Sandy Alomar Jr. debuted with the Indians in 1990 and at first he more than lived up to the hype that made him the most celebrated catching prospect in baseball and the point man in the deal that sent Joe Carter to the San Diego Padres. Playing 132 games, the 6'5", 200-pound Alomar hit .290, slugged nine home runs, knocked in 66 and became the fourth Cleveland Rookie of the Year as well as the first Indian in eons to start in an All-Star Game. At just 25 years old, it appeared that a long, prosperous career awaited the gregarious young man from Puerto Rico.

Things didn't quite work out that way, at least not in the years following 1990. Alomar's effectiveness was impaired by repeated injuries that limited him to an average of seventy games per season from 1991 through '95. As the Tribe roster filled to the brim with great young talent, and as the club became one of the best in baseball, the former Rookie of the Year seemed almost to be yesterday's news. In 1995, as the Indians put together their first World Series run in more than four decades, Alomar had 61 fewer plate appearances than his ostensible backup, 38-year old Tony Pena. Reasonably healthy in '96, Alomar managed an uninspiring .696 OPS in 127 games. He turned thirty midway through the season; a player whose best days were seemingly behind him.

Right from the beginning of the 1997 season, however, Alomar had the unmistakable look of a man who was locked in. Starting with a 2-for-4 effort on Opening Day the big catcher hit safely in his first eight games, including home runs in five consecutive outings, racking up a .618 batting average and 1.834 OPS en route. That sensational start- and the hitting streak- both were harbingers of good things to come. Sandy Alomar was about to take his team, and his fans, on a season-long joyride.

By the afternoon of May 25th Sandy had cooled off a little bit but was still hitting .331 with nine home runs, 28 RBI and a .985 OPS. That Sunday at Jacobs Field against the Orioles,

Cleveland's vanquisher in the '96 Division Series, Alomar would begin the longest hitting streak in franchise history with a second-inning home run off Baltimore starter Mike Johnson. Unlike their catcher the Indians were not off to a hot start: the 7-6 victory over the Orioles moved them to a mediocre 25-21, which was still good enough for first place in the weak American League Central.

May turned into June and game after game, Alomar kept getting base hits. On June 18th he celebrated his 31st birthday and extended his streak to nineteen with two hits in an interleague loss to the Reds. Four days later the streak reached twenty-one when Alomar slammed a three-run homer off David Wells in a victory over the defending World Champion Yankees. Six days later the big catcher made it twenty-five straight games with a hit when he went 3-for-5 in another victory over New York, this time in Yankee Stadium. Though the Tribe remained maddeningly inconsistent- they were just 39-34 at this point, two games up on the White Sox- Alomar had made his name into a byword for consistent excellence.

June turned into July but Sandy Alomar just kept knocking the cover off the ball. He extended his streak to twenty-eight straight games with a 3-for-4 performance in a loss at Houston and to twenty-nine with a 2-for-4 in a Fourth of July victory over the Royals in front of the usual Jacobs Field sellout. Two days later, in the final game before the All-Star Break, he made it thirty straight with a single off Kansas City starter and current Tribe pitching coach Tim Belcher.

1997 was a year for All-Star Games in Cleveland. Five months after the NBA played its All-Star Game in Gund Arena, baseball's version convened in Jacobs Field, the first time the event was held in Cleveland since the strike-shortened 1981 season. Three Indians were invited to play- David Justice as a starter (although he would miss the game), Jim Thome and Sandy Alomar as reserves. It was Sandy's fifth trip to the Midsummer Classic, but the first time since his rookie year he had really earned the honor with his play on the field.

Jacobs Field was packed with 44,916 spectators, the vast majority partisan Indians fans, for the Major League All-Star Game on the warm night of July 8th, 1997. Going into the contest the National League had won the last three Midsummer Classics, a skein the American League was looking to reverse. With both of their representatives on the reserve list, the hometown fans would have to wait a while for the opportunity to cheer one of their own.

The game was tightly contested throughout. Edgar Martinez gave the American League a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the second with a home run off National League starter Greg Maddux. It was still 1-0 in the top of the sixth when Alomar first entered the game, replacing starting catcher Pudge Rodriguez. One inning later Javier Lopez tied the game with a solo shot off Jose Rosado. It was 1-1 when the American League took its turn at the plate in the home half of the seventh. On the mound was San Francisco left-hander Shawn Estes.

