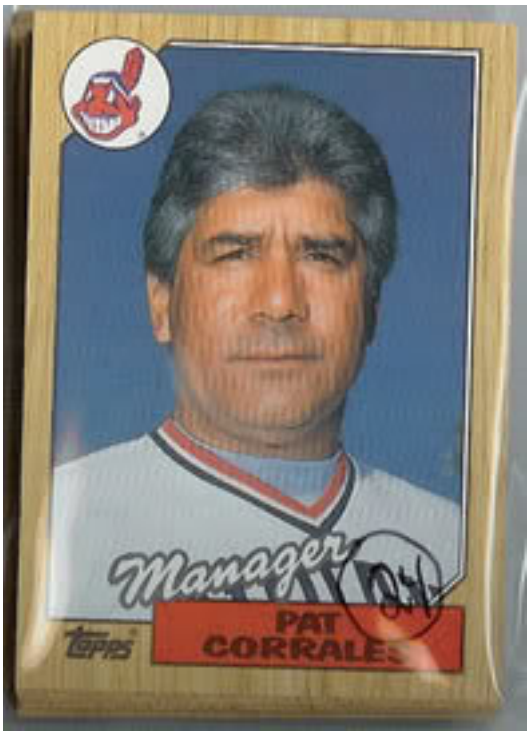
Our very own Paulie Cousineau ... going heads up with Curt Schilling and a host of other prominent media members and current/former players in an online recreation of the 1986 MLB season? It's true! And the action starts Monday in The Sporting News "1986: Take Two" online Strat-O-Matic competition. In his latest, Paul talks about the contest, talks about the fear factor of facing such stiff competition, and goes back in time to break down his 1986 Cleveland Indians. Good luck Paul! Kick Schilling's arse!



A few weeks ago, I received an e-mail from Bernie Hou at the Sporting News, asking me if I wanted to **manage the 1986 Cleveland Indians in a simulated season that would be replayed using the Sporting News' Strat-O-Matic game**. Intrigued, I agreed although I had never played the online version of Strat-O and hadn't played the board game since...probably 1986.

For those not familiar with Strat-O-Matic, it was originally a board game that included player cards for each MLB player with a series of numbers and results on the back of the card that corresponded to the player's actual statistics. The game was played with dice and constituted each at-bat breaking down to a pitcher's card vs. a hitter's card with a roll of the dice determining the outcome of the at-bat. It sounds complicated, but it really isn't and is truly a great statistically-driven way to "play" your own baseball games, with your favorite teams, All-Star teams, etc.

Unbeknownst to me, TSN (The Sporting News) developed an online edition where a computer would simulate full games and full seasons based on the same cards,

odds, and a "roll of the dice". But, having agreed to "manage" the 1986 Indians, I decided to check out this subculture of Strat-O-Heads and how I could go about approaching this league.

While doing some research on the 1986 Indians, I was e-mailed the list of "managers" for the league and was shocked to learn that in the AL East (remember, in 1986, the Tribe was still in the East) had Curt Schilling managing the Red Sox, Bill Daughtry (an MSG broadcaster) running the Yankees, Sean Forman (who created...CREATED...baseballreference.com) handling the Tigers, and Jeff Sackmann (he of BeyondtheBoxscore.com, MinorLeagueSplits.com and a part-time consultant for MLB teams) taking the helm of the Brewers.

And that was just in my division!

Needless to say, my confidence was shot, staring down the barrel of matching wits with these baseball minds (plus Schilling is allegedly a "Strat-O Freak") and confessed my fears to my wife, who (like a good wife) told me that I know a lot about baseball. It did not have the calming effect on me that I would have liked, but I amped myself up to re-learn as much as I could about the 1986 Tribe, prompted again by reading Jeff Sackmann's **ridiculously exhaustive "strategy piece"** on being the manager of the Brew Crew.

Perusing the 1986 team and the players, I realized something - 1986 was the the first year I remember poring over every box score and attempting to know every little stat about each Indian as a 9-year-old. I actually think that 1986 was the year that totally hooked me on baseball, with the Tribe, the amazing LCS's (HOU vs. NY, BOS vs. ANA) and the World Series, a love affair that has not abated.

