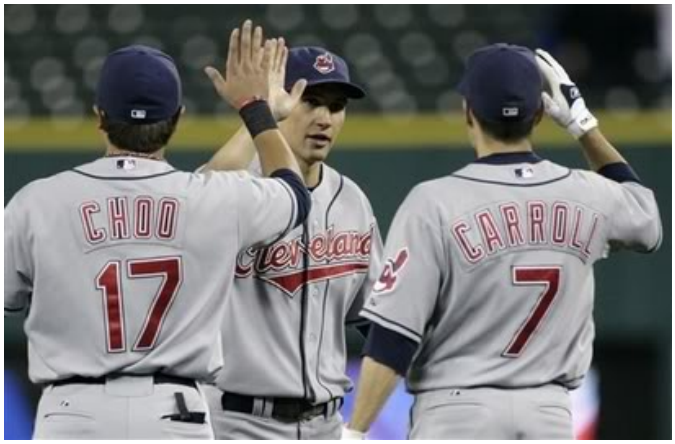
Who are those guys? Anyone else find themselves wondering the exact same thing after each victory as a team ravaged by injuries, ineffectiveness, and ultimately trades finds itself as the hottest team in MLB? Paulie C is, and invokes childhood memories of Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid to make his point. And in his latest, tells our readers exactly how the Indians are doing it, and how they have evolved into one of the best teams in baseball over the second half of the season.



In the days before Netflix entered our greater lexicon and even before the days of DVD's, my family used to find a good deal of their movie fix in the aisles of Glengate Video as we perused the VHS tapes for nighttime entertainment. Often, these excursions up to Glengate would consist of my dad and I walking up and down the aisles of wire shelving loaded with tapes that either had a rubber band around it (that meant it was not available) or not.

Invariably, if one of the participants in the trip was my father, the tape that would accompany us back to the homestead would either follow the inane adventures of Inspector Closeau (which my sister "didn't get" while my dad and I laughed until we cried), would be some tough-guy movie with Lee Marvin, or had one or both of the dynamic duo of Paul Newman and Robert Redford adorning the front of the VHS case. While I longed for the likes of *RoboCop*, *Aliens*, and *Comm ando*
(never really worrying as the guys up the street always had the latest shoot-em-ups), I was exposed month after month to
The Dirty Dozen
,
Jeremiah Johnson
,
Cool Hand Luke
, and my favorite...
Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid
.

Where am I going with this?

Watching this Indians' team rattle off 10 straight victories, I'm reminded nightly of the chase scene in the movie when Butch and Sundance are riding away from their pursuers, attempting to throw them off the trail by jumping off of cliffs and the like, but never able to escape the white skimmer hat that appears on one of their pursuers on the horizon. When the two would stop to see if they had lost the following group, as soon as they say that they were still being tailed, they would exchange forlorn glances and say, incredulously, "Who are those guys?"

Anyone else find themselves wondering the exact same thing after each victory as a team ravaged by injuries, ineffectiveness, and ultimately trades finds itself as the hottest team in MLB?

As this team somehow hits another gear, let's rattle off what's NOT on the field which was assumed to be givens for the season on Opening Day:

#1 Starter (CC)
#3 Starter (Jake)
#4 Starter (Byrd)
Closer (JoeBo)
#3 Hitter / Starting Catcher (Vic)
#4 Hitter / DH (Pronk)
#7 Hitter / 3B (Blake)

Perhaps I'm overstating the assumed roles of Borowski and Blake coming out of Winter Haven...but did I miss anything?

All of those players are not currently pulling their Chief Wahoo caps on and STILL the Indians have the 4th best record in baseball since the All-Star Break at 24-14. The All-Star break, you may remember, started just days after the Indians "put up the white flag" by trading their aCCe to the shores of Lake Michigan.

I mean, seriously, every night the question can be asked - "Who are those guys?"

The Indians have the 2nd best record in baseball in August (18-7, behind only the

Cubs' 18-6) with a rotation that "boasts" Jeremy Sowers, Anthony Reyes, and Zach Jackson. Their DH most nights is David Dellucci (who, truth be told, has a 1.056 OPS in August) and their lineup consists of a #3 hitter that started the season in AAA (Francisco) and their best power hitter who was a back-up when the season started (Show Pack).

How is this happening?

How does Kelly Shoppach have an OPS of .992 since the All-Star Break while SEVEN players have OPS over .800 in the month of August...and one of them isn't Grady Sizemore? The Indians have the 3rd most productive offense (5.70 runs per game) since the All-Star Break in the AL, all without Victor or Pronk picking up a bat in Cleveland. Given what we know about the importance of those two in the lineup, what's going on here? Are we seeing the offensive maturation of multiple players or are we just seeing a team get hot collectively, something that figures to serve as only an enticing mirage in this desert of a 2008 season?

Certain things are becoming clearer, like knowing Kelly Shoppach's value is awfully high right now and the Indians need to decide whether they are "selling high" on him or this is what can be expected of Shoppach in 2009, either making him an integral part of the team or moving him to fill a hole via trade, and knowing that Jensen Lewis is making a strong case for being in the back end of the bullpen (in some sort of role) for 2009.

But most of those things that are "becoming clearer" usually lead to another question.

We now know that acceptable production from Chootierrez IS possible (Gutz's August OPS is .977, The BLC's August OPS is .936) for an extended period of time and that The Ben Francisco Treat looks to be is what he is - a valuable complementary piece, but not much else - Coco without the plus range in the outfield. But can the corners be occupied by The Frisco Kid and Chootierrez to start 2009 until LaPorta is ready?

