It seems that the team that everyone loves to dismiss and find fault with has slowly but surely mounted a bit of a run here to capture a 1 ½ game lead in the AL Central. It hasn't always been pretty, but the starting pitching is the constant with no signs of a even a crack in their armor as the Indians approach a terrific opportunity over the next two months to separate themselves from the AL Central and pad their lead by taking advantage of what lies ahead. Paulie takes us into the weekend with this excellent piece.

It seems that the team that everyone loves to dismiss and find fault with has slowly but surely mounted a bit of a run here to capture a 1 ½ game lead in the AL Central. The formula that they're using to win comes as no surprise with the starting pitching leading the way, in historic fashion, making up for the offense starting to show signs of life and an unsettled bullpen (can today serve as the moment of transition to Masa as the closer?) still trying to find its sea legs. But, as always, the starting pitching is the constant with no signs of a even a crack in their armor as the Indians approach a terrific opportunity over the next two months (thanks to whomever is making these absurd MLB schedules) to separate themselves from the AL Central and pad their lead by taking advantage of what lies ahead.

The next 53 games leading up to the All-Star Break in mid-July pits the Tribe against some teams that aren't exactly counted as the elite of MLB at the quarter mark of the season. This particular two month stretch of opponents for the Tribe, listed in descending order and not in chronological order (with their records as of Thursday morning and respective totals in terms of runs and team ERA) based on amount of games played up to the "Midsummer Classic" are thus:

**Chicago White Sox (19-20) - 9 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.52
Team ERA - 3.70

**Texas Rangers (20-22) - 7 games**

Runs Scored per Game - 4.76
Team ERA - 4.73

**Cincinnati Reds (18-23) - 6 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.44
Team ERA - 4.71

**Detroit Tigers (16-24) - 6 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.55
Team ERA - 4.96

**Minnesota Twins (20-19) - 6 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.43
Team ERA - 4.24

**Tampa Bay Rays (23-17) - 4 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.53
Team ERA - 3.69

**Kansas City Royals (18-21) - 3 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 3.53
Team ERA - 4.19

**San Diego Padres (15-26) - 3 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 3.41
Team ERA - 4.25

**Colorado Rockies (15-25) - 3 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.27
Team ERA - 4.80

**LA Dodgers (20-19) - 3 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 4.95
Team ERA - 4.11

**SF Giants (17-24) - 3 games**
Runs Scored per Game - 3.49
Team ERA - 4.27

Looking at this schedule, it just feels like the Indians are Bruce Lee, slowly stepping into a circle populated by lesser men, taking on all opponents one by one , just waiting to vanquish them almost relishing the task at hand confident in his talent and the tools at his disposal.

Back to reality and before getting too in-depth on this two month stretch, how nice is it to see the DEEE-TROIT Tigers with the second worst record among these teams when we're playing 7 of the bottom 8 teams in MLB, according to ESPN.com's Power Rankings (which should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt as big as John Kruk's pumpkin-sized head) as of May 9th, after hearing ad nauseum all off-season that the Tigers were going to challenge the 1927 Yankees in terms of offensive production and that their thin starting pitching (welcome to the AL, Dontrelle) and bullpen wouldn't be a problem because their lineup boasted approximately 36 future Hall-of-Famers?

Hey, Dombrowski, how would Jair Juerrjens look in the rotation these days...or even Andrew Miller, who has put two terrific outings together for the Fish in the month of May ? I know it's awfully early to gloat, but I just don't see an obvious solution to the Tigers' pitching problems, particularly as each dreadful Verlander start passes (he's given up less than 4 ER in exactly one of his eight starts to date) and The Gambler gets older (May 10th marked the halfway point of his 43rd year on Earth) that would save their season unless they start averaging about 10 runs a game.

But, I digress.

Back to the matter at hand, as over the next 53 games the Tribe will play teams that have a cumulative 184-240 record (a .434 winning percentage) while playing only three teams (among the 11) that have winning records to date. Less than ½ of the teams are scoring more runs than they are allowing (important to note that the Indians are averaging 4.25 runs a game while posting a team ERA of 3.32, which is the best ERA on this list and constitutes the best runs scored versus runs allowed per game differential on this list at 0.93 more runs scored per game than allowed) and the list looks to be populated with teams built on offense as opposed to pitching, which certainly plays into the Indians' favor given the sterling performance of the Tribe starters over the past...well...over the whole season save a few early C.C. and Byrd starts.

MLB is full of parity this year, to be sure...but guess what?

If we can complain about how ridiculous the schedule looks regarding our season series in terms of entertainment (done with the Yankees and only six games remaining against the Angels with "only" 121 games left to play) or in terms of interleague play crushing what once were AL East division "rivals" for the Tribe (the aforementioned conclusion of the Yankees' season series, four games left against the Red Sox, three games left with Toronto), we can also chirp about how great it will be to face a struggling AL Central in nearly ½ the games leading to the All-Star Break and avoiding the Diamondbacks while playing every other team in the relatively weak NL West.

It's a flawed schedule, thanks to the continued belief in the League office that people in Cleveland are dying to see NL teams (but that's a whole other topic) and some lack of foresight in terms of traveling and off-days. However, if the Indians stand to come into what could be perceived as an "easy" part of their schedule sitting on a 1 ½ game division lead in the Central without playing their best (or even close to their best) baseball, isn't this two month stretch a perfect time to put some distance between themselves and the rest of the AL Central like a hot knife through soft butter? The fact that they are playing so many divisional games gives them the opportunity to not only rack up some wins, but to fill the loss ledger of their AL Central divisional counterparts at the same time to put this thing away early...because it is still early.

But this stretch gives the team an opportunity to make that jump to hyperspace and leave the rest of the division light years away...punch it, Chewy.