

What 35-29 Means

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, June 14 2011 4:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 14 2011 6:29 AM



An e-mail to an enthusiastic friend, May 26, 2011:

I guess I'm still tempering my enthusiasm -- not like I felt in 1995 when we were pummeling everybody. The season still has a long, long way to go. Did you know that if the Indians win 43% of their games the rest of the way out (their winning percentage last year), they will end up at 79-83? THAT'S what I mean by a long season. Quite frankly, I would be ecstatic if they just went 81-81 and laid a solid foundation for next season. If they're still in playoff contention by mid-August, THEN I'll really start getting stoked.

The Indians, in the space of three weeks, have gone from playing very, very good baseball to playing very, very bad (or is it badly?). Fans who were jumping on the bandwagon three weeks ago are now crying in their beer. But the fact remains: the season still has a long, long way to go. To quote a much-reviled former manager, it really is a grind.

Not-so-random thoughts:

What 35-29 Means

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, June 14 2011 4:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 14 2011 6:29 AM

>> **NOTHING NEW** - To the young and/or unindoctrinated, this scenario has played out more times than you can count on all your fingers and toes. The “June Swoon” (note caps) originated in Cleveland in the '60s and became more common as the '70s and '80s unfolded.

>> **STREAKS NOT UNCOMMON** - Most teams will go through winning and losing streaks that can, and do, last upwards of 15 games. The Boston Red Sox, who got off to a miserable start, are a case in point. They are currently the hottest team in baseball with the best record in the American League. The teams that make the playoffs are normally those that get hot in September and can climb one or two spots in the divisional standings. And September is still more than two months away.

>> **EXPECTATIONS** - Because the Tribe had a great April and May, many fans started expecting too much. “Oh, all we have to do is play .530 ball [!] for the rest of the year and we're in the playoffs” was a common refrain, voiced by everyone who was overly excited about the sprint out of the gate -- including some big-name commentators on local radio and television. What they overlooked was that this team was not built to contend this summer but next. It was simply playing over its head for a few weeks.

>> **NO BIG GUNS** - What is most worrisome at this time is that the every-day big guns (Shin Soo Choo, Travis Hafner, Grady Sizemore, Carlos Santana) are not hitting, and our one big gun on the mound (Fausto Carmona) is not pitching. And none of them (save Hafner, who's injured more than he's healthy) has shown any indication that he will emerge from of his funk. Without those five players producing, the Indians are just one notch above sucktastic.

>> **GOOD THINGS, PART 1** - What is not so obvious to anyone but the most dedicated fans is that good things are happening, despite the recent collapse. For starters, Santana and his fellow young batters (Matt LaPorta, Cord Phelps, Michael Brantley) are seeing major-league pitching on a regular basis -- Phelps for the first time ever. The young pitchers (Carlos Carrasco, Mitch Talbot, Josh Tomlin, Justin Masterson and eventually Alex White) are learning what they can and cannot get away with at this level. That can only serve them well next season.

>> **GOOD THINGS, PART 2** - This (hopefully) temporary folderoo also might give the powers-that-be a chance to promote other young players to evaluate, wins be damned. That might sound like giving up on the season already, but this team needs to finish September with a roster that will not turn over more than five or six players between then and next March.

>> **LEADERSHIP WANTED** - Just like playing fundamental baseball is contagious, so is playing rotten ball. Sorta like tipping over that first domino -- especially when you're talking about a young team that lacks veteran leadership. And don't be mistaken: There is little veteran leadership on this team. Hafner and Sizemore are hurt too much. Orlando Cabrera and Carmona can't perform up to the level that commands respect from the young'uns. And the rest of what might be considered veterans are nothing more than journeymen. If this team needs one thing -- certainly by next spring -- it's at least one proven big-leaguer in the field and one in the bullpen who can help the younger players smooth out the ups and downs of a long season -- much like Travis Fryman, Dennis Martinez and Orel Hershiser did here in the middle to late '90s. They don't need to be superstars, just solid, veteran contributors with Type-A personalities. It's GM Chris Antonetti's job to find the right fits, and the owners' job to provide the greenbacks.

>> **HITTING THE CORNERS** - During this current skid, and even before, the common excuse for poor hitting was that opposing pitchers were painting the edges of the plate. As a matter of fact, that was just about the only excuse you heard from manager Manny Acta and the players -- and it was presented not so much as an excuse but as a tip of the Wahoo cap to opposing moundsmen. What our young hitters are learning this season is that they cannot afford to wait for fastballs down Broadway. Santana is a good example. Opposing pitchers consistently bust him inside, a feat that most minor-league pitchers cannot consistently pull off. At the major-league level, however, Santana must learn to hit that pitch. And he will, with experience and hard work, because he has the talent.

>> **STAY THE COURSE** - Meanwhile, the front office is, so far, pretty content to let the season play out, whether the team ends up in first place or (heaven forbid) last place. This is right and good. There's no upside in trading for big-name, high-priced has-beens in an effort to break out of the slump and get over the playoff hump. It's bad enough that O-Cab, Adam Everett, Jack Hannahan, Austin Kearns and Chad Durbin are wasting spots on the roster. They will not be a part of the team that Mark Shapiro, Antonetti and the Dolans will tag a contender next season. If you believe in the front office, you should be fairly content with the current roster, combined with the addition of one or two new veterans and a few newbies from Columbus and Akron over the winter. If you don't believe in the front office, you can just go right on screaming, shouting and threatening to commit suicide every time the Tribe loses another game, because it won't do anything but raise your blood pressure.

>> **PREDICTION, PLEASE?** - Say you put a gun to my head and ask me to predict what kind of a win-loss record the Indians will end up with. Here's how I'd respond: somewhere around 79-83, the exact same record that I alluded to in my May e-mail. That's a considerable

What 35-29 Means

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, June 14 2011 4:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, June 14 2011 6:29 AM

improvement over 2010, but not quite to the level that would make me ecstatic or would lay a solid foundation for next season without some roster tinkering. As they say in the bigs, "It is what it is" -- at least for now.