

## A Lazy Sunday at A Crossroads

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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If the 40-game mark is the time at which pronouncements about teams are generally accepted as the “this is your team” stance starts to hold water and the All-Star Break represents a quasi-midpoint of the season, what can the performance of a team up to Father’s Day tell us?

For the Tribe, the path they’ve treaded since that 40-game mark to today has been treacherous and, frankly, a little disconcerting, but on June 19th, the Indians are once again alone in 1st place in the AL Central, all of this despite their recent performance that had effectively cleared out the bandwagon. While it’s true that the lead they built has evaporated as they’ve been caught in the Central (with more teams closer behind them...though no closer than the rest of the divisions) and the Indians find themselves at a crossroads for this season. Where they go from this crossroads in the next few weeks is going to determine if the path that they start down is the one going up or if they’re going to continue on the downward path that they’ve been on for a couple of weeks now. Perhaps that’s what Father’s Day is – far enough away from the quarter-pole but not quite to the midway point – when the tone of the season is really set.

The Indians have existed in two incarnations already in this season – the bulldozer of a team that leapt out of the gate to post the best record in baseball and the one that resembled a broken-down machine, spitting out smoke and making all sorts of objectionable noises over the better course of two weeks – but with 3 ½ months still left to play, the Indians still have time to pull themselves out of this tailspin and assert themselves firmly back into the flawed AL Central race...if they haven’t already. Certainly, the idea that this team is going to be able to pull up from the crash course that seemed to have been set for them looked foolish at this time last week, with the mountains looming larger on the horizon, but let’s take this Sunday to gain some perspective about where they’ve been and perhaps where they’re going...

Lest anyone forget, it was talked about ad nauseum prior to the Reds’ weekend series in

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Cleveland about how the Indians were about to be tested by the “tough” section of their schedule that would show if the Indians were legitimate contenders or pretenders. When Cincinnati arrived to Cleveland, the Tribe was 26-15 with a commanding lead in the AL Central. Since that time, Hafner hit the DL (and has since returned), their starting pitching showed some chinks in their armor (or seem to not be wearing any armor at all in the case of Fausto), and their offense wholly disappeared.

However, since the start of that Reds’ series, the Tribe has gone 12-16 and while the recent past has been most discouraging and a 12-16 performance isn’t going to put them squarely in too many divisional races (particularly with the “brand” of 11-16 baseball they’ve been playing)...the Indians are still sitting on top of their division. Maybe you want to throw the “not for long” on that last sentence, but if you are what your record says you are, the Indians are still the team with the 3rd best winning percentage in the AL.

Given the recent history of slow starts for the team, maybe this is an odd feeling that we’re having since the Tribe usually starts slow and comes on in the 2nd half, meaning that we’re just not used to sitting atop the mountain early on, then sliding down it...slowly or quickly. Like the Twins of this year, we’re used to digging a DEEP hole, then attempting to slowly crawl out of it. Instead, the Indians are attempting to dig their heels in to prevent the slippage in the standings and where that leaves us is a place [that Adam Van Arsdale at LGT summed up pretty nicely](#) : *We probably do not have the talent to be the steamroller of a team we were for the season’s first 50 games, but that stretch should give us all confidence that we have more talent than the last 20 games. We are probably somewhere in the middle. But where that puts us right now is in the middle of a pennant race even if it is still only June.*

Not to belabor this point, but the Indians are in the AL Central race in mid-June and while some may have expected it, perhaps it’s time to put aside expectations coming into the season and start to deal with the records that show up everyday in newspapers and websites everywhere perhaps meaning more than what was expected of a particular team (or teams) nearly three months ago. The team is still in control of a pennant race and while it looks to be more of a “race” now than it did when it one horse (the Tribe) leading the pack back in May, the Indians still do have some pieces and parts that could keep them in this race longer than most currently anticipate.

Perhaps the recent performance of the team has colored the perception to a darker shade of blue, but haven’t these things all happened in the first 2 ½ months?