To borrow a corny phrase from Indians' Marketing Campaigns of the past - This WAS My Team!

Here's the thing, though - I actually think that the 1986 Tribe could make some noise in this "1986-Take 2 Game" as the offense is stacked (most runs in 1986) and there's some depth to make a move for another starter or bullpen help. The real 1986 Tribe finished 84-78 and were in 1st place in May, in 2nd place as late as July (43-35) until the bottom dropped out and they finished in 5th in a tight AL East.

By the way, **here's just about the coolest thing I've found on the InterWeb** in quite a while. You can do it for any season!

As I said, the offense is absolutely loaded (5.1 runs per game, outpacing the Blue Jays) and a look around the diamond shows why (with their cumulative stats):

Player - OBP / SLG / OPS

C Chris Bando - .325 / .327 / .652
1B Pat Tabler - .368 / .433 / .801
2B Tony Bernazard - .362 / .456 / .818
SS Julio Franco - .350 / .441 / .791
3B Brook Jacoby - .338 / .422 / .760
LF Joe Carter - .335 / .514 / .849
CF Brett Butler - .356 / .375 / .731
RF Mel Hall - .346 / .493 / .839
RF Cory Snyder - .299 / .500 / .799
DH Andre Thornton - .333 / .392 / .725

Even the bench has some nice players:

OF Otis Nixon - .352 / .326 / .678
OF Carmen Castillo - .310 / .439 / .749
C Andy Allanson - .260 / .280 / .540

In determining the lineup, I decided to look to see where the decided splits existed; that is, if a player struggled against LHP or RHP, how would that affect their placement in the lineup against that particular type of pitcher and whether any platoons would be created.

To me, because of the depth of the lineup, OBP became the most important determining factor in placement in the batting order as I attempted to construct a lineup that would fill the bases with the idea that the middle-of-the-lineup run producers would have many RBI opportunities.

The first thing that stood out was the pronounced split for Mel Hall (OBP / SLG / OPS):

Hall vs. LHP - .241 / .231 / .472

Hall vs. RHP - .353 / .510 / .863

Considering that Cory Snyder had a split going the opposite way (though not as egregious as Hall's), the decision was made to platoon them in RF - (OBP / SLG / OPS):

Snyder vs. LHP - .333 / .585 / .918
Snyder vs. RHP - .285 / .466 / .751

Due to the fact that Hall and Snyder absolutely crushed the pitching coming from the side they would face, I slotted them in the clean-up spot to maximize RBI opportunities for each.

As an aside, thank God for **Baseball Reference's pages on individual seasons for teams**, which I am going over with a fine-tooth comb. Did I mention that the guy who CREATED and RUNS B-Ref is managing the Tigers?

Anywho, looking then at how I could get Otis Nixon and his speed into the lineup (as the team is not exactly full of many "athletes"), I attempted to determine where he could play every day. With Carter, Butler, and Hall/Snyder, the OF was pretty crowded, unless I moved Carter to the DH in lieu of Thunder and had Otis (MY MAN) playing LF. Carter, though, is a better defender than Nixon, which scrapped the plan.

But what about Nixon DH'ing ahead of Thornton to add some baserunning options to the lineup? Would omitting Thornton lessen the offensive power of the team?

While Thornton is a beloved Indian, 1986 represented the beginning of the end as his OPS beat out only Nixon (by a paltry 47 points considering the type of players each are), Bando, and Allanson on the team. His 1986 ended with a .229 Batting Average, 17 HR and 66 RBI despite playing 105 games (of the 120 in which he played) in the clean-up spot on an offensively loaded team.

So, with enough offensive weapons and little speed and flexibility with Thornton's defensive deficiencies (his only possible position is DH), I sat him on the bench to play the PH role while the speed (and OBP) of Nixon will add baserunners to the bottom of the lineup.

A corollary to the Hall/Snyder/Nixon decisions is that if any of the players thrives in their role, because of the depth of the team (Castillo is actually not that bad), one could be used as trade bait to bolster the rotation and bullpen that sabotaged the real 1986 Indians.