Jim Thome led off the inning, the first Indian to bat, and grounded out to short. Bernie Williams followed with a walk and remained at first when Joey Cora flied out. With two away Sandy Alomar came to the plate looking to extend the inning. He got an opportunity to hit with the go-ahead run in scoring position when Williams advanced to second on a wild pitch. As it turned out, Sandy would render the break unnecessary with one swing of the bat.

Alomar worked the count to two-and-two and Estes came with a breaking ball that hung out over the plate. Alomar reached out and slammed the pitch on a line to deep left-center. National League left fielder Steve Finley raced back toward the wall and peeled off, realizing the futility of pursuit. The ball cleared the nineteen-foot wall in left and landed deep in the bleachers, giving the American League a 3-1 lead.

The crowd at Jacobs Field was on its feet screaming as Alomar rounded the bases and got a hero's welcome from the American League dugout. Sandy was in seventh heaven. "I was flying around the bases," he said later. "I don't think I've ever run so fast around the bases." He was also in good company: the last player to hit an All-Star home run in his home stadium was Hank Aaron, who went deep during the 1972 Midsummer Classic in Atlanta. Moments later, with the crowd chanting his name, Sandy came out for a well-earned curtain call.

As it turned out the 3-1 score held up. Randy Myers and Mariano Rivera retired the last six National League batters in order to secure the win. Sandy Alomar became the first-ever player to win the All-Star Game MVP Award while playing in his home stadium. That night, and that long shot off Shawn Estes, was the signature moment of Sandy's brilliant 1997 season. But the biggest hits for Sandy and the Indians were still to come.

Sandy's thirty-game hitting streak came to an end in the first game following the All-Star Break. Still, he would finish the 1997 season with sensational numbers in almost every category: his .324 batting average, 21 home runs, 83 RBI and .900 OPS were all career bests. Cleveland would make a late charge to secure its third consecutive American League Central crown, albeit

with an 86-75 record that was the worst of any playoff qualifier. With a Division Series matchup with the Yankees looming, the Tribe's sojourn in the postseason was expected to be a short one. But Sandy Alomar would have something to say about that.

New York bullied its way to victories in two of the first three games of the best-of-five series and carried a 2-1 lead into the bottom of the eighth inning of Game Four. With two outs and nobody on Sandy came to the plate against Mariano Rivera, the 27-year old flamethrower that had racked up 43 saves in his first season closing games for the Yankees. Sandy got ahead in the count 2-0, got the pitch he wanted from Rivera and jumped on it, slamming it deep the opposite way. Yankee right fielder Paul O'Neill could only slam his glove into the padded wall as the ball disappeared into a churning mass of jubilant Indians fans. The game was tied, 2-2.

Cleveland would win Game Four in the bottom of the ninth and finish the comeback the following night, eliminating the favored Yankees with a 4-3 Game Five win. The Indians then surprised the Orioles in the Championship Series, getting revenge for the '96 Division Series with a six-game triumph over the team with the league's best record. Sandy hit just .125 against Baltimore (although one of his three hits was the game-winner in the tenth inning of Game Four) but bounced back brilliantly in the World Series, hitting .367 with two home runs and a series-best ten RBI in Cleveland's seven-game loss to the Florida Marlins. In all, Sandy hit .274 for the 1997 postseason with five home runs, 19 RBI and an OPS of over .800.

Sandy Alomar wound up playing twenty seasons in the big leagues with seven different teams. His career numbers- .273 batting average, .309 on-base percentage, .716 OPS, 112 home runs- are not imposing, especially for the offense-heavy era in which he played. Unlike his brother Roberto, he will never be a Hall of Famer. In some ways he never quite fulfilled the promise of his Rookie-of-the-Year campaign of 1990.

But for one magical season, Sandy Alomar was as good, and as clutch, as any player in the game. For one season he was the man who could do no wrong. For consistency, for big moments in big games from the start of the season to the end, Sandy Alomar's 1997 is one of the greatest seasons I've ever seen from a Cleveland athlete. And for a man who always conducted himself with great class on and off the field, it was a season richly deserved.