

Tomahawks Back to Even

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Wednesday, June 15 2011 10:06 PM - Last Updated Thursday, June 16 2011 7:34 AM



While these interwebs are all atwitter with pieces about LeBron, the Indians' freefall out of 1st place has occurred and while the wailing and moaning may be audible from the North Coast, the only wailing happening around these parts is coming from a one-week old that sleeps in the basinet in our room. Regardless, the Tigers have officially now caught the Indians (even if they're technically tied again) as the slates have been cleared and we're back to sitting at even with the Motor City Kitties.

That hot start is now for naught as the cushion that was so fully inflated just a few weeks back now sits limply, bereft of air. The Indians' season is at a crossroads for sure as the next few weeks of Interleague Play are likely going to determine if the Good Ship Wahoo is one that is just starting to take on water or if the Tribe can right the ship, get their bearings and start to move forward once again.

And with that, let's get some Tomahawks in the air...

Realizing that recent performance is going to play a major role here, is anyone THAT convinced that the Tigers are the cream of the AL Central? While the recent standings may say otherwise, I'm not convinced that the Tigers are this much better than their AL Central counterparts, much less this much better than the rest of the AL. The Tigers have gotten hot at the perfect time as the Indians went frigid, but just as people were quick to point out that the Indians weren't going to win at a .600 clip for the season, couldn't the same be said for the Tigers?

Over the first 46 games of the season, the Tigers were exactly .500, going 23-23 as they struggled with problems that don't figure to go away for them (modest starting pitching past Verlander, age, injuries, regression, etc.) as the season wears on. That said, it is true that they've been playing at a .666 clip, going 14-7 over their last 21 games as they've been hitting

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on all cylinders as of late. However, it begs the question as to which team are the Tigers closer to being?

The answer to that is fairly obvious (closer to .500 team) and there was a point in the season in which the Tigers went 5-10 over 15 games (including 3 losses to the Indians in Cleveland) and Detroit has endured a 7-game losing streak and a 5-game losing streak ALREADY this season and while they've balanced that out with a 7-game winning streak and a couple of 4-game winning streaks, the Tigers are an impossibly streaky team and, given how much they lean on one or two players (Verlander and Miggy), they're prone to stretches of losing baseball...not unlike most other teams.

Just to bring this around to the Indians, take a look again at those numbers for the Tigers over their first 46 games and their last 21 games and realize that the Indians won at a .666 clip, going 30-15 and have since played .250 baseball with a 5-15 record in their last 20. Again, which team are the Indians closer to being?

Isn't it reasonable to assume that the Indians are likely somewhere between that .666 clip and .250 clip? Of course, that's a pretty wide berth but it speaks to the importance of the Indians establishing over the next two weeks as a legitimate contender who can stick around in this AL Central race and, most importantly, start playing the way that they played for nearly 1/3 of the season. Remember, the larger of the two groups of games that the Tigers and Indians have played had the Indians with a decided advantage, but things have evened out as the lead that the Indians had built up has disappeared and even turned into a deficit for a short time.

While everyone wants the answer as to whether the Indians are able to stick around in this or if the Tigers are going to run away with the division, let's remember what everyone wrote and said about the Indians being atop the Central a month ago and amend it a little bit – it is still mid-June and both the Indians and Tigers have experienced success and failure in the first two and half months during this season.

In this “what have to done for me lately” culture that we live in, where perception is somehow reality and where conventional wisdom is a constantly moving target, the Indians and Tigers have changed seats from where they sat just over a month ago when the Tribe swept Detroit in late April/early May. It stands to reason that they may keep changing seats for the better part of the season as the AL Central is full of flawed team, Detroit and Cleveland included.

As to who ends up still standing when the music stops is an answer that isn't going to come over three days in Detroit in June (just as it didn't come in three days in Cleveland 6 weeks ago), but will reveal itself as the season wears on and as the band plays on...

Despite the struggles of the Tribe of late, the recent performances by individuals on the team are definitely bright spots and are some building blocks upon which the Indians can start to develop some momentum as portions of the starting rotation have started to come into their own once more. After a rough stretch for the starters, the troika of Carrasco, Masterson, and Talbot have all provided the Indians with some much-needed momentum in terms of outings, if not

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necessarily wins.



