



On Tuesday night, the Cleveland Indians beat the Oakland A's 1-0. It was the second straight win for the Tribe over the As. It also was the team's 8th win in their last 9 games and pushed their season record to 16-14. Overall, a decent start to the season, right? The answer depends on what you're measuring.

While the Indians were winning there were a total of 9,474 people in attendance at that game or about 40 less than the night before. Those are the kind of pre-Jacobs Field numbers that ought to give fans the willies. Apparently it's just giving them shrugs.

The Indians have the worst attendance in the major leagues and they aren't even sniffing the next worse team, the Kansas City Royals. In fact, the Indians would have to increase their average per game attendance by a whopping 27%, or another 268,000 fans over the rest of the season, just to equal the Royals' average.

Parsing further, if you eliminate opening day and the first game of the Yankees' series, each of which drew over 40,000 fans, the Indians are averaging almost to the person the attendance at Tuesday night's A's game. That would mean they'd have to attract almost a half million more fans than the current pace just to stay with the Royals' current average.

Lest anyone think this suggests that the Indians' attendance is in a free fall, that wouldn't be quite accurate. Year over year the Indians are averaging a mere 534 fans less per game than at the same point in 2012. This year's poor attendance isn't news, it's the norm.

When you think about all this in economic terms it's pretty clear that the Indians' are losing more and more ground against their competitors. If you assume that the average fan spends a mere \$20 at a game, including his ticket, the difference between the Indians' and Royals' attendance translates to more than \$5.3 million less in revenue for the Indians and that's being exceptionally conservative in estimates. It's probably far closer to \$10 million and likely even more than that.

There are a multitude of reasons for the Indians' poor attendance including the deadening approach that the owners, Larry and Paul Dolan, have taken over the years. A seemingly never ending string of poor personnel decisions wrapped around an exceptionally tight budget have combined to make the Indians not just a perennially lousy team but a boring one as well. The fans have been systemically conditioned to expect the worst. This past off season the Dolans decided to switch the paradigm, at least for one season, by spending money in advance of the revenues. It's resulted in a marginally better team and a less boring one to boot. They lead the league in home runs, for example. But the revenues at this point aren't following. Indeed they are still dropping. If that trend continues, don't look for deficit spending next off season and so the spiral will deepen.

The Dolans haven't been the worst owners in team history or even the cheapest. But they haven't done much to infuse the franchise with much excitement either. They've entrusted their franchise to Mark Shapiro, first as general manager and now as team president, and the results, well, speak for themselves. Chris Antonetti is relatively new to his job but he's a Shapiro acolyte and subordinate so there's no reason to expect a different approach or result. The on field results this group has achieved are dubious. But perhaps the broader indictment is that they've been part of a far larger problem. Their indifferent ownership and poorly executed approach has helped foster a town of indifferent sports fans, people that at best casually care about what's happening but certainly not enough to invest.

The Indians mostly own the spring and summer and as they've wallowed in the muck and mire, people who were once fans have been infected not with disdain but indifference. At least when fans show animosity toward you they're feeling something. They're engaged still on an emotional level. When they're indifferent it simply means they just don't care what happens.

But we can't lay this all at the feet of the Indians though because they have the longest season they get a slightly larger share of the blame. Cleveland is a Browns town and it hardly bears mentioning the soul-sucking siege that this team has inflicted on this area. Randy Lerner was not just a reluctant owner he was an indifferent one as well and it showed in both his approach and in his results.

The sale to Jimmy Halsam was at least two years too late. Yet even with all the issues Haslam is facing professionally, he still remains the best hope to re-energize the moribund franchise. Unfortunately, those professional issues are a huge distraction to Haslam personally and will be for months, if not years, to come. Meanwhile he's entrusted the day to day operations to perhaps the most boring front office executive ever in Joe Banner. Holmgren was a joke but his nonsensical outbursts at least added comic relief. Banner just generally rests his head on his hands and sighs. It's the perfect meme not just for the completed draft but for the fans as well.

Then there's the Cavs, bleeding fans at a faster clip than even the Indians. The Cavs have been in a free fall for 3 years now coinciding with the loss of LeBron James. During that time owner Dan Gilbert has been mostly distracted by an expanding empire of other businesses including his casinos. Fans also know that the NBA is the toughest league in which to turn around a franchise so even a fully engaged Gilbert wouldn't make much difference anyway. Fans don't just know the Cavs are awful right now they know they'll be awful for years to come as well. Put it this way, when the biggest selling point going into the next season is to tout the rehiring of a former coach who couldn't win a championship with LeBron James, the franchise is in more trouble than it realizes.

When you look out toward the horizon on each franchise there's nothing much to see and there hasn't been for a long time, especially in the case of the Indians and the Browns. It's had an impact, a significant one, on the fans. They've gone well beyond cynicism and are now simply indifferent and if there's one thing that's abundantly clear from the Indians' attendance results thus far, indifferent fans don't throw good money after bad.

One of these years one of these teams will emerge to reinvigorate this town and give the fans a reason to believe again. It's just that when you look out into the distance it doesn't look like a ship will be coming in any time soon.

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