

Tomahawks Slip-Sliding Away

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, August 25 2011 10:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, August 25 2011 10:29 AM



If I may set the scene for what has transpired in what has felt like a very long six days for Tribe fans, I loaded up the Family Truckster with The DiaBride and the kids for a trip to Milwaukee to visit the in-laws and to enjoy some Fat Tires, Spotted Cow, and brats. En route to the Land of Beer and Cheese, we passed The Cell on Thursday night and pointed out to The DiaTot (pulling him away for a moment from “Mary Poppins”) that the Indians were actually playing the White Sox in the stadium as we passed it. After a brief (well...not brief) discussion about why we weren't going into the stadium to watch the game, I settled in for the final stretch of the drive, thrilled about being able to listen to the Tribe-Pale Hose game all the way into Milwaukee as the Indians took the series finale in the Windy City to pull themselves to within 1 ½ games of the lead of the AL Central as they readied themselves for a trip to Detroit with the hopes that they could continue to make up ground against the divisional leaders.

That was less than a week away.
Seriously...

During my absence from the North Coast, the Indians have seen Kipnis, then Hafner, and soon Brantley hit the DL as Ubaldo Jimenez's unquestionably disappointing performance on Sunday has allowed the instant analysts (the ones that deal in 140 characters or less) to categorize him as a bum while the Indians' 1 ½ game deficit in the Central has mushroomed to a 6 ½ game deficit.

Again, in less than a week...

Regardless – and as it seems that I cannot leave Cleveland for fear of the bottom falling out while I'm gone – let's get some Tomahawks in the air so we can at least get a look at something moving upward...

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When I referenced the 2004 team [in the middle of last week](#) in terms of providing some context for how the two teams – both surprise contenders in mid-August – were not all that similar in terms of make-up and age, I certainly didn't think that pointing out that "the 2004 team got to within 1 game of 1st place when they were 8 games over .500 on August 14th of that year, only to see the bottom fall out to the point that they were 16 games back and 6 games under .500 a little more than a month later" would prove to be prescient in terms of what was waiting for the 2011 club.

Lest you forget, that 2004 team had a series finale against the Twins in which they could have pulled even with the Twinkies by sweeping them in mid-August, but would lose the game 4-2 in 10 innings as the air would begin to go out of the balloon...quickly. It would be their 1st loss among the 16 losses in their next 20 games as they would go from one game back to ELEVEN games back before anyone really had a chance to even take a breath. They would eventually sputter to the end of the season to finish 80-82, exceeding pre-season expectations, but ultimately disappointing in terms of how quickly their divisional deficit grew on them until it became untenable.

Watching the Indians go against the M's after being completely deflated in the Motor City, it's hard not to think that a similar slide (and final record) is coming for the Tribe as the injuries on the offensive side have simply proven to be too much for this young, inconsistent, shallow team to overcome. Where there should be Hafner, Sizemore, Brantley, and Kipnis, we have Duncan (or LaPorta), Zeke, Fukudome, and Donald, meaning that nearly ½ of the Tribe lineup is made up of players whose role is best maximized as a bench option or as a bottom-of-the-order filler.



Remember, just about a week-and-a-half ago, with Choo coming off the DL and Kipnis tearing through the AL, the Indians had the look that they might actually be coming together as an offensive club as they held tough with Boston and Texas and won consecutive divisional series with the Twins and White Sox. Now, the offense that looked offensively competent enough to

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“hide” Lou Marson in the lineup now has Jack Hannahan back in the everyday mix (although Supermanahan has been a bright spot of late) to go along with a whole mess of players that started the season in Columbus and are trying to keep up in an AL Central race that the Tigers have grabbed by the throat in the last week.

The offense has disappeared (as Hafner, Kipnis, and an effective Brantley went away) and, with the exception of Justin Masterson and Carmona, the pitching has been...um, erratic as the starters have been unable to replicate their early success (Tomlin) or past success (Ubaldo...and read [this from Jordan Bastian](#)) while the back-end-of-the-bullpen has given away leads at the worst possible time of the season. While the thought that the starting pitching would carry this team down the stretch, the struggles of Ubaldo – and [a scout recently told B-Pro's John Perroto that](#)

, “Now you’re seeing why the Rockies were willing to move him. He has no command of his off-speed pitches, and his mechanics are a mess. This is going to be a long-term project for (pitching coach)

Tim Belcher

, and the Indians don’t have the luxury of time with where they are in the standings right now”...which is awesome – and the issues with Chris Perez have made it nearly impossible for the Tribe to overcome their offensive deficiencies as the team that has nearly zero margin for error is forced to rely on young players whose adjustments to MLB are going to result in more mistakes than this team can endure right now.

