Does it get any better than this? The Tribe, winners of seven of eight, week before the All-Star break. Making the short drive to Detroit for three with the second place, division rival, defending American League champion Detroit Tigers. With C.C. Sabathia and Justin Verlander, two of the candidates to start the All-Star game, opposing each other in the series finale. Cris Sykes previews the series for us.

For the thousands in attendance, and the hundreds of thousands watching at home ... we are scheduled for 27 innings of Major League Baseball, for the undisputed midway point champion of the American League Central. In the first base dugout, wearing the white home uniforms, the defending American League Champion Detroit "Motor City Kitties" Tiiiiiiigerrrrrrs. In the third base dugout, wearing the special event blue jerseys over gray pants, your Cleveland "Little Engine That Could" Innnnndiannnnnsssss.

Lets get ready to tumble!

(Sorry, can't afford to pay Michael Buffer's fee for using the word rumble).

Cleveland and Detroit will do battle for the third time this year as the Indians embark on their final road trip before the All-Star break. Going into the series, the Tribe holds a two game advantage over Detroit so it will take a three game sweep for the Tigers to take over the division lead. Detroit also has to follow this series up with three games against the Boston Red Sox, so the chances are pretty good the Indians can hold a lead heading into a well-deserved four-day rest.

In the first series of the year between the two teams, the Indians walked into Comerica Park and slapped the Tigers around in a three game sweep. Series number two was a four gamer, in Cleveland, which coincided with the Cavaliers finishing off the Pistons. The Tribe won the first two games before celebrating

with the Cavs a little too much and dropping the final two games.

Tuesday, July 3rd, 7:05 PM

Paul Byrd (7-3, 4.67 Earned Run Average) vs. Nate Robertson (4-6, 4.82 ERA)

If I can promise one thing to all the faithful readers of The Cleveland Fan, it is this: there will not be a lot of swinging and missing on Tuesday at Comerica Park. The duo of Byrd and Robertson strike out about one half of a batter (or one Mike Rouse) per inning.

Paul Byrd has begun to rebound from consecutive poor starts with a pair of strong ones. Since getting tattooed like he was an extra on Miami Ink by both Seattle and Atlanta, giving up 12 earned runs in nine innings, he managed to hold the Oakland A's and Washington Nationals to six runs in 13 2/3 innings.

Byrd should be happy to embark on a new month of the season. June was not very kind to him as he dropped two out of three decisions over five starts. He also saw his earned run average jump one full run over his 28 innings in the month.

Against the Tigers, Byrd's career numbers are some of his best against any team. He has made 13 starts versus the Tigers and has a record of seven and two to go along with his 3.22 ERA. This will be Byrd's

second start of 2007 against Detroit. He came away from the first one victorious, allowing four earned runs in six and one third innings of work.

Nate Robertson stinks. I don't really know what else to say about him. He stinks so badly, he got to go one the disabled list with a "tired arm". If you don't believe me, here are some stats to back up my claim. Right-handed batters hit Robertson at a .308 clip, which is bad, but left-handers hit him for a .313 average. The guy is left-handed and can't get lefties out. He is terrible at home, allowing hitters to bat .290 with a slugging + on-base percentage (OPS) of .791, which is bad. On the road though it gets much worse. Away from Comerica, he allows teams to hit .340 and have an OPS of .912! To put that in perspective, Jeremy Sowers "limited" the opposition to a .310 average and an .866 OPS.

For his career against the Cleveland Indians, Robertson is not much better. In 12 career starts, he has a two and four record with a 5.24 ERA. Robertson made a start against the Indians in Detroit, and was treated like the dog he is. He allowed 10 hits, five earned runs and three home runs over five and two thirds innings. Casey Blake, Victor Martinez and (get ready for this) JOSH BARFIELD all took Robertson deep in that start.

Wednesday, July 5th, 7:05 PM

Jake Westbrook (1-3, 6.10 ERA) vs. Kenny Rogers (2-0, 0.75

ERA)

Welcome back Jake. We missed you and it is great to have you back pitching every fifth day. You had us pretty scared while you were giving up more than a run per inning in Single-A ball, but we understand the infield defense is not all that down there.

Prior to going on the disabled list, Westbrook was not pitching like the Jake we all know. Could he have been feeling the pressure of being known as the guy that got Mr. Dolan to open the wallet? Did one of the moths fly out and hit him in the eye, messing with the focus?

Since being activated from the DL on June 24th, Westbrook has been excellent. In 14 innings, Jake has only allowed four earned runs. It is too bad for Jake the Indians have been unable to support him. In his first start, Westbrook worked seven innings and gave up three runs but took a loss against Washington. He followed that up with seven innings of one run ball only to leave with a no decision in a game won by the Indians on Ben Fransisco's first career home run.

The Detroit Tigers are not Westbrook's favorite match up.

For his career, he has made 17 appearances (14 starts), winning four times and losing seven. Jake has an ERA of 6.53 against Detroit. Of Jake's four wins, two of them were complete games so it is either really good or really bad when these two square off.

