Buckeyes - Wolverines. Cavs - Pistons. Indians - Tigers. I would say that the rivalry between the sports teams of Ohio and Michigan is as lively now as it's ever been in my lifetime. Add in the fact that first place in the AL Central is on the line, and that the Saturday and Sunday games are nationally televised ... and you have yourself one helluva series this weekend. Cris Sykes previews it for us.

The battle for supremacy in the American League Central Division begins tonight as the Cleveland Indians travel to Comerica Park to take on the Detroit Tigers.

This Cleveland/Detroit rivalry is really picking up some steam. The two cities are battling it out in both baseball and basketball, in two premier matchups. Wonder if there will be any "LeBron is a punk" smack run this weekend in Detroit? And oh yeah, there's a little college football rilvalry between the states of Ohio and Michigan as well.

The Tigers are in the midst of a pretty magical run over the last fourteen months. They have gone from the laughing stock of the league to a World Series berth and now the second best record in baseball since losing 119 games in 2003. I still give the Indians credit for the Tigers turning things around last year. Following an early season smackdown at the hands of the Tribe, Jim Leyland launched his now famous tirade, and the team began winning almost immediately thereafter.

The two teams have gone back and forth holding the top spot in the Central Division and hopefully the Tribe can put some good baseball together and go in and take two out of three and regain the division lead. It will not be easy, as the Tigers are one of the best teams in baseball at home (15-8) while the Indians are a below .500 team on the road (10-13).

Friday, May 25th, 7:05 PM

Paul Byrd (4-1, 3.55) vs. Nate Robertson (4-3, 3.62)

The Indians will call on Paul Byrd in the opening game of the series, giving him the responsibility og trying to shut down the best hitting team in the American League on Friday night. The Tigers offense leads the American League in three statistics and they are three big ones, batting average (.277), slugging percentage (.468) and runs scored (260).

Paul Byrd is the type of pitcher that can give them fits, as evident by his career 6-2 mark against them to go with a 3.04 lifetime ERA. As bad as Byrd was in 2006, overall, he pitched pretty well against this Tiger team in three out of four starts. In the three good starts, Byrd totaled 20 2/3 innings, allowing three earned runs, with 15 strikeouts. In the bad start, Byrd allowed 10 hits and seven earned runs in three innings. Maybe his eyelids were jammed?

Nate Robertson will be opposing the Tribe offense on Friday. Robertson must be the only Tiger pitcher not getting the benefit of all that offense, as his four wins against three losses despite a 3.62 ERA, would suggest. Robertson has only allowed more than three earned runs in once in nine starts. The Indians can

fell free to go with their best lineup, as Robertson has nearly the same batting average against left-handed hitters (.286) as he does right-handers (.287).

Robertson has started 11 games in his career against the Indians, going 2-3 with a 5.00 ERA. Robertson faced the Indians twice in 2006, beating them once (two earned runs in six innings) and getting mauled by them once (six ER in 2 1/3 IP). Jhonny Peralta, who has owned Robertson in his career, is 9-16 with five doubles in his career against Robertson.

Saturday, May 26th, 3:05 PM

C.C. Sabathia (6-1, 3.51 ERA) vs. Justin Verlander (5-1, 2.68 ERA)

This right here is what we like to call a good old fashion pitcher's duel. Our best against their best. Man to man. This game was originally scheduled for a 7:05 start, but even the executives at Fox realize they can't show the Red sox or Yankees every week.

Sabathia will be trying to become the third starter in the AL to get to seven wins (Josh Beckett and John Lackey) when he takes the mound in the first inning. C.C. has watched his earned run average more than a full run over his last six starts, but the Indians have managed to win five of the six.

For his career, Sabathia is 10-7 against the Motor City Kitties, with a 4.04 ERA in 20 starts. Carlos Guillen is the Tiger to keep an eye on, owning a career batting average over .300 for his career against Sabathia. 2006 was not a very lucky year for Sabathia versus Detroit. C.C. made three starts, C.C. took three losses. The bad luck part? He only allowed six earned runs in his 22 innings of work (2.45 ERA).