As I wrote this weekend, if the Indians are going to win some games while the offense continues to thrash about in the quicksand, it will be because of their starting pitching and Cookie Carrasco (yes, the team calls him “Cookie”) has led the way for the rotation, posting the 13th lowest ERA (at 3.03) among AL starters over the last 30 days, the 13th lowest WHIP (at 1.11) among AL starters in the last month. Going past just Carrasco, in the last two weeks, Carrasco, Masterson, and Talbot have all posted ERA’s under 3.50 throwing 52 2/3 of the 114 innings that the Indians have played. Despite this, the team is 3-10 in the last 14 days with three of their starting pitchers putting them in position to win games.

That’s almost hard to do and to understand why that is doesn’t take much understanding at all as the issue is still the issue that’s plagued the team since Hafner hit the DL – they can’t score any runs.

This is not telling secrets or cracking codes, I know...and I wrote that the onus was on the players to start to get back to being productive, but each game makes it all the more apparent. Until Santana and Choo show some consistency for more than a week and until Grady starts to look closer to the player that emerged from the DL in May and until Hafner returns both healthy AND effective, the offense is going to struggle and the team is going to have trouble putting together a winning streak.

As much wailing and gnashing of teeth that may be happening while wholesale changes are being suggested in some (dark) corners, not to go all Rick Pitino on you, but Manny Ramirez v. 1995 isn’t walking through that door and a young Albert Belle isn’t about to show up to clear up these offensive issues. The Indians need the players that are in place, that have a track record of production, and on whom the effectiveness of this offense relies upon to start producing and scoring runs.

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There is no magic bean out there that can be planted that's going to lead this offense back up into the sky. While the offense continues to work through these...uh, "issues", the aspect of the team that needs to keep the team in these close games is that starting pitching. While the success of the rotation has not been universal (and anytime Fausto wants to try to limit damage with runners on would be a nice change of pace), the Indians need to take advantage of the starting pitching that they're getting and allow the recent performances of their starting pitchers to turn into some victories...and I don't just mean "victories" of the 1-0 variety.

As for where the Indians stand right now and where they're going, there are a couple of schools of thought emerging in terms of how to approach this team. The first sees the Indians still at the top of a winnable division, meaning that the Tribe has been presented with a (surprise) opportunity that they should be taking advantage of, whether that means straying from the "best-laid" plans or not. Maybe that means calling up more players to "shake things up" or to explore trades to supplement the current roster. This is the one that is touted in ink and on the airwaves, PLEADING for the Indians to do something to stop the bleeding, generally ignoring what happened over the first two-and-a-half months of the season. This point of view aches for something/anything to change because change can only be good at this point.

While there are emotional aspects of this that make sense (and let's remove the Bobby Phelps/Uncle Orlando "change" from this because that actually represented – and still should represent – the team improving internally, even incrementally), to take this viewpoint as a concrete stance is to say that what happened over the first two or so months of the season was a fluke and that what happened over the last two weeks is not.



Let me say that again as this is what is presupposed here in the idea that the Indians have to make MAJOR changes immediately:

Success in two-and-a-half MONTHS = Fluke.

Failure in two-and-a-half WEEKS = Reality.

Maybe this is oversimplifying things, but it's something that was included in [a great piece from](#)

[B-Pro's Marc Carig on Manny Acta](#)

and how the Tribe skipper is still trying to take a long view:

Acta expects things to eventually get back to normal, which is perhaps the most important point. It's one that he recently hammered home to his players in a team meeting, and one that will surely surface again as the Indians face off with the Tigers. "We're not a fluke," Acta said. "You're not a fluke for 2 1/2 months when you're in first place for that long. Still, there's a lot of games left. We've built up that lead at the beginning. That's why right now we're still in a good spot."

While "good spot" is a relative term, that leads us into the next school of thought that is out there on the Indians, which is that the players that put the Indians at the top of the division for two months are pretty much the same guys that are in there now and that "waiting it out" and weathering this storm is the course of action that is most advisable. You may not buy that – and the perception of this team has certainly swung 180 degrees in about three weeks – but that last point above made by Acta is what's troubling to simply letting this play itself out as the Indians did build up "that lead" and watched it fritter away as the offense fell on its collective face.