Given the power that the team gets (and assumes to get in 2009) from Sizemore, Peralta, Martinez, and (fingers and toes all crossed) Hafner, can the corner OF positions be complementary pieces until some of the youngsters start to force themselves into the picture? I tend to think that it can, as long as nobody is

overestimating Francisco as a "core" player or assumes that (at age 28 in 2009) he's on the verge of something more than he is right now. The likes of Frisco and Chootierrez aren't that much different than having your corners patrolled by Coco and Dellichaels, which could certainly be upgraded; but if greater needs exist, this can't be the top priority, particularly with LaPorta, Weglarz, and perhaps Brantley (though all three are presumably LF) in the pipeline.

We seem to be getting a better idea that Andy Marte is not long for Cleveland and that Ryan Garko's true performance probably lies somewhere between his 2007 and his 2008...which means that neither should be counted on to provide adequate production from 3B or 1B for 2009. What dominoes fall based on that notion seem infinite with the makeup of the whole infield in flux, with the only known being that (barring a trade) Peralta, Cabrera, and Victor will occupy 3 of the 5 positions when the team leaves Arizona next Spring. Where they fall figures to remain a mystery as The Kelly Shoppach Show continues on a nightly basis and as the Free Agent and trade markets are explored for a 2B or a 3B.

We know that C.P. Lee is on an incredible run and hope that it will continue into 2009 while hoping that "Good Fausto" (the one that can throw all three of his pitches for strikes) shows up more frequently than "Bad Fausto" (the one who throws 100 pitches through 4 innings...with ½ of them being balls) next year. Beyond that, the principals in the running for the rotation need a longer look, and it looks like we'll get it as Aaron Laffey will join the rotation (to make it a 6-man rotation) in the first or second week of September. Now, should a strong finish by Sowers, Reyes, Jackson, or Laffey guarantee anything for 2009? No, nothing should be guaranteed...and Dave Huff (yes, he prefers "Dave", according to a family member who complimented my piece on him last week) is right in that pack as well (if not leading it). But Rey-Rey is out of options after this year and a decision should probably be made on whether The Zach Attack (or is it Zachson) should go into Spring Training next year vying for a spot in the rotation or the bullpen.

Beyond Lee and Fausto, questions abound including when Jake Westbrook is thought to be returning from TJ surgery and at what capacity. Given what the Indians like to pad their rotation with in terms of depth, a middle-of-the-rotation starter should be on their shopping list this winter, if only to slot those young arms into the #6 through #8 starters in the organization so a Matt Ginter sighting or something like it isn't forced to occur again.

We are being reminded what an effective 9th inning option can do to the rest of the bullpen while realizing what roles seem to best suit the Fist of Iron and the Fist of Steel, which would be as effective bridges to the 9th...not pitching the 9th itself.. Consider that the Indians have put up that 24-14 record since the All-Star Break with 5 blown saves in 15 opportunities, prior to Jenny Lew getting the nod in the 9th. There were 5 games that the bullpen has blown (Eddie Moo - 2, Betancourt - 1, Perez - 1, Masa - 1) since the All-Star Break...and the Indians STILL have won 63% of their games in that stretch!

Now, has this 10-game winning streak allowing us to see what a settled pen can do for a team?

Absolutely...but we thought the pen was relatively settled and stocked with arms going into THIS season, so the thought that everything is now suddenly fine with the bullpen for 2009 shouldn't pass through anyone's mind. While Lewis, Perez, and Betancourt are rediscovering their effectiveness down the stretch here and young hard-throwing arms like Jon Meloan, Jeff Stevens, Atom Miller (whose transition to the bullpen looks like a near certainty), and perhaps even Tony Sipp figure to be factors in filling out the 2009 bullpen, I don't think that even the most optimistic person could think that the bullpen doesn't need some quality and depth added to it. Certainly some pieces are slotting themselves for roles next year; but again, that's what we thought last year.

All told, this stretch of success has been a thoroughly enjoyable ride as the lost season essentially has piqued some interest once again as winning baseball has returned...even if it is too little, too late. We know that this team isn't content to just roll over and wait for the end of the season (anyone else think signing checks is not one of Mike Ilitch's favorite activities these days?) and that some key youngsters are gaining (or regaining) some momentum for next year.

However, while this stretch is exciting and seeing these young players excel gets the mind racing, it's important to remember what this team looked like in May and June and that a 2009 that could potentially start similarly will have the same debilitating effect on the season that it did this year.

Despite the recent run of success, it's not safe to say that once this team is set once it gets Victor and Hafner back because they'll simply enhance the performance of a winning team. If the transition from 2007 to 2008 has taught us anything, it's to revel in the good times and prepare for the bad times to maximize

the former while limiting the latter. These last 30 games could roll on in this suddenly magical manner that leaves us all smiling and excited for next year. But temper that enthusiasm with the reality of why, after a 10-game winning streak, the team is still double digits out of 1st place in a very winnable Central.

Right now feels like the best of times...just as the playoff chase and run of 2007 did. Now, avoiding the worst of times as an encore is what needs to be in the back of everyone's minds as we revel in being able to FINALLY watching a team that consistently wins games as we try to turn "Who are those guys" into "THESE are the guys" that make this team a contender in 2009 and not another construction project.