Masterson (3.18 ERA) and Carrasco (3.87 ERA) have shown signs that they can front a rotation...

C. Perez, Sipp, and Pestano look like they can hold down the back of a bullpen...

Asdrubal looks to finally coming into his own as a SS...

Mike Brantley has shown glimpses of the OBP machine he was purported to be...

If you’re keeping score, that’s a team with young power pitchers at the front of the rotation and the back of the bullpen with strength up the middle of the diamond...

Realizing that this is a somewhat-tired question, if I would have told you on Opening Day that

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those things would bear out over the first 2 ½ months of the season, you would take it...right?

Past those bright spots, there are secondary signs of hope as Josh Tomlin continues to give the Indians quality outings nearly every time he goes out. No, he may not be front-end-of-the-rotation material, but he and Talbot have shown enough promise that it's not hard to see them sitting at the back-end-of-the-rotation for the remainder of the year, if not beyond.



On Tomlin, just to digress for a moment, remember how nobody can quite figure out how Josh Tomlin (who now has a 3.93 ERA and a 1.07 WHIP on the year) is able to do what he's doing?

Interestingly, Tomlin was included in [an article on the cut fastball in a recent print edition of SI](#) where the piece (and this is Albert Chen of SI...not me) asserted that the cutter, "is why virtual unknowns such as Cleveland's Josh Tomlin...are blooming into All-Stars". While that "All-Star" assertion may be a little aggressive,

[opponents are hitting .213 off of Tomlin's cutter](#)

(sorry, I can't find an OPS against for it), which he has thrown for 23.3% of his pitches. In a description of his repertoire,

[a PD piece from a couple of months ago](#)

mentioned "a cut fastball that rides in on left-handed hitters and down on righties", among Tomlin's other offerings.

Past his "strike-throwing mentality" and "moxie" and "grit", could it be that Tomlin has a pitch that is difficult for hitters to square up, meaning that they often struggle to make solid contact, resulting in Tomlin's success because of the effectiveness of that cutter to both RH and LH hitters?

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Regardless (and moving on from this little digression on Tomlin), the Indians' pitching has been the strength of the team to date, something that most did not expect coming into the season. Perhaps that is why acceptance of the pitching staff's success has been so slow (well...that, and the occasional Fausto implosion), but the Indians' pitching staff has a cumulative 3.98 ERA on the year and a good portion of that can be traced to the success of the bullpen, which has the 2nd best ERA in the AL at 3.23 in 2011. That shouldn't minimize the performance of the rotation however, as the starters not named Fausto or Jeanmar have combined for a 3.85 ERA in 55 starts and, while the exclusion of a few pitchers is some deep-tissue massaging, the pitching for the Tribe has paced their success and figures to continue to do so.

If the Indians' pitching can keep performing at their current level, the Indians have a chance to stabilize and regain their footing during the next few weeks which (and this is not hyperbole) are going to determine how the 2011 Indians season will be remembered. The reason that isn't an exaggeration is that the Indians have now removed themselves from the "gauntlet" portion of their schedule (although the upcoming schedule isn't full of cupcakes either) and with Hafner now fully healthy – if largely unavailable in NL parks, other than to pinch-hit – it's time for the Indians to establish what type of team they really are, with the two victories against Pittsburgh providing a reminder of how this Indians' team was winning games for the better part of 2 ½ months.

Are they the early-season "steamroller"?

Probably not, but they're also not the team that's been lying down in front of steamrollers for the past three weeks either...

So, who are these Indians?

The answer is not going to come in one weekend against the Pirates, in one fell swoop, or even in one swing of the bat as the official start of summer comes on Tuesday and the time has arrived for the Indians to recognize the opportunity in front of them (re: the Central division) and start to make a push to at least stay in the divisional race.