The Tigers ace will be looking to match Sabathia pitch for pitch on Saturday. Justin Verlander has

been terrific through his first 41 Major League starts, carrying a 3.57 ERA with a 22-12 record. He has been even better in 2007, as he ranks seventh in the AL in earned run average. Verlander is working on a string of four consecutive games of only allowing two runs to cross the plate. Those starts followed his worst start of the season, when he gave up five runs (three earned) in only three innings, against the Minnesota Twins of all teams.

It took until his third and final start of 2006 for the Indians to figure out a way to hit Verlander. After being held to two runs over 13 1/3 innings during his first two starts, Verlander got lit up like a Christmas tree in his third start versus the Tribe. On August 26th, the Indians torched Verlander to the tune of eight earned runs on ten hits in four and two thirds innings of work. Verlander is another Tiger pitcher that Jhonny Peralta likes to face, as he has a .364 career average against him. Grady Sizemore will look to continue his

turn around, as he boasts a .455 career mark including a home run into Saturday against Verlander.

Sunday, May 24th, 8:05 PM

Fausto Carmona (5-1, 2.77 ERA) vs. Mike Maroth (3-1, 4.94 ERA)

Hopefully, the Indians win their first two of the series and Carmona will head to the mound looking for the sweep and open up some ground between the two teams. If not, he will be pitching to salvage the series and keep the Tribe within striking distance. For the second straight game, the battle for the AL Central will call for a national television appearance, this time on ESPN's Sunday Night Baseabll.

Fausto had his string of 19 1/3 innings of scoreless baseball was broken up in his last start, when he took a no decision against the Royals on Tuesday. Carmona will be making his second career start at Comerica Park, which is where he held the Tigers to one earned run over six innings in his Indians debut last year. It would be the only game Carmona won in his young career, until turning into the Johan-beater in late April.

The Tigers will be sending Indian killer Mike Maroth to the mound on Sunday evening. Maroth has mesmerized the Indians hitters over his 12 starts against them, going 8-3, with a 2.71 ERA. Take the Indians off the schedule and Maroth is

a 40-58, 4.98 ERA having stiff. His ERA against the Indians is a full two runs better than his career ERA, so something about the Indians brings out the best in Maroth.

Tigers Hitting

As mentioned earlier, these guys can mash the baseball. They love to hit gaps and pile runs on in large quantities. Plus, the Tigers are actually getting hotter at the plate as the weather warms up. Over the last week, they have seven regulars hitting over .300, six slugging over .600 and four getting on base over 40% of the time. Those numbers have allowed them to average over seven runs per game in their last six.

Who is the hottest of them all? Magglio

Ordonez. In his last six games, Ordonez is 13-24, with four home runs, eight RBI and twelve runs scored. Carlos Guillen, who was an Omar Vizquel physical away from being an Indian, is also extremely hot, going 10-25, with three home runs and eight RBI in his last six games.

Tiger Bullpen

With the loss of Joel Zumaya, the Tiger bullpen has not been as unbelievable as it was at times in 2006. They still find ways to get things done, but they do not have anybody out there that makes you say put the women and children to bed, this is going to get nasty. Todd Jones does the closing for Detroit and is one of those Doug Jones, Bob Wickman types. He doesn't strike many out, in fact he walks

more than he strikes out, but he apparently does not need to by going 15-17 in save chances. You will probably see Wil Ledezma and Bobby Seay each a couple of times this weekend, as they are the lefties in the Tiger bullpen. Neither has been very effective in 2007. Each will wander out to the mound with an ERA over five and a half. Fernando Rodney is their prime right handed set-up guy, but he has struggled this year allowing more than a base-runner an inning and sporting a 4.71 ERA.

Let's hope we get the chance to see old friend Jose Mesa a few times this weekend. If we do, it means one of two things; the Indians are up big, or they are about to rally. These stats are Danny Graveslike: 12 appearances covering

eight and two thirds innings, 15 hits, 12 earned runs, three home runs and five walks.

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