

The Tribe Abides on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, June 05 2011 4:00 AM - Last Updated Sunday, June 05 2011 7:10 AM



Around the time that Tony Sipp allowed his 2nd HR of Friday's game against the Rangers, I decided that I needed to spend the remainder of my Friday night in a better mood. With The DiaBride having gone to bed, as we await the arrival of child #3 to the growing Tribe in these parts ([literally](#)) any day now, it was time to relax with a little viewing of "The Big Lebowski". While I enjoyed the umpteenth viewing of the Coen Brothers' second best movie ([this](#) is clearly the best), I started to drift away to sleep, snapping awake oddly enough at the conclusion of the movie. While I realize that my audience does not need to be reminded of the final scene of "The Big Lebowski", it involves The Dude and The Stranger at the bowling alley bar, with the final words of The Dude hanging out in the air, "The Dude Abides"...

After spending the better part of Saturday still waiting for a child to arrive (counting intervals between contractions), the words stuck with me, much in the way that The Stranger savors them and repeats the philosophy of a beloved SoCal slacker..."The Dude Abides".

In thinking about this Indians' team, the one that has looked so horrible recently and has remained atop the AL Central despite some warts that are being shown under the bright lights, is it apropos to say that "The Tribe Abides"?

While I point out that three AL teams had winning records in BOTH April and May (the Yankees, the Rays, and YOUR Cleveland Indians), there is a growing sense that this ride is about to veer completely off course. With every national (and local) columnist and talking head wondering openly if the Indians are "returning to Earth" or were invoking a "pumpkin watch" for the Tribe, the Indians have simply continued to hang around, inexplicably playing around .500 baseball while all signs on their roster would point to a complete and utter bottoming out, particularly over the last two weeks.

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What's happened in the last two weeks?

The Indians have faced off against the Reds, the Red Sox, the Rays, the Blue Jays, and the Rangers and have looked dreadful at times, oftentimes more in line with what was expected of them by most at the season's dawn than the team that was on display for the first 6 weeks or so of the season. On one hand, you can blame the brutality of the schedule and some of their pitching match-ups as they faced Beckett, Lester, Shields, Price, and Hellickson. But they also faced Volquez, Jo-Jo Reyes, Drabek, and a spot starter in Dave Bush, with neither rhyme nor reason lending any insight into which of those games would turn into victories.

They've looked bad and worse at times over these last two weeks...and yet, the Tribe abides, still sitting atop the AL Central, inexplicably going 7-8 over their last 115 and while that may not conjure up images of a playoff contender, things could be a LOT worse for the Indians, as evidenced by what the team has put forth over those last two weeks, in terms of individual and collective performance.

Despite that 7-8 record, things have been ugly for the Indians at most times and the main reason has been the performance of the starting pitchers, which had been the strength of the team to this point. In an alarming turn of events, the Indians have given up 7 or more runs in 6 of the last 10 games and, more acutely, 5 of the last 8 games. Certainly, any teams that put up that amount of runs against another team are going to benefit from bashing away at the rotation, and the last two weeks has certainly shown some kinks in the Tribe rotation's armor.

Just to jump off of [something pointed out in AC's minutiae](#) and update it for Friday's game, the Indians' rotational ERA over the last 14 days is now 6.00 (worst in the AL) with a 1.58 WHIP, which is nest to worst in the AL in that timeframe. Compare that to the Indians' starting five posting a 3.88 ERA for the month of April (with a 1.26 WHIP) and you start to see why the Indians have started to struggle to piece together consecutive wins at the same frequency that they did during their magical April.



With the small sample size siren blaring, what's even more disconcerting is that the Indians' rotation has not only collectively dropped off, but they've done it individually as well if you look at the numbers for the current Tribe starters over the last month. While Talbot has only started

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two games in the last month, the other current quartet have all started at least 5 games, with their totals for the last month looking like this:

Masterson – 4.31 ERA, 1.46 WHIP, 3.35 FIP

Tomlin – 4.35 ERA, 1.13 WHIP, 3.84 FIP

Carrasco – 5.40 ERA, 1.41 WHIP, 4.18 FIP

Carmona – 6.39 ERA, 1.34 WHIP, 5.17 FIP

Talbot – 8.38 ERA, 2.38 WHIP, 5.32 FIP

Yet the Indians are 14-14 in that stretch though the numbers for the starters over the last month are unquestionably a cause for concern as no starter has accumulated a sub-4.00 ERA over the last month.

Interestingly, some of this may not be their fault as I included FIP in there to show how the Indians' starters have been adversely affected by the Indians' recent shoddy defense as the [FIP \(Fielding Independent Pitching\)](#)

– which attempts to “measure of all those things for which a pitcher is specifically responsible” as it (ideally) “helps you understand how well a pitcher pitched, regardless of how well his fielders fielded” – for each starter is significantly lower for the same last 30-day timeframe.