Maybe no changes were going to prevent this widespread regression and maybe this is a number of players regressing back to who they are, but the second school of thought (which is probably closest to rational) suggests that the Indians need to stick with the current group of players that they have to allow them a significant amount of time to pull themselves out of this tailspin. If they're not able to do it as individuals (and some will while others won't) over the course of the next month or so, then the Indians need to start augmenting the roster internally. Of course, the season may be too far gone to save at that point and whether that means a Kipnis or a Putnam or a Gomez/McAllister addition to see if the Indians can stabilize some of their weak links, it's not something that has to happen immediately, but maybe over the next month or so.

A "month or so" may seem like an eternity, given what we've seen the past two weeks, but the Indians need to find a delicate balance of patience and urgency. Those two words may not go together all that cleanly, but the Indians need to continue to be patient with guys like Santana, Choo, and even LaPorta to see if their past production and/or pedigree is going to eventually come shining through. At the same time, there needs to be some urgency to improve this team where they can, whether that means eventually going to Kipnis at 2B (though giving Phelps even a cursory shot would be nice before replacing him with The OC as a DEFENSIVE REPLACEMENT late in the game) or adding bullpen arms remains to be seen. Ultimately, the prevailing idea with this school of thought is that there's help that come, but that the help should arrive on its own, not as the panic button is continually pressed.

Regarding that "help", the final school of thought (and this one is the most comforting, if not satisfying) is that this early-season contention is unexpected and a year ahead of "schedule" and that the best course of action let this all play out and simply enjoy any pleasant surprises that may be enjoyed on the road to contention...in 2012. In a recent post at Hardball Talk, [Craig Calcaterra wrote that](#)

, "The early season surge notwithstanding, everyone knew that this was not going to be a competitive year. That they occasionally win a game they have no business winning is a bonus;

that they occasionally stink on ice should not be taken too hard.”

Before anyone gets too fired up about the “stink on ice” line, Calcaterra was writing about the Royals – not the Indians, so I’m being a little sneaky here by including it. But that being said, when the season started for the Tribe, wasn’t there this overwhelming sense that “this was not going to be a competitive year” and that the Indians were just going to look for some improvement from their burgeoning core of players that was going to be supplemented at some point by Al White, Jason Kipnis, and The Chiz?

Certainly, the surprise of the first two months changed those expectations but as the Indians sink back towards .500 (which was the optimistic expectation of most going into the season) is that what we’re back to...this “let’s stay the course” rationale that puts across the idea that the team was “happy to be there” for the first two months. Maybe I’m wrong about this, but I can’t imagine how that’s the prevalent line of thinking down at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario and the only evidence that I can cite to support my belief that the Indians are closest to the 2nd school of thought (ride this group out...but only for so long) is that Al White was promoted when he was.

Was it just a mirage?

The Indians were playing solid baseball for, as Acta pointed out, 2 ½ months and while “June Swoon” may be the phrase carrying the day right now, the Indians are still at the top of a winnable division. Major changes are probably not the best course of action for this team that needs to find its legs underneath them once again, but neither is simply letting this whole thing play out as the Indians continue to sink.

As much as these arguments over what the Indians should or should not be doing, it is worth pointing out that there’s too much “black” or “white” in these discussions. Just like everyone said, “the Indians aren’t this good”, isn’t it fair to assert that “the Indians aren’t this bad”? Where that middle ground exists is what we’re going to find out, but the Indians need to do some climbing to find that middle ground.

Finally, there are times when fandom does funny things to even the most rational among us as, for whatever reason, we (as fans) think that our actions somehow affect a play, a game, or a season. Given the abyss that the Indians have fallen into, I thought I’d come clean as to role that I’ve played in the freefall in the standing for the Wahoo Warriors. Realizing that this is going to paint me as a wildly irrational person, just bear with me as this has been weighing on me and I’m in need of some help on this...and not in the psychiatric sense.

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