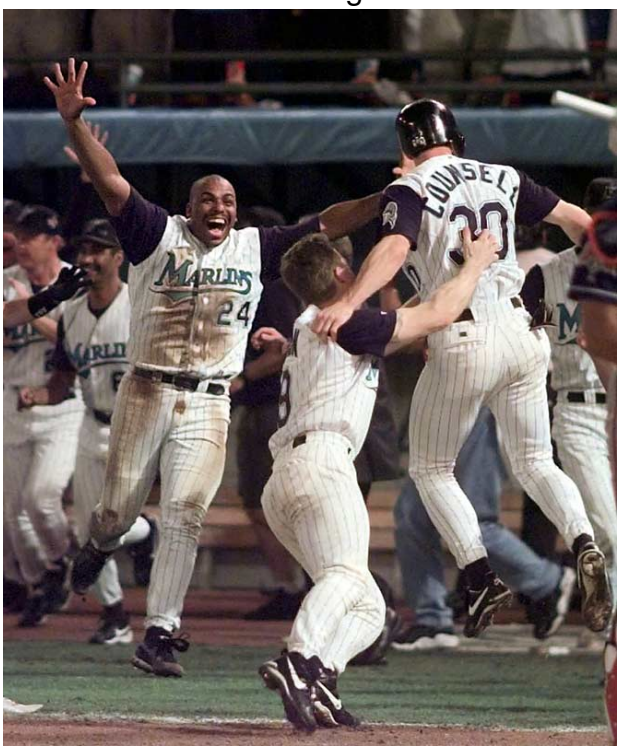
61 years and counting. That's how long it's been since the Cleveland Indians have won the World Series. That's a long time Tribe fans ... and the number of people that can actually say they remember the team's last title are dwindling by the day. And as we watch a baseball final four take place with four of the highest payroll teams in the game, it's clear that the difference between the have's and the have not's continues to widen ... reducing the chances the Indians will break that 61 year curse anytime soon.



There were six of us at dinner on Sunday night, at a Toledo-area restaurant. My fiancee Jane and I had returned to the city of her more formative years to finally nail down a reception site and a wedding date for late next summer.

Joining us at the dinner table were her parents -- Detroit fans who had moved the family to the outskirts of Toledo about 20 years ago -- and my parents, who had made a daylong trip from Cleveland to assist the four of us in the reception site selection process. My parents, like me, are Cleveland natives saddled with a lifelong attachment to Cleveland sports.

Inevitably, the conversation among the men at the table turned to football and the common thread of losing shared by the Lions and Browns. This past Sunday came and went like so many other Sundays before. While the Browns were busy enduring a 12th straight loss to the Steelers, the Lions were in the process of getting rolled by the Packers 26-0. It was Detroit's 19th straight loss to the Packers in Wisconsin.

The football talk ran out of steam, and the conversation turned into a comparison

of how Detroit and Cleveland sports are bottomless pits of misery -- subjectively speaking based on where you live, of course. We have LeBron and Shaq, but no championships in 45 years. They can actually remember the last time a Detroit team won a title, but they've mostly been Stanley Cups by the Red Wings, which doesn't really have any bearing on NHL-devoid Cleveland. As far as the Lions, Tigers and Pistons are concerned, the less said, the better.

Just then, my mom interjected in that way that so many moms do when it comes to sports -- vaguely on topic, but kind of not really.

"You know, your grandma remembers being downtown and watching the parade the last time the Indians won the World Series."

A brief background was provided for Jane's folks: That would be 1948.

Jane's dad didn't miss a beat in asserting that ever-so-slight advantage of Detroit over Cleveland. The Tigers last won a World Series in 1984.

"Wow, that's 61 years ago," he said, drawing out "sixty-one" for full effect.

My dad and I didn't bother counting the several near misses for the edification of Jane's dad. The 1995 team with the lineup for the ages but not enough pitching to match the Atlanta Braves, and more specifically, Tom Glavine. The 1997 team that got hot at the right time, scored improbable upsets over the Yankees and Orioles in the AL playoffs, fended off a 3-2 series deficit against the Marlins in the World Series, held a 2-0 lead going into the middle innings of Game 7, and ... well ...

More recently, there was the 2007 team that had a 3-1 series lead against the Red Sox in the ALCS, but fell victim to the playoff-inexperienced knock-knees of C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona, who crumbled right when their team needed them the most.

