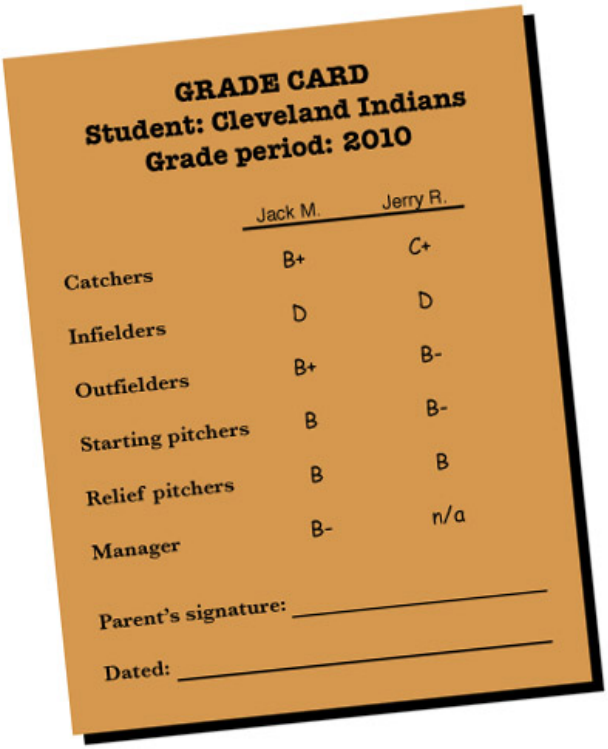

GRADE CARD
Student: Cleveland Indians
Grade period: 2010

	Jack M.	Jerry R.
Catchers	B+	C+
Infielders	D	D
Outfielders	B+	B-
Starting pitchers	B	B-
Relief pitchers	B	B
Manager	B-	n/a

Parent's signature: _____

Dated: _____

My pal Jack M. is a long-suffering but loyal Indians season-ticket holder. I daresay that the only person (to my knowledge) who has followed the Tribe longer and harder is Bob Feller -- and that's saying a mouthful.

Immediately upon completion of the not-unexpected 69-93 season, he e-mailed me his final grades and asked for my response.

"A disappointing season?" his e-mail began. "Well, maybe, but maybe not. Expectations were certainly not high, and add a season-ending injury to your best player (Grady Sizemore) and lost time for Asdrubal Cabrera, and what could we really have hoped for?

"But in my opinion, there is definitely a silver lining to this season. The Tribe gained an opportunity to give their many high-caliber prospects significant playing time at the major-league level."

For the record, I did not follow the team as closely as I usually do, having suspected way back

in spring training that it would be yet another only mildly entertaining “rebuilding” year. To that end, I based my grades on the writings of our own Tribe expert Paul Cousineau and *Plain Dealer*
beat reporter Paul Hoynes, whom I followed every day. I also relied heavily on final-season team and individual statistics, which accurately reflected the 69-93 mark. For the record, in case you haven’t seen them yet, here’s how the Indians ranked in the 14-team American League:

OFFENSE: 12th in runs scored, 12th in hits, 11th in home runs, 12th in total bases, 6th in walks (yay!), 12th in fewest strikeouts, 9th in stolen bases, 10th in on-base percentage, 13th in slugging percentage and 10th in batting average.
PITCHING: 12th in ERA, 13th in saves, 3rd in fewest homers yielded (yay!), 13th in fewest bases on balls, and 14th in strikeouts.
FIELDING: 10th in fewest errors committed.

That said, here’s how we both graded the Tribe, by position:

CATCHERS: Jack’s grade B+, my grade C+
If Carlos Santana can come back injury-free next year and with Lou Marson backing him up, Jack believes that catching “is a strong category.” I, on the other hand, noted that, had Santana played all year my grade would be a solid B. “The kid really looks good at the plate and will only get better,” I replied. “But because he only will be catching in the neighborhood of 100 games next year and spending the rest of the time at 1B or DH, I can’t stomach the thought of Marson catching 50 to 60 games. He’s okay defensively, but a dud at the plate.”

