



Imagine going to your job after somebody else in your department just got a promotion. You're going to work with no real incentive. The paycheck still comes, and as long as you aren't on commission or due for a review anytime soon, there's not a whole lot of motivation. You've been working your tail off for the last five months, feverishly trying to be considered for that beautiful pay raise, an office with a view, and a hot secretary who likes wearing short skirts to work.

The big day comes and you slept terribly the night before and look awful for the chance you've been waiting for all year long. You bomb your interview and go down in flames. Because that guy you really can't stand and would like to punch in the face repeatedly with the garbage inkjet printer on your tiny little desk got the promotion, a desire to mail it in for a while and just lazily go through the motions sets in.

You're left with two choices. Pack it up and play more Tetris and Angry Birds in lieu of working on Excel spreadsheets or put your nose to the grindstone and try to get somebody's attention for the next time a better position becomes available at the company. It's a gut check, really. It is a way to examine who you are and establish what personal standards you set for yourself.

The Indians have bombed their interview, lost out on the promotion, and the girl with the short skirts is now sitting on her new boss's desk like they're about to film an adult movie. Undoubtedly, this is the hardest time of the year for a baseball team on the outside looking in. It is a spot that the Indians are familiar with since 2003 except for a couple seasons, but this year, it's different. After a 30-15 start, the Indians are 16 games under .500 and have kept the fine folks at Medical Mutual Insurance exceptionally busy.

Given that we are a football town, it is not as hard of a time for fans as it could be. Notice that other doormat ballclubs like the Orioles, the Royals, the Padres, and the Pirates all have competent football teams for fans to follow once the calendar hits September. Others, like us, have more frustration to look forward to. Such is life as a sports fan in Cleveland.

Part of the reason, I think, that the majority of Indians “fans” are very wishy-washy on the team and are so diehard on the Browns is that the grieving period for an Indians season is very small compared to football. After the Browns, since the Cavs are irrelevant, we have three months before the baseball season begins. In regards to the Indians, football begins before baseball even ends. Baseball then becomes “the time between Browns games”. There’s less examination of the previous season and, given the recent struggles, the lack of love for the Tribe seems to begin earlier and earlier as summer fades into fall.

Certainly, not all people are Browns first and Indians second, and I am one of them. Sure, I watch every Sunday Browns game, but I also spend a lot of time making my offseason wish list for the Indians and taking a very analytical look at the end of the season. I have always been of the belief that the next season begins the day the current season ends. No time can be wasted. Obviously, there are timeline restrictions on talking to free agents or whatnot, but as a front office, performance analyses of the players on the team need to be compiled, weaknesses need to be put on bulletin boards, and end-of-season player meetings need to address concerns and give the players’ offseason homework.

I’m sure the front office has already done their due diligence on offseason preparation. Meanwhile, the Indians still have games to play. While it may not seem like much, their goal for the rest of the year should be to finish the season .500 or better. If we ignore the Indians hot start, we all would have taken .500 or better this season with the roster as it looked in April. This season has to be considered a success on many levels. Getting to .500 would give the organization a little something to show for it.

You can learn a lot about the personalities in the clubhouse at times like this. There is no shortage of reasons to pack it in and eagerly await the offseason. This is especially true for the lone few who have stayed healthy all year. However, leaders emerge during these times. The guys who are able to get their teammates pumped up enough to give a solid effort in a game where there really isn’t anything to play for but pride. Leaders who lead both by example and vocally. Young teams like the Tribe need leaders.

Thursday night's game against the White Sox is a microcosm of what September baseball for two teams who can barely see the division leader on the horizon. It was gloomy, disgusting weather to play baseball in. A steady mist/drizzle/rain fell all night long, prompting the grounds crew to put diamond dust down between every inning and also halt the game to tend to the deteriorating mound conditions. Yet the Indians, and specifically starter David Huff, battled to a 1-1 deadlock in the seventh inning before the bottom fell in as the Indians went to their secondary relievers.

Jim Thome, who hits more air molecules than baseballs at this stage in his career, had a couple of hits. Asdrubal Cabrera was on base three times. On the flip side, Carlos Santana led the team with three strikeouts in four at bats. Evaluation never stops at any level in baseball. September baseball at the Major League level is one of the biggest evaluation periods of all. In general, most teams are giving their big prospects their first taste of The Show. Due to injuries, the Indians have already done that. But, teams like the Indians, who have pieces in place for next season are looking for guys to step up and become viable bench players and fill-ins. Some are playing for big league roster spots on any ballclub.

This time of the baseball season is hard as a fan. Continuing to keep interest is a bit of a chore as fall sitcoms and dramas return, football is starting to take over the sports landscape, and the last nice weather days are upon us before we drive on salt truck-filled roadways. The games have little to no meaning and the season fate has been decided.

The Indians heartache and frustration has turned to optimism about the Browns and the new West Coast Offense that they will be running. Just like that. In the blink of an eye. With the flip of a switch. By the finale against the Tigers, after the Indians lost the first two games of a "must-sweep" series, the attendance dropped to 16,783 (with probably half of that physically there).

While I watch the rest of the Indians games to see leaders emerge, the only leaders most people in Northeast Ohio are worried about are the ones who play in the Leaders Division in the Big Ten for college football. No commentary on the Indians except for those who swear up and down that they knew the team would fall apart and disappoint.

The skies become greyer. The leaves change colors. The Indians become an afterthought. Autumn in Cleveland.