Unfortunately, the Indians have begun their probable slide down the standings that most have been waiting for since Memorial Day. Though we are only about a week-and-a-half from Labor Day, the naysayers will say “nay” and “I told you so”, but this Indians team scratched and clawed their way to stay in the AL Central race despite injuries that have affected this team from the beginning of the year to where we stand today.

Where we stand today is stepping up to the podium, ready to deliver the eulogy on an Indians’ season that resembled multiple rides in an amusement park throughout the course of the year. From the roller-coaster ups-and-downs to the Rotor-esque sticking around as the bottom seemed to drop out, the Indians seem to have finally started their final descent. While the last week has felt like the ride on the Demon Drop (and who know where the bottom is), it has been a fun ride.

Maybe the Indians have one last push left in them, but with the injuries taking their toll and with the young players being forced into positions that they may not quite be ready for, it may be time to get your tray table and your seat back to the upright and locked position as the ride that

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the Indians have been taking us on may finally be coming to an end...or at least some turbulence is on the horizon.

While there was much hullabaloo about the prospect of Jim Thome perhaps returning to the North Coast, let's not forget that the whole idea that Thome would actually even fit on the Indians is the assumption that Hafner is done for the season. Since Thome was likely claimed by the White Sox (who leapfrogged the Tribe in the waiver claim line by losing on Tuesday night), the point is moot, but the more interesting aspect to look at in all of this is Hafner's performance in the last few months and how his performance was obviously affected by not only that oblique injury that put him on the DL for a month earlier in the season, but by what we now hear was a lingering foot injury.

According to the Tribe's Lonnie Soloff, Hafner's foot injury apparently originally occurred on April 27th and while it's been reported that he re-aggravated the injury on Sunday, anyone who has been watching him run the has seen him limping for the last few weeks (at least) and the numbers back up that something's been amiss with him for a while. To wit, after the April 27th

game, Hafner had a .342 BA / .393 OBP / .566 SLG / .959 OPS line and after sitting out a couple of games to rest the foot, he returned on May 3rd

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From that time until he was shelved this week, he compiled a .259 BA / .353 OBP / .405 SLG /

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.758 OPS over his last 61 games with those numbers being badly affected by his performance in the last two months. In fact, from the time that Hafner returned on May 3rd to the oblique strain in mid-May, he posted a .955 OPS in 11 games and continued on that torrid pace when he returned from the oblique strain injury, posting a 1.100 OPS in his first 16 games back from the DL until the first week of July. While most of those 16 games were against NL opponents, in which Hafner was not much more than a glorified PH, his presence in the lineup gave the Indians' offense some teeth until he experienced a drop in production that affected the effectiveness of the Tribe lineup.

From July 8th until Hafner's placement on the DL, he posted a .206 BA / .288 OBP / .313 SLG / .601 OPS over a 34-game stretch as the effects of his foot injury grew more noticeable as he hobbled around the bases and experienced a nearly-complete power outage in nearly ¼ of the season. As the days wore on and Hafner's performance only worsened, it was obvious that he was attempting to play through pain, with the injury ultimately resulting in the DL stint that will likely end his season, with foot surgery probably thrown in for good measure and to erase any doubt that his 2011 is done.

What is perhaps most interesting about the effect of Hafner on the lineup is traceable to that early-season surge as, when Hafner hit the DL for his oblique strain, the Indians were 26-13. While everyone keeps pointing to that 30-15 start, perhaps a big portion of their early success is largely attributable to the presence of a (healthy) Hafner in the lineup and (perhaps just as importantly) a healthy Sizemore in the lineup with Hafner.

Lest anyone forget as we all wonder whether Grady's coming back (this year or ever), Sizemore posted a .974 OPS in his first 18 games back with the Tribe and his early performance (particularly combined with that of Hafner) is what allowed the Indians to get out to their blazing start. Sure, there were other factors involved, but when Hafner and Sizemore were showing why they're still probably the two most talented hitters on the team (when healthy...a big caveat), the Indians were building their lead in the AL Central, a lead they have only recently given up.

What does that mean for the future, in terms of decisions to be made with Sizemore and with Hafner seemingly snakebitten (again) by injuries?