INFIELD: Jack’s grade D, my grade D
“If not for Asdrubal Cabrera, it would be an F,” Jack wrote. “We have a couple of 2B prospects in the minors who show real promise as well as Lonnie Chisenhall at 3B, so maybe help is forthcoming.” I noted that Jason Donald is a passable second-baseman. “But Matt LaPorta’s .583 OPS is a real concern. I’m hoping that he finds his missing pop in winter ball,” I wrote back.

OUTFIELD: Jack’s grade B+, my grade B-
“Good speed and defense,” Jack wrote. “Lacking a little power, but Michael Brantley is developing nicely and may show power soon. Coupled with Grady Sizemore and Shin-Soo Choo, the outfield is solid. Trevor Crowe and Shelley Duncan give great depth here, too.” I told him that I’m sold on Duncan as a fourth outfielder, but not so much Crowe, who had a stinky .584 OPS. Jack wrote back: “I like Crowe, not for his batting average but for adding speed and

defense -- especially as a defensive substitute (or runner) for Duncan in late-inning situations and for giving Grady an occasional rest."

STARTING PITCHING: Jack's grade B, my grade B-
"Who could have foreseen Jeanmar Gomez, Carlos Carrasco and Josh Tomlin coming?" Jack asked rhetorically. "And Fausto Carmona was outstanding again. With pitching being 90% of the game, we have to be very optimistic here." I observed that, before the start of the season, I predicted that manager Manny Acta would have to use maybe 18 to 20 starting pitchers over the course of the season; he actually only used 10: "If Carmona can keep up the good work, he can be a solid No. 1 -- until the inevitable trade. Carrasco, Tomlin, Gomez and maybe Mitch Talbot could work as 2, 3, 4 and 5 next year."

RELIEF PITCHING: Jack's grade B, my grade B
Jack gave the high grade primarily due to the emergence of closer Chris Perez, who took over when Kerry Wood was traded. "But other arms showed themselves, too," he added. "The closer is the key guy, and the Tribe seems to be set there. Of course, the performance of a bullpen year-to-year is a crap-shoot, but the Tribe is at least respectable in this category now." I agreed with his "respectable" statement and added that Justin Masterson, Chris Perez and Rafael Perez could form the core of a decent bullpen in 2011.

MANAGER: Jack's grade: B-, my grade N/A
"Acta may have been the best choice to manage this young team," Jack wrote. "He seemed to understand that his job wasn't so much to win ballgames as to develop the young players, especially when Sizemore went down early, followed by Cabrera. Under his steady hand, the young players were able to develop without any outside pressure. I do think that he under-utilized his team's speed, and I think there is still much to do regarding fundamentals."

As counterpoint, I noted that a baseball manager does not make a big impact either positively or negatively. "Even Casey Stengel or Bobby Cox would've lost 90+ games with this crew," I rightly observed.

He came back at me with a vengeance. Here's what he wrote: "Who would have thought that Atlanta would be in the playoff hunt? We know that the difference is the manager. I just think that a manager (like a manager in any business) has to know his people's capabilities and know when to apply the pressure and when to teach. I think Acta is the right man right now. In two years, maybe we'll have his head. The test will be when the team becomes reasonably

competitive -- can he whip them home? I think Lou Piniella would have destroyed these kids this year, but Acta allowed them to play without the pressure. I was as unexcited as the next person when they hired him, but as the season progressed I thought he was a good fit under the circumstances."

LOOKING FORWARD

"Even though I'm generally grading lower than you," I wrote Jack, "I still worry that I'm grading too high. After all, this team lost 90+ games again. My C+, D, B-, B- and B don't average out to D+, which is about what I'd give the whole team for its season."

But Jack was quick to point out that I based my grades primarily on this season's results, while he based his "on what I see the same crew doing next year. This means that I'm not throwing any weight to statistics from this year, but rather to where I think the team will be at the start of next year. [For instance], the outfield grade assumes that Grady is back and [assumes] that Brantley's late-season improvement carries over -- including a boost in power as he matures."

The real test for next year, we both agree, will be the starting pitching. "It's hard to put too much faith in the performance of a bunch of kids in their first major league seasons going into the following season," Jack commented. "My opinion is that next year will be much like this year, and that we're really waiting for 2012."

In other words, Indians management is not asking us to "wait until next year," as they usually do. In our eyes, they're asking us to wait until the year after next year.