Opposing Jake will be "The Cheater". Kenny Rogers recently came off the suspension list for using pine tar on his glove during the World Series, oh what's that you say, he was on the disabled list after shoulder surgery...my bad.

Kenny Rogers has obviously found a better way to be a little more inconspicuous about the pine tar since we have not seen it yet, but he is still getting big leaguers out. In his two starts, Rogers has worked six innings, allowing zero and one run.

Since 2004, Rogers has given the Indians some trouble, winning six times and losing three in his ten starts. Over the course of his career, Rogers has faced the Tribe 55 times and gotten a starting assignment 32 times. Rogers

is 16-16 with a 5.28 ERA, but most of those stats came pre-pine tar.

Thursday, July 5th, 1:05 PM

C.C. Sabathia (12-2, 3.20 ERA) vs. Justin Verlander (9-3, 3.18 ERA)

There is no better way to wrap up this series than the staff aces letting it fly in their final starts before being teammates on the American League All Star team. I say Jim Leyland gets them both in a room and tells them whomever pitches better on Thursday gets the start in San Francisco.

Carsten Charles Sabathia has been as effective as any Indian starting pitcher in a very long time. He currently leads the AL in wins, complete games and innings pitched, ranks third in strikeouts and eighth

in WHIP and eighth in ERA. If it pitches like an ace and talks like an ace, well it must be an ace.

Sabathia has matched up with Justin Verlander twice thus far in 2007. Sabathia has two wins and Verlander has zero, so maybe the decision should already be made as to who starts the All Star Game? C.C. was not terrific in either start against Detroit, allowing eight runs in 14 innings, but he has been good enough to get the job done.

Prior to this year, Sabathia had made 22 starts against Detroit in his young career, winning 12 and dropping seven decisions. In his 139 innings versus Detroit, Sabathia has given up 64 earned runs and struck out 109 Tigers.

Justin Verlander is as good of a right-handed pitcher as there is in baseball right now. If he did not have to face the Indians or Twins he might be

labeled as the best pitcher in baseball, period. Against those two teams, Verlander has zero wins and all three of his losses in four starts. He has won all nine of his decisions against anyone else. Against those two teams, he has an ERA of 8.52. Against everyone else he has an ERA of 1.95. In fact, in four starts against the Tribe and Twins he has allowed 18 earned runs, the same number he has allowed in his other 12 starts combined.

In his first match up with Sabathia, Verlander pitched well, but was unable to make it past the sixth inning because of the Indians plate discipline. He allowed two runs on only three hits, one of which was two-run shot by Victor Martinez.

Start number two versus C.C. and the Tribe did not go nearly as well for Verlander. The Indians pounded him for a season high seven earned runs. Four of the runs came via Travis Hafner and Victor Martinez two run homers.

Detroit Offense

Most fans are happy with the stats of the Indians offense, as they are second in the AL in runs scored. The team ahead of them is the Detroit Tigers and they are way ahead of us. In one less game played, Detroit has scored 38 more runs than the Indians. That is about the same difference as exists between the third highest scoring team and the tenth.

The Tigers are a balanced attack, with six regular players hitting above .290. Leading the way is MVP front-runner Maglio Ordonez. Ordonez is hitting a blistering .369 with 13 home runs and 68 runs batted in.

Lending a helping hand is the middle infield duo of Placido Polanco and Carlos Guillen. They are hitting for a combined average of .325, which isn't

too bad for a couple of middle infielders.

The protection in the Tiger lineup comes in the form of Gary Sheffield. Sheffield was struggling to get accustomed to the DH role and being a Tiger, before some idiot decided to make him mad and hit him square in the ribs. Ever since, he has been a one man wrecking crew in the middle of the best lineup in baseball.

Detroit Bullpen

Finally, we get to the weak spot of the Detroit Tigers. They have been trying to find the right combination of relievers to get them through to closer Todd Jones all season long and even the genius of Jim Leyland has not been enough to fix the pen.

The Tigers currently have last year's saviors Fernando Rodney and Joel Zumaya on the disabled list, but neither was able to match their success from 2006 before getting hurt. They had combined to go two and six with an ERA of almost five 40 games.

Even when they have been able to bridge the gap to Todd Jones, he has not been the same Todd Jones that he was last year. He has already blown nearly as many saves halfway through 2007 as he did in all of 2006. None of those blown saves were as enjoyable as the one on June 1st at Jacobs Field when David Delucci finished off a ninth inning rally with an RBI single, completing the comeback when the Indians scored 5 times off Jones in the ninth inning.

The rest of the Tiger pen is a coin flip as Jim Leyland is still searching for answers. Over the last 30 days, the trio of Jason Grilli, Bobby Seay

and Mackay McBride has been the most dependable arms in Tigerland. Seay is the match up lefty and McBride is also left-handed but he is usually asked to face right-handed hitters as well.

On Deck: Indians @ Blue Jays July 6-8