Those are probably questions for another day, but when you realize that those two were paid more than 40% of a payroll that was lower than \$50M (and [go look at this new page and bookmark it](#) ...if you're still

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bookmarking), you start to realize that one of the reasons that the Indians raced out to that early lead was the performances of Hafner, then Sizemore producing at the plate.

Since Sizemore injured himself (and I'm not even sure which injury I'm talking about because I can't keep track) and since Hafner's foot injury took him off track, the Indians have been not even treading water, but taking it on. The pitching kept them around for a while and the performances of Cabrera and (later) Santana held the offense together for a while, but without Sizemore, a fully healthy Hafner, and a fully healthy and productive Choo, the Indians were bound to start to falter, despite the reinforcements from Columbus...or maybe because of those reinforcements and who they were not.

The Indians, as an organization, cannot withstand the injuries that they have all season and simply soldier through them the way that others can. While I know that this isn't telling any secrets and is preaching to the assembled choir, it is (as always) worth noting that of the top 10 teams in MLB ([sorted by winning percentage](#)), seven of them have payrolls of \$90M or more and three of them have payrolls of \$164M or more.

Is it a coincidence that those three teams (with the [payrolls over \\$164M](#)) have the best three records in baseball?

No, and it brings back into focus what the Indians are trying to do in terms of accumulating as much under-club-control, "affordable" talent as quickly as possible in an attempt to not just compete for a division, but for much more. To do that however, they need health and production from some key spots and, as the year wore on, they didn't get it as injuries, inexperience, and attrition remained doggedly at the heels of the Indians with the last week feeling like it has finally caught up with the Tribe.

With all of that said, and attempting to keep some folks off of the 480 bridge (it is baseball and a pennant race in August after all), sometimes it is interesting to look back before looking forward and, with that in mind, [this is what was written in this space on August 7th](#) , as the Tigers were about to arrive into town:

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Even if the Indians can play close to .500 baseball in these next 11 games, the teams that follow that trip around the AL Central are the Mariners, the Royals, the A's, and the Royals once again...or 3 of the 4 teams with the worst record in all of the AL (the Orioles are the worst), meaning that the Indians still have an opportunity to tread water in a still-winnable division for a while, with a stretch of games coming at the end of the month and the beginning of September that they could use to catapult them into (or back into) control of the AL Central...where no team has a positive run differential into August.



This may be crazy to point out, but the Indians went 6-5 in those 11 divisional games and despite the fact that they started off their homestand by going 1-3 against the Mariners, the soft underbelly of the upcoming schedule may allow them to remain relevant a little longer...not much longer, but longer.

As difficult as it may be to envision on a day in which the Indians' lineup included 5 players (Zeke, Cord, Duncan, Donald, and Chiz) who spent most of the year in Columbus, one player who probably SHOULD have gone to Columbus...or be in Columbus (LaPorta), and one player who made the team as a non-roster invitee in Spring Training (Hannahan), the Indians still actually have some time to make some hay against some teams that are probably on about equal footing as them right now as the Royals, the A's, and the Royals (again, this time on the road) are next up on the schedule before the Tigers come to Cleveland on Labor Day.

Now the Tigers will face the Twins, Royals, and White Sox after they leave St. Pete and they have certainly taken advantage of the Indians' struggles by going off on a tear of their own (they've won 9 of their last 12) to take control of the division, but we've seen the Tigers fall apart in years past down the stretch. Detroit still has the A's and the Orioles on their schedule in addition to the AL Central heavy finish, but if the Indians can get some momentum on this

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homestand and in Kansas City, it's possible that the Tigers arrive back to Cleveland on Labor Day with still something to play for and attempting to keep the Tribe at bay.

As improbable as that looks right now, how improbable was the idea that baseball would figure to be relevant in Cleveland on Labor Day when the season started?

This team has been overcoming obstacles all season long to remain relevant and while it is certainly hard to see them being able to overcome the injuries and the inconsistency that they're getting right now, baseball's a funny game. Whether the Indians' fans will start laughing again this season remains to be seen or whether the Indians' Front Office still is going to try to pull some rabbits from hats to keep this team viable (or get this team back to viable) as the Indians have made the final turn to come down the homestretch.

Against all odds, the lead horse is still within view, even if the distance between the two is growing with each stride. Whether this becomes a race to the finish or simply watching the Tigers pulling away from behind will bear out in the coming weeks, but the longshot underdog has caused some excitement around the first three turns.

How much is left in them – bruised and battered as they are – is what we're about to find out...