But that's not to say that if you're in first place at the 40-game mark, you're a lock to stay there. Or that you should even be considered the favorite to win your division. But the vast majority of the time, after 40 games, you are the team you're going to be.

Therefore, the Indians' 26 victories at the 40-game mark forecast a season-long shelf life that we haven't seen around here for a while.

Now, the logical assumption to make after the prologue you just read is to take the Indians' win total and multiply it times four, then expect them to hit it. That, of course, would put this year's Tribe at 104 wins.

The first order of business is to throw holy water at that expectation like Max Von Sydow and watch it scald the tainted flesh of Linda Blair as she writhes around screaming in a demonic, clearly dubbed voice. The 2011 Indians will certainly **not** win 104 games. (And before you get pissy about that, keep in mind that two months ago, you would have been thrilled with 75.)

But wait - didn't I just say...

I did. But what makes the 40-game projection viable – and more pertinent than using the same

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formula with any other sport – is the wiggle room implied within the calculation. And within that wiggle room, we can inject a much-needed dose of common sense.

For example, a year ago after 40 games, the Indians stood at 15-25, a winning percentage of .375. That calculates to a 61-win, 101-loss season. Now, by Memorial Day we knew last year's Tribe was about as remarkable as a 14-year-old girl's Facebook post, but we figured they'd be able to avoid 100 losses.

And sure enough, they did, finishing with 69 wins and a .426 winning percentage. Better than what they showed out of the gate, but still within the window of expectation delivered in the first 40 games. Common sense and the 40-game formula collided to create a genuinely realistic prediction – a veritable Reese's Peanut Butter Cup of baseball prognostication.

The year before, the verse was the same as the first: the Tribe started 14-26 (.350) and finished 65-97, once again exactly 51 percentage points off.

The line of demarcation for an exception to the general rule is 100 percentage points: if a team's final winning percentage isn't within 100 percentage points of its record after 40 games, that's considered an aberration.

And of course, these aberrations do happen – some teams do indeed grow antlers after high school. But not often.

Of the Indians' previous 110 seasons, only 20 fall within this category. That means that more than 80% of the time, the Indians remained the team they were after the first 40 games.

So the odds are dramatically in favor of this year's Indians (26 wins, .650 winning percentage after 40 games) finishing no worse than 89-73 (a .550 winning percentage). Odds are even better that they'll come in somewhere between 89 and 105 – a geographic area officially known as "AL Central Contenderland"

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That being said, I'm sure you can think of someone from your high school graduating class who isn't even close to the same person who sat next to you in homeroom. The shiny, industrious student council president named Kipp is now dealing crystal meth out of the trunk of his car behind a Ponderosa. Or the brash jezebel who always smelled like a pile of burning tires is now the pastor at a Unitarian church somewhere in Iowa.

Clearly, this examination isn't complete without acknowledging those aberrations and understanding that they do happen.

The Indians' most recent came in the star-crossed 2005 season, when they started 17-23 (.425) but caught fire in the summer to wind up with 93 wins (.574) and nearly snagged a playoff berth.

The most recent "letdown" actually occurred in the playoff season of 2001. The Indians finished a solid 91-71 (.562) and won the Central, but after starting 28-12 (.700), anything short of 100 victories would have been a disappointment.

To further illustrate the exceptions, below you'll find the top five post-40-game surprises and letdowns in Tribe history.

(Keep in mind, the terms "surprise" and "letdown" don't necessarily reflect the team's overall season performance, but rather how they finished compared to how they started. Also, all teams prior to 1961 use the 38-game record rather than 40 to reflect the quarter-pole of a 154-game season).

SURPRISES

5. 1969

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Started 11-29 (.275) = projected 45 wins

Finished: 62-99 (.385)

Plus 110-point difference

4. 1970

Started 14-26 (.350) = projected 57 wins

Finished: 76-86 (.469)

Plus 119-point difference

3. 2005

Started: 17-23 (.425) = projected 69 wins

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Finished: 93-69 (.574)

Plus 119-point difference

2. 1992

Started: 13-27 (.325) = projected 53 wins

Finished: 76-86 (.469)

Plus 144-point difference

1. 1902

13-25 (.342) = projected 53 wins

Finished: 69-67 (.507)

Plus 165-point difference

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LETDOWNS

5. 1988

Started: 25-15 (.625) = projected 101 wins

Finished: 78-84 (.482)

Minus 143-point difference

4. 1966

Started: 27-13 (.675) = projected 109 wins

Finished: 81-81 (.500)

Minus 175-point difference

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3. 1928

Started: 22-16 (.579) = projected 89 wins

Finished: 62-92 (.403)

Minus 176-point difference

2. 1905

Started 26-12 (.684) = projected 105 wins

Finished 76-78 (.494)

Minus 190-point difference

1. 1941

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Started: 26-12 (.684) = projected 105 wins

Finished: 75-79 (.487)

Minus 197-point difference

A lot can and will happen over the next four-and-a-half months. There will be winning streaks and losing streaks, moments when we're sure the 2011 Indians are a team of destiny and others when we're positive we just witnessed the moment that forecasts their demise.

When those moments arrive, I suggest keeping an even keel and thinking of your high school graduation.

And remembering that probability is on our side.