

May a Crucial Month for the Tribe in the Standings and at the Box Office

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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May is going to turn into a key month for the Cleveland Indians, both in the standings and at the box office.

The Tribe went into Thursday night's game against the White Sox with Justin Masterson on the hill and a chance to win a road series from their Central Division rivals. The Indians entered the day a game up on both the White Sox and the "unbeatable" Detroit Tigers.

While the Indians didn't repeat their hot start from 2011, when an 18-8 April put them four-and-a-half games up on Kansas City and eight games up on the Tigers on this date one year ago, the Tribe finds itself in first place for the second consecutive year.

The Tribe struggled to maintain that pace, of course, and hit June 1 of last year at just 33-20, but had increased their lead to five games over the second-place Tigers.

It's hard to project very far when looking at the day-to-day schedule in baseball, but May isn't that brutal for the Indians. After this weekend's series with Texas, they have series with current basement dwellers Boston (AL East), Seattle (AL West) and Miami (NL East). The month is also heavy with division games, as the Tribe will face the White Sox seven more times this month, along Kansas City, and their first looks at Minnesota and Detroit.

Speaking of the Tigers, things haven't gone quite as planned for the off-season champions. As [Rany Jazayerli pointed out earlier this week on Grantland](#)

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“A year after the Brewers bucked baseball's recent trend toward valuing glove work, the Tigers decided to take it a step further when they announced that (Miguel) Cabrera would move to third base. They're now playing a first baseman at third base, a third baseman (Jhonny Peralta) at shortstop, a DH (Prince Fielder) at first base, and a left fielder (Ryan Raburn) at second base. Left fielder Delmon Young has the range of a fire hydrant, and apparently he has the personality of one too – he's on the restricted list after he was arrested for aggravated harassment. The Tigers aren't fielding a defense as much as some kind of weird social experiment, the sort of thing on which Randolph and Mortimer Duke would have wagered a dollar.”

“Raburn (8-for-54 this season) is struggling to hit Peter Dinklage's weight (Detroit's second basemen are batting a combined .156/.198/.247 this season), and Young was waived by the mighty Twins just last year. Brennan Boesch and Andy Dirks are good fourth outfielders forced into roles as the team's primary right fielder and DH. The Tigers have reached so deep into the barrel that their starting DH over the weekend was Brad Eldred, who is 31 years old and had played all of 85 games in the majors before he was called up last week.

“Behind (Justin) Verlander, the rotation is hit-or-miss: Rick Porcello and Doug Fister are pitch-to-contact guys who will be rolling their eyes at fielders all year, while Max Scherzer has top-of-the-rotation stuff but middle-of-the-rotation results. The bullpen is neither deep nor particularly effective. The Tigers are struggling to get over .500, and they'd be in even more dire straits if not for Drew Smyly, a lightly regarded left-hander who made his major league debut when Fister went on the DL three weeks ago, and who in four starts has allowed just four runs.”

Kind of makes you feel a little bit better about Shelley Duncan and Johnny Damon, doesn't it?
OK, not really.

Even with their flaws the Tigers are probably still a better team than the Indians because they have Verlander, Fielder and Cabrera. But if the Tribe has a more consistent and balanced team, even if that balance includes a daily lineup featuring Michael Brantley (.235), Shin-Soo Choo (.219), Casey Kotchman (.143) and Johnny Damon (and his general cramping), can they keep up with Detroit?

They can if they can keep their pitching in order.

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Derek Lowe has been ridiculous in going 4-1 with a 2.27 ERA to start the season. He's also gone at least six innings in each of his starts. Even though he is 0-2, Masterson looked sharp in his last outing, throwing eight-and-a-third innings of two-run ball against the Angels, with the most important stat being the 17 groundball outs he recorded.

Josh Tomlin has looked better of late and, after giving up two homeruns in his first start of the year, he's only served up one in his last 22 innings of work. With the way the long ball haunted him last season, he gave up 24, that's a good sign. Finally, Jeanmar Gomez has only given up three earned runs in his last 11.1 innings of work.

And don't forget: Ubaldo Jimenez is [working on those mechanics](#), so it's only a matter of time before he joins the party (ahem).

The bullpen is holding up as well, [as Paul points out](#) that Vinnie Pestano has struck out at least one batter in every one of his appearances this year and Nick Hagadone is striking out 29 percent of the batter he's faced (although in a smaller sample size). And since the hot mess of Opening Day, closer Chris Perez has been perfect, earning a save in eight consecutive chances and holding the opposition to just a single run in 9.1 innings of work.

It would be nice if the offense could be a bit more productive, especially when the load the bases. On the season, the Tribe batters have come to the plate with the bases loaded 24 times and on 14 of those trips they have failed to tally even a single run.

For a team that is always going to have to battle to score runs, they really need to start doing a better job of bringing home the bacon when the opportunity arises.

We know it is still early – and the baseball season, much like the English Premier League, is a marathon not a sprint – but being in first place on May 1 has some historical significance in the AL Central.

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Five times in the past eight years, the team leading the Central Division on May 1 has gone on to win the division. The times it didn't happen, the Twins came back to beat out the White Sox in 2006 and 2009. Oh, and the Tigers came back last year to take the division from the Tribe.

May is also an important month for the Tribe because, now that the NFL Draft is over, and with the NBA lottery not being held until May 30, the rest of this month the Indians are not competing (for the most part) for the attention of Cleveland fans.

If they can get through the month in decent shape, the Indians could be set up for another fun summer. And that is where the box office comes in.

If the Tribe can stay in contention and keep the fan base engaged until the calendar flips to June 1, school will almost be out for the summer and the weather should be consistently better, meaning we should see fewer of the four-digit attendance figures that are a reality of April baseball in a cold-weather city.

It is a pretty narrow window, but if the Indians can stay near the top of the standings through June, July and August, it will keep fans from stressing over who the back-up defensive linemen are for the Browns.

And as fans, that's all we can really ask for right now – a reason to pay attention during the hot summer months. Just get us through the summer and we'll worry about September when it gets here.