That all being said, here's how the lineup shakes out for MY 1986 Tribe:

Lineup vs. LHP

Butler
Bernazard
Carter
Snyder
Tabler
Jacoby
Bando
Franco
Nixon

Lineup vs. RHP

Butler
Bernazard
Carter
Hall
Jacoby
Tabler
Bando
Franco
Nixon

Bernazard gets the nod at the #2 spot over Franco because of Bernazard's .419 OBP vs. LHP (Franco's is .370 vs. LHP) and .341 OBP vs. RHP (Franco's OBP vs. RHP - .326). Tabler and Jacoby flip-flop because of Jacoby's OPS being 50 points higher against RHP and the Tabbie Cat's OPS being 50 points higher against LHP. As for Chris Bando...well, I tried to put him where he could be the 3rd out and lead off some innings with Franco and Nixon setting the table and to keep Andy Allanson as far away from the batter's box as possible.

With the offense locked and loaded, it was time to turn my attention to the Achilles Heel of the 1986 Tribe - the pitching staff. The rotation posted a somewhat respectable 4.33 ERA that year only to be relieved by the still-developing "Bullpen from Hell" (that was 1987), which posted a 5.33 ERA and is populated by players I don't even remember.

But there is reason for hope based on some of the players granted to me by the Strat-O-Matic Lords at TSN. The fact that I have Swindell (who pitched only 9 games that year) for the whole season could be huge in fortifying a rotation that (in reality) was dependent on Neal Heaton and Scotty Bailes.

The rotation that year actually posted some modest numbers as this is how my rotation looks to play out with their 1986 results:

Tom Candiotti - 3.57 ERA, 1.35 WHIP
Greg Swindell - 4.23 ERA, 1.17 WHIP
Phil Niekro - 4.32 ERA, 1.60 WHP
Ken Schrom - 4.54 ERA, 1.29 WHIP (a 1986 All-Star)
Neal Heaton - 4.24 ERA, 1.42 WHIP

Nobody's ever going to confuse these guys with the Mets' rotation that year that had three starters with sub-3.00 ERA (Ojeda, Darling, Gooden) and the other two (Fernandez, Aguilera) under 4.00, but all I need these pitchers to do is eat up innings to allow the offense to score runs and to keep the ball away from the bullpen.

Ah...the bullpen.

With only 2 legitimate relievers (one of whom, Doug Jones, only pitched 11 games that year), many Tribe leads could evaporate in the 6th and 7th innings if the starters can't make it very far into the game and the likes of Scott Bailes and Rich Yett become regular guests on the mound.

I think the best way to approach the back end is to allow the 8th and 9th innings with Doug Jones and Ernie Camacho work (as reader Shane Holmes pointed out to me) like the Indians worked JoeBo and Senor Slo-Mo this year. If a lead can be handed to Special Delivery and Macho, the Tribe could be in decent shape, but getting a lead to them with the dregs of the bullpen is going to be the challenge.

The rest of the bullpen is a giant question mark with the aforementioned long man Scotty Bailes, Bryan Oelkers, Rich Yett, Dickie Noles, and Don Schulze. The only way that I can think to get any kind of production out of any of these pitchers is to go Mike Hargrove (the manager, not the player) on them - let's play the match-ups.

Interestingly, most of these pitchers have pretty profound splits vs. LH and RH and I'll use them only against hitters that they may have a shot of getting out. Keeping in mind that a LOOGY is a Lefthanded One Out GuY and a ROOGY is a Righthanded One Out Guy, this is the strategy for bridging the 6th and 7th innings:

LOOGY - Brian Oelkers (OPS vs. RH - .843, OPS vs. LH - .771)
LOOGY - Rich Yett (OPS vs. RH - .852, OPS vs. LH - .719)
ROOGY - Dickie Noles (OPS vs. RH - .662, OPS vs. LH - .918)
ROOGY - Don Schulze (OPS vs. RH - .694, OPS vs. LH - .835)

Oelkers is probably the closest thing to a pitcher that can find success against both LH and RH hitters, but even that's a stretch.