The inclusion of that FIP is not meant to absolve the Indians' starters for their struggles over the last 30 days, or even the last 14 days, where NO Indians' starter has an ERA below 5.00. Rather, what's amazing is the Indians is that the Indians are 7-8 in the last 15 games in which their rotation has been inconsistent...to be kind as Masterson (5.68 ERA over last 3 starts), Tomlin (5.21 ERA over last 3 starts), Carrasco (5.50 ERA over last 3 starts), Carmona (7.36 ERA over last 3 starts), and Talbot (8.38 ERA over last 2 starts) have sabotaged the Indians' chances at winning most of their games...but the Indians still have won at nearly a .500 clip despite this.

As much as “wins and losses are the only things that matter”, the recent performance of the rotation is obviously cause for concern. Perhaps it was inevitable that the Indians were due for some regression, given how they raced out of the gate, but remember that run differential that was pointed to as a manner of asserting that the Indians were not a fluke and that they were winning games that they should win, based on outpacing their opponents at an absurd pace?

Well, that +66 run differential (built over 44 games) back on May 22nd has shrunk by more than half as of Saturday (+26 entering Sunday's tilt) in the last 12 games. Perhaps their divisional lead hasn't been THAT affected, as the Tigers have only gained 3 ½ games in that stretch of 12 games in which the Indians had a -40 run differential. Regardless, this swing in run differential means that the pitching has been pretty bad as run differential is (obviously) going to be affected pretty severely by some bad pitching performances and the Indians have been sabotaged by some as of late, as the numbers above bear out.

To pull out of this tailspin for the rotation, the Indians don't really have much by way of much more than hope that the top of their rotation (Masterson and Tomlin) can revert back to their April ways and that the middle-of-the-rotation can fix their (mostly self-inflicted) afflictions so the

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team can continue to tread water at the very least. Maybe playing .500 ball shouldn't be the stated "goal" right now, but with the Rangers about to leave town and with the Yankees' arrival not far off, "treading water" doesn't sound that bad.

To even do that however, it would be a lot easier if Masterson were to recapture some degree of his dominance, for Tomlin to get back to his beguiling ways and for one of either Carrasco or Carmona to start to figure out how to not let things unravel for them in particular situations or innings. Maybe that's being overly optimistic, but if the Indians could even get some consistency out of their top 3 (whoever that "third" may be), their staying power at the top of the AL Central only increases. As for what happens at the back of the rotation, don't overestimate what a 4th or 5th starter should be in MLB, but also don't forget that the Indians could dip into some of their depth in AAA (McAllister or Jeanmar) if need be to see if they represent an upgrade over Talbot or even Carrasco.

Don't take that to mean that I think either McAllister or Gomez is better than Talbot or Carrasco right now (and I'm still irrationally holding out hope that CarCar is that "3rd starter" who will start to shoulder some of the load) as I would expect both 'Los and The Fury to outperform the duo currently in the Minors for the long haul. However, if compelling options in Columbus become more compelling, I wouldn't be surprised to see the Indians tweak their rotation in an attempt to keep their divisional lead or to find the right mix of arms (at the right time) going forward.

Whatever may happen, what remains stunning is that the Indians are 7-8 in their last two weeks or so as their rotation has fallen apart...which means that the offense has carried the flag for the team, right?

Well...no, not at all actually.

Over that same "last 14 day" timeframe, the Indians' offense has a collective .691 OPS (10th in the AL) and has scored 49 runs in the 13 games in that timeframe. So, as the Indians' rotation started to falter (with a 6.00 ERA), the Indians' offense averaged 3.76 runs per game, striking out in nearly 25 PERCENT (24.5%) of their AB...and STILL the Indians played nearly .500 ball in that stretch.

Yes, the Tribe abides...

Whether that's simply good luck, good managing, or some stunning reversal of karmic forces that have always worked against the city of Cleveland, it's a nice thing to point out – that they've overcome bad starting pitching and an inconsistent offense to continue to win any games. Or...it's not really a "nice thing to point out" as it represents some serious underlying issues that are starting to show their head above the surface.

Perhaps the starting pitching rounds back into form ("back" being the key word there), but if the Indians are going to continue to keep their lead in the Central through the month of June, they're going to need a serious turnaround offensively. While this is still the team that posted a 19 on the scoreboard in Kansas City, a 12-spot on the Reds at home, and plated 13 runs in the Rogers Centre (and these games are all within the last month), the Indians' offense has been inconsistent – particularly recently – as they've struggled to get multiple players going at once, except for a game here or there.

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the cowboy, you're already going to see. Or you can see a soy-soaked voice here and continue