It goes without saying that their ability to stay in the race is going to be dictated by their offensive production and while some have declared Hafner's return as the elixir to cure what ails them, the reality is that the Indians need more than just Hafner (or Asdrubal) to make this offense productive once more. It's been written and said far too many times, but until some combination of Santana, Choo, Sizemore, and Hafner gets going, this team is going to struggle to score runs.

Though Hafner has just returned, the other troika upon whom the production of the offense is built to rely has been the reason for the Indians' slide in June. While that's certainly not revealing anything too mind-blowing, check out the OPS for the trio in June:

Santana - .695 OPS in June

Sizemore - .627 OPS in June

Choo - .550 OPS in June

In the past two games, it's been apparent what the offense can look like with that trio getting on base in 14 of their 21 plate appearances in the first two games of the Pirates' series (which included 3 XBH for them), but that needs to be the rule and not the exception.

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Perhaps the return of Hafner takes some pressure off of those players (and Santana certainly seems to like a lineup with Hafner in it as his OPS when Hafner was on the DL was .604 and his OPS with Hafner in the lineup is now .827), but the Indians are only going to go as far as that quartet takes them as the rest of the lineup is too full of holes or one-dimensional (or no-dimensional) players elsewhere to overcome the struggles of those four. Asdrubal and Brantley are still coming into their own as players and the ceilings for those two are appreciably lower than the ones that exist for Hafner, Sizemore, Santana, and Choo. As fun as it is to see his development and maturation as a hitter, Asdrubal isn't the middle-of-the-order presence that those players were, either in the distant past (Hafner and Sizemore), the not-too-distant-past (Choo) or could be in the near future (Santana) and Cabrera wasn't/isn't going to put this team on his back for the whole season to carry them to much more than a couple of wins.



For the Indians, they have to hope that two or three of that quartet of Hafner, Sizemore, Santana, and Choo gets going at the same time because THAT is what is going to pull the team out of its offensive doldrums. Who's to say when (or if) that time is going to come, but the unfortunate nature of that truth is that the only path to find out when (or if) that quartet is going to start producing is to be patient with them.

As much as the sports-talk radio crowd (or worse) may want to send Santana or Choo off to Columbus (and, yes...I don't need to be told that Choo is out of options, but the idea that he should be sent to AAA has actually emerged as an "option") or want Sizemore to be sent far away from Cleveland because of his K totals, the Indians' success is predicated on the performance of their four (potentially) best offensive players.

In terms of the rest of the lineup around them, a little tinkering would be nice if only to maximize the performance of the supporting cast and while I have no issue with SuperMannahan continuing to stride to the plate every night (because his glove is that good), the team (or at least the manager) should get serious about platooning The OC and Bobby Phelps. While I understand the whole "play the veterans while the team is struggling" idea in theory, when the



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veterans are contributing to those struggles, a course of action needs to be taken.

By “course of action needs to be taken”, allow me to point out that 144 players in the AL have more than 75 plate appearances against RHP. Among those 144, Uncle Orlando has the 6th lowest OPS vs. RHP at .497...yes, FOUR NINETY SEVEN. And yet, The OC continues to face off against RHP for the Tribe as they attempt to “look for an offensive spark”. Truthfully, I don’t care if Bobby Phelps looks terrible at the plate as he is facing MLB pitching for the first time and judging him on 19 plate appearances is grossly undeserving and it is worth pointing out that in those 19 plate appearances, Bobby Phelps has 3 BB. That amount (3 BB) is 3 BB fewer than Orlando Cabrera has accumulated in...wait for it...keep waiting...219 MORE plate appearances on the year.

Maybe The OC doesn’t like the idea of a platoon and maybe the team is scared that his inevitable pouting will affect team chemistry, but Uncle Orlando is terrible against RHP and Orlando should be part of a 2B rotation that allows Phelps to face RHP (and Phelps had a .935 OPS vs. RHP in AAA) and begins to filter Phelps into the infield rotation.