I know it has been 61 years for the Indians, but when someone from outside the Cleveland sports cocoon says it with an air of disbelief, it's kind of jolting. I dwelled on those near-miss Tribe teams for a few minutes while the conversation shifted to other topics. I thought about the thoroughly scary case of the Chicago Cubs,

who are now working on 101 years without a World Series title.

It can get that bad. And I wonder if it might get that bad for the Indians, who are already six-tenths of the way to a century without a championship.

The conditions that created the gold rush of the 1990s might never come together again, unless the Indians manage to once again construct a lineup of borderline Hall of Famers just as they're moving into a new ballpark, with a title-hungry fan base eager to drop millions in disposable income on tickets and merchandise.

Six division titles in seven years? Those days are long gone, never to return without unforeseen positive developments. The Indians aren't designed to win that way.

The Indians are now designed to win the way baseball wants its small-market teams to win: once in a while.

For the longest time, I thought baseball wanted a salary cap. I thought Bud Selig, for all his warts as commissioner of Major League Baseball, was trying to fight the good fight and put teams like the Indians, Twins and Rockies on even ground with the Yankees, Dodgers and Red Sox.

Now, the salary cap talk has gotten strangely quiet since the last collective bargaining agreement. The Yankees and Red Sox are more popular than ever. The Yankees, Dodgers, Angels and
Phillies
-- all from the five largest U.S. markets -- comprised baseball's final four this year.

Baseball's leaders want it that way. They've wanted it that way since the days of Babe Ruth, but as the rich get richer and the less rich get less richer by comparison, the chasm only widens. And as the tectonic rift between baseball's made men and indentured servants continue to grow, teams like the Indians are going to find themselves just plain out of luck. Baseball's competitive system will be inherently weighted in favor of big market teams from now until the Rapture.

Unlike the NBA, and to a lesser extent the NFL, baseball is a sport that markets teams over players. MLB's lot is cast with the highest-profile teams that have the most name recognition among Joe Fan types from coast to coast. Certainly, the NBA wants to see pillar teams like the Lakers and

Celtics in the playoffs, but baseball places far more weight on their money-maker teams to generate interest and draw viewers.

In short, baseball wants to see a steady diet of the Yankees, Dodgers, Red Sox, Cubs, Angels,
Phillies
and
Mets
in the playoffs. It's OK if the Indians, Twins or Rays rise up and go on a Cinderella run every so often. Fans like a good underdog story. But this isn't March Madness. Cinderella can't visit the ball every year, or one of baseball's wagon-pulling
Clydesdales
consistently misses the party.

A world in which the Indians can make the playoffs 15 times in 16 years is not a world that baseball wants to create. With that in mind, you can probably start engraving the headstone for baseball's would-be salary cap. The cause died sometime after the 1994 strike, and no one looks like they're going to bother reviving it anytime soon.

The Indians of the now-closing decade are the Indians of forthcoming reality. Out of contention 50 percent of time, on the outskirts of contention 40 to 45 percent of the time, and maybe a legitimate contender once or twice every 10 years.

Part of the problem is certainly how the Indians do business. The Dolans don't have the deep pockets to make risky investments on high-priced veteran players. Mark Shapiro and his staff have made errors in conducting drafts, free agent signings and trades. But at their best, all the Indians can probably every hope to become is the Minnesota Twins, racking up a few extra division titles, but seldom playing deep into October. Mostly because of where Johan Santana and C.C. Sabathia
now pitch -- New York. The only market big enough to cater to their contract demands.

If nothing changes in the baseball landscape, you'll probably only need one hand, plus maybe a finger or two if we're lucky, to count the number of times the Indians will be able to mount a serious World Series run in the next 39 years. If opportunity only knocks once or twice a decade, you better be doggone sure you

can answer the door. Unfortunately, it would be all too easy for the hand of fate, and better teams, to thwart a mere handful of playoff runs in the coming decades.

Jane's dad might have been shocked and awed by the title-bankrupt state of the Indians over the past six decades. But the real shock and awe is what might not happen over the next four decades.

If' I'm still around, I'll turn 69 in 2048. Our family dinner conversation in 2009 will probably have been long forgotten by then, but the Indians might still be plugging away with 1948 as their last entry in the World Series championship log. In fact, it's a highly probable outcome.

Even worse than that, the Indians might become trendsetters among small market and midmarket teams. Future generations might see further entries in the Century Club. The clock is already ticking on the Giants (2054), Expos/Nationals (2069), Brewers (2070), Pirates (2079), Orioles (2083) and Royals (2085), just to name a few.