



When it comes to assessments of our iconic sports figures, Clevelanders tend to exhibit a pretty remarkable degree of solidarity. Divided as we may be over climate change, tax rates, or health care, everybody seems pretty much on board with the city's stance on Bob Feller (hero), Art Modell (villain), and even Anderson Varejao (fun hair). An exception to the rule, however, is the newest member of baseball's (mostly) hallowed 600 homerun club—that confusingly polarizing good-old-boy Jim Thome.

Nearly a decade after the Tribe's all-time leading homerun hitter skipped town for a substantially plumper cash offer from Philadelphia, Cleveland fans still seem a little collectively perplexed about the whole affair. While the affable, aww-shucks Thome earns kudos and standing ovations from enemy spectators in Detroit, new fans in Minnesota, and old devotees in Chicago, he remains a pariah in some circles of the Central Division city in which he truly made his mark.

"It always bothered me a lot that your fans would boo him when he came back to Cleveland," a friend and White Sox fan told me this morning.

"Why would you care?" I asked, genuinely curious why the seemingly logical displeasure of a spurned crowd would be jarring to an otherwise rational sports fan.

"I always thought he got offered a ton more in Philly for a better situation. I didn't think he

burned you,” my friend replied. And then came the kicker. “And... because he is just an awesome guy.”

In a nutshell, this might be what makes Cleveland’s lingering Thome issues so compelling. While the Indians’ previous superstar turncoats included a menacing asshole (Albert Belle in 1996) and a space cadet (Manny Ramirez in 2001), Thome was extremely down-to-earth, quotable, likeable, admirable—all the things national commentators were still saying about him this week. He had come up through the Tribe system just like Ramirez and Belle before him, but he was a much bigger part of the community—someone who seemed destined to become the club’s equivalent to Cal Ripken in Baltimore or Tony Gwynn in San Diego. Then, all of the sudden, the path to glory diverged east to Pennsylvania, giving the folk tale of The Thomenator a new backdrop it was never supposed to need. Believers in the presumed permanence of Thome-as-Tribesman now stood in the streets, mouths agape, like Harold Camping’s cult followers the day after “Doomsday.”

“He signed with the Phillies? What the f**%k!”

That was December 6, 2002. Since then, Cleveland fans have gradually dropped into six general schools of thought when it comes to the man who will eventually enter the Hall of Fame with Chief Wahoo on his cap (the first to do so since Larry Doby in 1998). Sure, the perspectives overlap in spots, and some people have spent a year or two in all six camps. But after all this time, the spectrum remains wide.

Cleveland-Thome Perspective #1: Blind Seething Hate



Cleveland-Thome Perspective #2: Blind Seething Hate... of Larry Dolan

Pretty much the same kinda stubborn emotional bunch as Group #1, only focused in a different direction. These former Thome lovers don't care much about Jimmy's recent exploits one way or another, except to point out that all of them should have occurred in an Indians uniform. In fact, if they really think about it, every milestone achieved by any player this century probably should have been reached in an Indians uniform. "F@#%ing Dolan!" they all cry. "Cheap bastard. We let Manny walk. We let Thome walk. Now look at Thome! 600 homeruns! Typical. We're never going to win anything until Dolan croaks..." etc, etc.

Cleveland-Thome Perspective #3: Sad Pandas

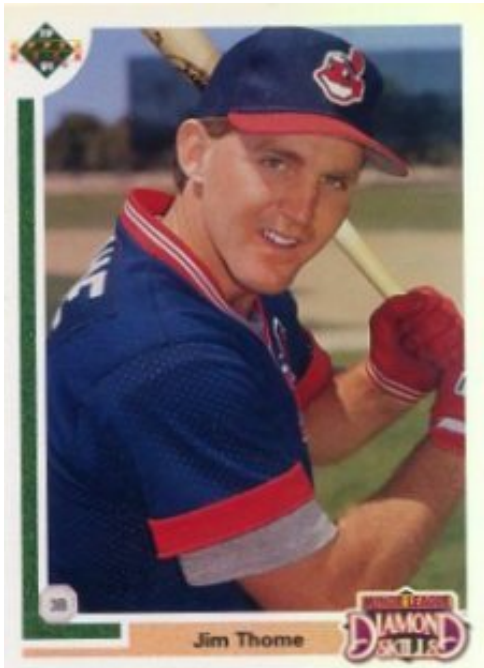
Some people get angry. Some people get even. And some people—actually a hell of a lot of Cleveland sports fans—just mope around, collecting their laments like crummy little antiques on a mantelpiece (and yes, it takes one to know one). For these folks, Thome's great accomplishment was met not with a growl, but a long, drawn-out sigh. "Well, Jim, hope you're happy," they say. "But nobody will ever love you like we did. Why, Jim? Why did you break out hearts?"

Cleveland-Thome Perspective #4: The Big Picture

This is not a great time in history for well-reasoned, open-minded, analytical types to gain a lot of traction, so this is predictably the smallest group of Thome-assessing Clevelanders. The majority of these "Big Picture" thinkers were very bummed by Thome's defection, but not shocked. Similarly, they are perfectly pleased to see him reach 600 homeruns, though not wildly

enthused by his accomplishing the feat in Twins gear. “Look,” they say, “Philly offered almost \$30 million more than we did. We’re not talking about pocket change here. And besides, the Indians were rebuilding. Paying one guy that much just wasn’t a reasonable move for a young, retooling club. Pay Thome, and we probably don’t get the pieces in place for the ALCS run five years later. Jim was a good guy. It’s just the way things go.”

Cleveland-Thome Perspective #5: It was a Long Time Ago, Man



Some members of this group are teenagers who think of Jim Thome more as “that guy who used to be with the White Sox.” Others are old men with fading memories. Still others just favor forgiveness over the more popular “fanatical grudge carrying” so rampant ‘round these parts. Basically, whether it’s “time heals all wounds” or “time wounds all heels,” these people can’t be troubled to worry about it one way or another. “Why are people still upset about Jim Thome?” they say. “We’re in a pennant race! Good job, Jimmy. Thanks for beating Detroit for us.”

Cleveland-Thome Perspective #6: Blind Seething Love

Maybe it’s genuine admiration. Maybe it’s the weird flip side to a psychotic detest for the Dolan Brothers. Or maybe it’s just that old sumbitch Nostalgia rearing its always increasingly attractive head. Whatever the reason, some Clevelanders really, really LOVE Jim Thome. They haven’t just forgiven him for leaving, they praise him for “doing what was right for him and his family!” To them, Thome still ought to have a statue outside Progressive Field, even though it was supposedly part of the contract offer he turned down from the Tribe nine years ago. Jimmy, in their eyes, “is a saint; everything that’s still good about pro sports; a role model; a hero; a proud Cleveland Indian.” And why not? Sure, channeling out the grey area in favor of one extreme emotion or another is rarely going to put you in arm’s reach of the truth. But for those of us who were still kids when Thome first laced up his spikes for the Tribe back in 1991, it’s nice to think

that the rest of the country still looks at him the way we did all those years ago. And since we know him best, why should we be left out in the cold? Congratulations, Jim. See you in Cooperstown.