

Fave Five #4: Indians vs. Yankees, 1997

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, September 08 2011 6:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 09 2011 6:37 PM



1997 A. L. CHAMPIONS

Jaret Wright

Digital Art by: LOUIE ANDERSON

There are times you get a feeling- more than a feeling, a premonition- about the outcome of a game before it's even played. That feeling, that premonition, could be bad- and if you've rooted for teams in this town long enough, it's probably a familiar one. Then again, sometimes it's a good premonition. Sometimes you just *know* the Browns/Indians/Cavaliers are going to win, even before the ball is rolled out.

By my count I've had that good premonition twice since I became a Cleveland fan way back in the early '80s. The first time came during the 1986 AFC Divisional Playoffs, after the Browns overcame a ten-point deficit in the last four minutes of regulation to tie the Jets and sent it to overtime. The score may have been knotted at 20-20, but I just knew the Browns were going to win. Even Mark Moseley's shank of a game-winning chip-shot field goal in the first overtime didn't shake my belief. *That's okay*, I thought, *they're still going to win*. And sure enough, they did.

My second good premonition came before Game Five of the 1997 American League Division Series between the Indians and Yankees at Jacobs Field. And like that first premonition, it was right on the money.

The 1997 season was a strange one for the Indians. The teams that had dominated the American League in 1995 and '96 had been radically altered. Albert Belle, the power gear in

Fave Five #4: Indians vs. Yankees, 1997

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, September 08 2011 6:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 09 2011 6:37 PM

those monster lineups, had [gone to the White Sox in free agency](#) after the '96 season, instantly becoming the most hated sports figure in Cleveland not named Art Modell. The dynamic Kenny Lofton was

[traded to Atlanta for Marquis Grissom and David Justice](#)

prior to 1997. Carlos Baerga

[partied himself out of town](#)

midway through the 1996 season, and other significant figures from those juggernauts- Eddie Murray, Paul Sorrento, Tony Pena, Julian Tavarez- were now plying their trade elsewhere.

In their places were new faces and new names. Grissom, Justice, Matt Williams and Tony Fernandez all made their Cleveland debuts in the summer of 1997. Melding these new faces with established Tribesmen like Thome, Ramirez, Vizquel and Alomar proved a painstaking process. On August 13 the Indians were 59-56; just two-and-a-half games in front of the White Sox and three-and-a-half in front of the Brewers in the AL Central, a division they had won by thirty and fourteen-and-a-half games the previous two seasons.

Eventually the real Indians finally stood up. With the lineup clicking and the pitching bolstered by the arrival from the minors of flame-throwing prospect Jaret Wright, Cleveland heated up and pulled away down the stretch, winning the Central by six games over Chicago. But the Tribe's 86-75 record paled in comparison to the 100-and-99-win extravaganzas of 1995 and '96. There were plenty of individual stars and the offense was one of the best in baseball- but pitching is the coin of the realm in October, and the Tribe's hurlers were ranked in the bottom half of the American League.

What's more, new powers had risen since Cleveland's pennant romp in 1995. The Tribe had been upset by Baltimore in the '96 Division Series, and the veteran Orioles were back in '97 with a club that won a league-best 98 games. The New York Yankees had won their first World Championship in fifteen years the season before, and like the Orioles they looked even more formidable in 1997. With a balanced lineup, a pitching staff that was rock-solid from front to back, and the cool leadership of Joe Torre, the Yanks went 96-66 and, despite finishing second to Baltimore in the AL East, were considered more than capable of winning the whole shooting match for the second consecutive season.

New York's first assignment was to dispatch the Indians in the Division Series- something they were heavily favored to do. Cleveland got off to a great start in Game One at Yankee Stadium, hammering David Cone for five first-inning runs. But with the Indians leading 6-3 with two outs and a man on in the bottom of the sixth, everything fell apart. After a Rey Sanchez RBI single made it 6-4, Tim Lincecum hit a two-run bomb off Eric Plunk to tie the score. Derek Jeter came up

Fave Five #4: Indians vs. Yankees, 1997

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, September 08 2011 6:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 09 2011 6:37 PM

and hit another homer to give the Yankees the lead. Paul O'Neill then sent all of Gotham into hysterics with another home run, [the third straight off the dazed Plunk](#), to make it 8-6. That score stood, and now New York led the best-of-five series, 1-0.

It was a devastating defeat, and things didn't get any better early in Game Two. Almost out of desperation, Mike Hargrove named Jaret Wright as his starter- and the jittery kid wasted no time falling behind. Three walks, a double and a sacrifice fly gave New York a 3-0 first-inning lead. But Wright settled down, shutting out the Yankees the next five innings and giving Cleveland's offense a chance to respond- which it did. A five-run fourth gave the Indians the lead, a two-run homer by Matt Williams in the fifth solidified it, and the Tribe was on its way to the 7-5 win that snarled the series at a game apiece as the action moved to Jacobs Field.

Game Two looked like nothing more than a temporary reprieve. Charles Nagy, Cleveland's Game Three starter, had long been a Yankee whipping boy, and he stayed uncomfortably in that role as New York regained the series lead [with a 6-1 thrashing](#). Joe Torre's lineup kayoed Nagy in the fourth, and Tribe killer Paul O'Neill put it away with a grand slam off relief man Chad Ogea. New York starter David Wells, another Tribe killer, cruised to a complete-game five-hitter, and the Indians were now one game away from elimination.

At this point the Indians were just about out of lives. New York had racked up nineteen runs in three games against the mediocre Tribe pitching staff, while Cleveland had done little offensively aside from those two five-run innings in Yankee Stadium. The Indians looked simply outclassed by the reigning World Champions, who seemed destined for an ALCS rematch with the Orioles in an East Coast battle that had the networks salivating.

Fave Five #4: Indians vs. Yankees, 1997

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, September 08 2011 6:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, September 09 2011 6:37 PM