Speaking of the infield, Matt MaTola (yes, he’s MaTola again) will now be out of the everyday lineup for a time after the ankle injury and truthfully, maybe that’s not such a bad thing as (though I’m trying to preach patience with LaPorta) he had posted a .456 OPS in the last 14 days and a .585 OPS in his last 25 games. LaPorta had not hit an extra-base hit that wasn’t a HR since May 16th (a stretch of 25 games) and he hit only 4 HR in that stretch, meaning that he didn’t hit a 2B in 90 plate appearances...which is actually pretty stunning.

Regardless, with MaTola out for the foreseeable future, the hope would be that some amalgamation of Santana, Marson, and Buck will handle C and 1B in his short absence. While you may cringe at the idea of calling Buck back up, the idea that Santana should rotate between 1B and C depending upon the starting pitcher holds water (particularly with no DH in NL parks) as Marson should really only face LHP (he has a .327 OPS vs. RHP) at this point and, if you’re looking for a “platoon” partner for Marson, Buck is as good as any that the Tribe as if you realize that his .661 OPS vs. RHP is underwhelming but represents a higher OPS vs. RHP than Duncan.

Maybe Nick Johnson becomes an option as that platoon “partner” with Marson (and interestingly Johnson has 24 AB vs. RHP and only 3 vs. LHP in the 9 games he’s played in this year), but he’s only played in those 9 games and if we saw how off Sizemore’s timing was as he did his “rehab” stint (poorly) with the Indians, I’d let Johnson continue to get his timing back in Columbus give Buck a chance to play 1B against RHP and offer the Indians some OF flexibility not named Austin Kearns. If Johnson can stay healthy (and I cannot stress how big of an IF that is), he could represent a viable option to replace MaTola, even if Johnson would be another LH hitter in a sea of them. But that’s getting a little too deep into “maybe” and “what could be” as the Indians’ immediate future is likely to dictate the rest of their season.

However, with the direction of the season in the balance and with feelings that the Indians’ bottoming out over the last three weeks is just a harbinger of things to come, sometimes in the depths of our sorrows, it’s easy to forget the big picture view here. For a quick reminder of that,

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Peter Pattakos (who runs [Cleveland Frowns](#)) has a great piece that is available in the newest issue of Scene.

[Pattakos' piece in Scene](#), which includes the words “downright Lincolnesque” in terms of the Dolans’ admission that the team would contend every “four or five years”, a quote that has been met with equal parts derision and disdain, is a fascinating read as it takes a couple of steps back from where the Indians are on June 19th of 2011 and where they are in the grander scheme as an organization:

*Even in the midst of a precipitous decline that's all but erased the euphoria of their record-setting start, the Indians' proximity to first place in the American League's Central Division is still more than a nice surprise.*

--snip--

*And most important, here we are on the early side of “four or five years” since the Tribe last contended, with just about every significant contributor on this year's team signed up for next season as well. An uphill battle isn't completely hopeless, competence is good, and predictably consistent competence is even better. As much as we might want the Indians to more enthusiastically embrace the role of small-market standard-bearer, and for the Dolans to take more of an activist role against baseball's tilted playing field, “as good as it gets” is still something, and we're getting it. Especially here, especially now, that's pretty damn good.*

The whole piece from Pattakos is worth your time as it takes a quick glimpse at that small market/large market that is particularly apropos with the Pirates in town and that has been the favorite dead horse to beat around these parts in [an attempt to find a “solution”](#).

As for the “solution” to what currently ails the Indians, the only thing that they can attempt to do is get back to what won them games at the beginning of the season – strong starting pitching, lockdown bullpen, and enough offense. Sitting here on a glorious Father's Day afternoon, the Indians are at that point in the season in which they can go one of two directions, with the weathervane figuring to move over the next couple of weeks to let us know which way the wind is blowing.

Two nights against the Pirates doesn't mean that the Indians have re-discovered that formula, but it does mean that they aren't incapable of recapturing it. After the last three weeks, that's a welcome change of direction...