The bullpen (and the rotation to a lesser degree) remains a concern, but I'm hoping that I can work some sort of trade from the surplus of hitters to fortify the bullpen to lock down the 9th inning and allow the rest of the relievers to either slot down in the ladder or simply fade into oblivion.

Feeling confident about the team and the strategy I've laid out, I have to admit that I've acquired my first heckler for the Strat-O-Matic game.

Goes by the name of Maxie Minoso and he checked in with some advice:

Don't ask Schilling if that was red paint on his sock.

Be sure to call time and visit Camacho after he throws three pitches.

Lastly, Dave Stewart knows martial arts. Don't make a fool of yourself; keep your temper under control.

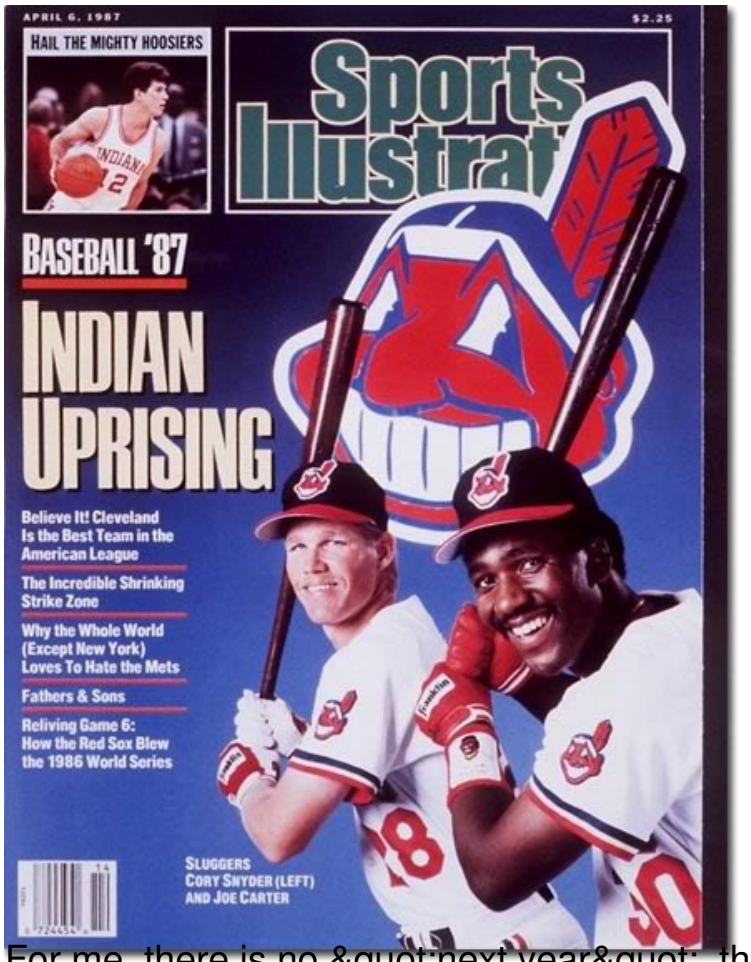
Good luck. The fate of the Men of the Cuyahoga and their fans are riding on your skills

I'll be the guy yelling "JUUUUUUUUUUUU...LIO."

Terrific...As if I wasn't stressed out enough about embarrassing myself up against some of the best and brightest baseball minds out there, I'm going to hear the echoes in an empty Municipal Stadium.

Regardless, hecklers and the like can follow the season here on the **"1986 Take 2"** page. Bookmark it, add it to your favorites, do whatever you like with it. If you think you're heckling me at some point in the season with a suggestion, don't be surprised to see it happen as I'm not above listening to my own version of sports talk radio and taking advice from the congregation.

Undaunted by the task ahead, I'm encouraged by the talent on the 1986 team. Remember that this is the same team that garnered enough attention to merit the notorious SI Cover for the 1987 Preview Issue:



For me, there is no "next year", there is no "team to build". I'm managing the 1986 Indians with the idea of bringing the 1st World Championship to Cleveland in 22 years (remember, this is 1986) to bring some joy to this off-season back in reality.

It's 1986 all over again and (literally) THIS IS MY TEAM!