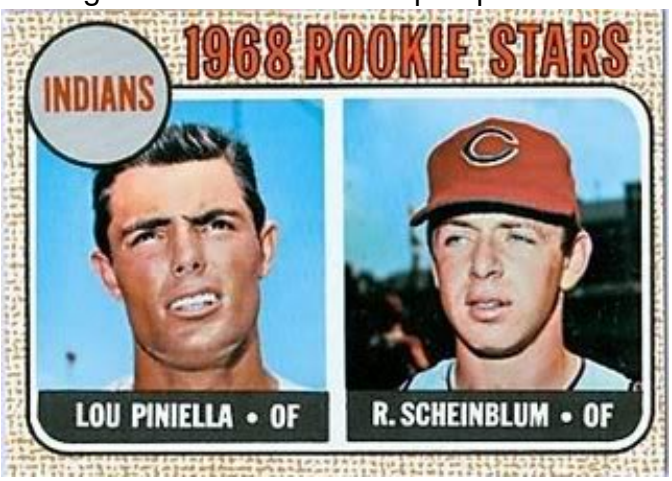
Welcome to another edition of Ghosts of Prospects Past, where we dig deep into the Tribe archives to see how the future stars of yesteryear did or didn't pan out. Today, it's a special Cubs vs. Indians edition of GPP, in honor of this past weekend's rare Wrigley Field match-up between the two storied (often depressing) franchises. And what better man connects these interleague dots than "Sweet Lou" himself-Cubs manager and former Indians prospect Lou Piniella? Andrew Clayman takes a look back ...



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I attended Friday afternoon's Cubs-Indians game at Wrigley, arriving late to the park with the Tribe already up 7-0 and Cliff Lee looking dominant on the mound. As has been the running theme this year, of course, the Indians' rental bullpen politely gave back all those runs and more in a slow death march to defeat against Sweet Lou's previously scuffling offense (kind of like watching the moveable object against the stoppable force). Being present for a bit of good fortune for the precious Cubbies at Wrigley-the cathedral of curses-certainly leaves one wondering, which of these teams is really playing at the cosmic disadvantage here, Piniella's current team, or his first team?

Aside from the on-field heartbreak, both Cleveland and the Chicago North-Siders have suffered through their share of disastrous off-season developments, as well. After all, you don't go a combined 160 years without a championship if you're making all the right decisions. However, in some cases, you've put all your ducks in a row, and fate intervenes. Take the case of the '68 Tribe, for example.

In the fall of 1968, the Indians were coming off a respectable 86-75 season under

manager Alvin Dark, establishing themselves as legitimate American League contenders behind one of the most dominant pitching staffs in team history (Sam McDowell, Luis Tiant, Sonny Siebert and company combined for an insane 2.66 team ERA!). Clearly the club's Achilles heel was offense, but there was every reason to believe that some of the team's young hitters would hit their stride in '69. These names included first baseman Tony Horton, second baseman Vern Fuller, center fielder Jose Cardenal, and AAA standouts Ray Fosse, Richie Scheinblum, Russ Nagelson, and a guy named Lou Piniella, who hit .317 at Portland and was rewarded with a six-game cup of coffee in Cleveland toward the end of the '68 campaign.

Piniella had actually been signed by Cleveland as an 18 year-old amateur free agent in 1962. He then wound up spending time in the Senators and Orioles farm systems before Baltimore traded him back to the Indians in 1966 for Cam Carreon. Lou would spend the new few years raking for the Pacific Coast League's Portland Beavers, turning himself into an excellent contact hitting outfielder, and the heir apparent to the Indians aging Lee Maye (not to be confused with the Reds' Lee May). All signs indicated that 1969 would be his year to become an everyday player. The only trouble was, the Seattle Pilots felt the same way.

Yes, in the Expansion Draft held in October of 1968, everybody's favorite one-and-done franchise, the Pilots, scooped up Sweet Lou with the 28th pick. In classic form, they then traded Piniella to Kansas City just before Opening Day, receiving John Geinar and Steve Whitaker in return. Piniella had found his home at last as a Royal, and an excellent 15-year Major League career was underway.

In 1969, Piniella hit .282 in 135 games for Kansas City. The Indians, meanwhile, hit .237 as a team and collapsed to a 62-99 record. Cleveland's rotating corner outfielders that year included Maye (.250), Frank Baker (.256), Ken Harrelson (.222), Scheinblum (.186), Russ Snyder (.248), and Cap Peterson (.227).

Piniella only improved his numbers in 1970, hitting .301 and driving in 88 runs. The rest is well-documented history-world titles with the Yankees, a .291 career average, and a long, illustrious post-playing career as a manager of the Yankees, Reds, Mariners, Devil Rays, and now, the Cubs.

If Piniella stayed in Cleveland, who knows what might have happened? Richie Scheinblum may have blocked his progress, left him bitter and frustrated, and

prevented him from blossoming into the fiery, cerebral player and manager he became. Then again, Lou may have helped the Indians climb out of mediocrity in the ‘70s, offering a consistent bat and much needed leadership.

Cubs fans can debate how much Piniella's leaving Cleveland has to do with him being the skipper in Chi-Town now. But just for fun, it's worth mentioning that the Indians also lost another one of those young outfielders from the 1968 team-Jose Cardenal-who went on to great success with... that's right, the Cubs. This might not prove that the Tribe is as cursed as the Cubbies, but it's certainly an argument with some supporting evidence.