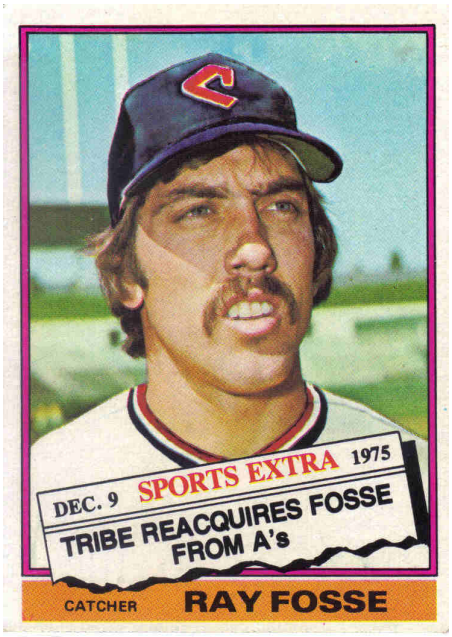


Cyclical creatures as we are, the last step out a door is often just the first step on the road right back to it. For Jim Thome, a 20-year journey as a pro ballplayer finally winds its way back to its origin point in Cleveland this weekend—nine years after the Tribe's all-time home run king infamously designated himself for a more lucrative assignment. It's the latest example of how--in sports as in life— there are few burnt bridges that can't be rebuilt… especially if it means a spike in ticket sales.

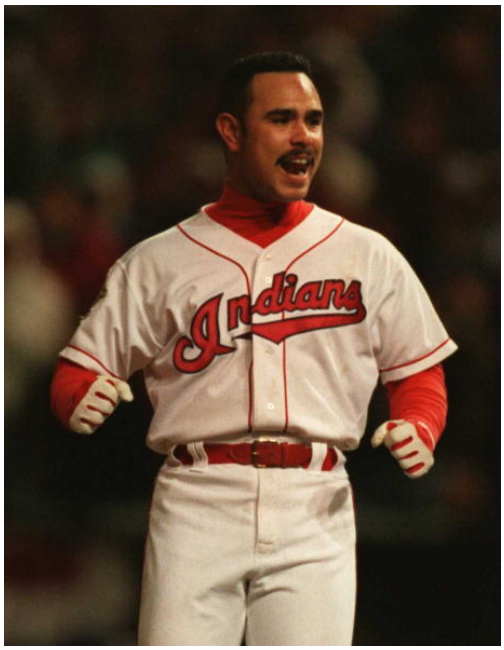
Fact is, if it took the Thome signing to teach you never to say "never," you don't know your Cleveland sports history too well. For decades now, it's been a local tradition of sorts to welcome back our various prodigal sons for one more run. Sometimes, it's a needless but bizarrely therapeutic move to heal old wounds from regrettable past transactions—a publicity stunt of sorts. In other cases, it's a genuine effort to bolster a team's competitive chances by adding a proven piece. In almost every "Welcome Home" scenario, however, the emotional payoff of seeing that old friend again has far outweighed the actual on-field benefits of the acquisitions.

Admittedly, few franchises in any sport are immune to this type of nostalgic straw-grabbing and merch-selling slyness. The Browns and Cavaliers have certainly barked up the tree before, bringing back past-their-prime versions of Paul Warfield (1976), Earnest Byner (1994), and Campy Russell (1984). The Cavs even managed to make a major event out of the "return" of Zydrunas Ilgauskas in 2010 after he spent a month or so hiding in a cabin in the woods as part of the Antawn Jamison deal. It's the Cleveland Indians, though, that really have this tricky maneuver down pat. They've been doing it as far back as the 1930s, in fact, with some names just as noteworthy as Thome's. So, for a quick primer on the Tribe's history of remarriages, let's

do the standard Top Ten thing, including a look at how these ten prodigal sons performed in their first games back in Cleveland.

Top Ten Cleveland Indians Homecomings (Pre-Thome)

10. George Uhle
First Stint: 1919-1928 / Return: 1936
Known as the man who once intentionally walked a batter to face Babe Ruth (and struck him out, of course), George "The Bull" Uhle was a huge star for the Indians in the 1920s, winning 147 games across 10 seasons. A Cleveland native, Uhle was traded to Detroit in 1928, much to the dismay of the Forest City fanatics. But in 1936, aged 37 and way past his usefulness, Uhle— now a player/coach—took the hill again as an Indian for 7 more games. Unfortunately, an 8.53 ERA and 2.45 WHIP in 12.2 innings probably didn't instill a ton of confidence in his pupils. Still, the Indians saw the PR value in re-animating their old timers, bringing back Uhle's old battery mate Luke Sewell in a similar capacity three years later.
Uhle's First Game Back in Cleveland: July 25, 1936. 3.1 IP, 2 ER, 6 H, 1 BB in a 15-12 loss to the A's.



9. Carlos Baerga
First Stint: 1990-1996 / Return: 1999
Long before Thome or Lofton were dragged back via the waiver wire, the Indians tried to find some late season magic in the form of Carlos Baerga—a perennial all-star who'd devolved into a scrub seemingly overnight. While Baerga's stunning trade to the Mets had sent Tribe fans into an uproar in 1996, his return was met with something closer to pity than excitement. In 1999 alone, he'd already been dumped by the Cardinals, Reds, and Padres. And his second go-round with the Indians proved equally brief (22 games, 1 HR, 5 RBI, .228 AVG). Still, no one with a heart could deny it was nice seeing Carlos in a Tribe uniform one last time.

First Game Back: August 16, 1999. 2-4 with a K in a 13-5 loss to Texas.

8. Early Wynn

First Stint: 1949-1957 / Return: 1963

After winning 163 games for the Indians across nine seasons, Wynn was traded to the White Sox in 1957 for Minnie Minoso—a deal that ironically brought Minnie back to the Tribe (where he'd started his career) after seven years in Chicago. Skip ahead another six years, and the nostalgia train was back on the rails again, as Cleveland picked up the now 43-year old Wynn off the scrap heap to close his career out back "home." He only appeared in 20 games, but pitched admirably, posting a 2.28 ERA mostly out of the pen.

First Game Back: June 21, 1963. 9 IP, 2 ER, 5 Ks, 1 BB in 2-0 loss to White Sox.

7. Doug Jones

First Stint: 1986-1991 / Return: 1998

Might not be quite like bringing back your all-time homerun leader, but the Indians welcomed back then all-time saves leader Doug Jones in a fairly surprising midsummer '98 deal that sent similarly reliable right hander Eric Plunk to Milwaukee. The 41 year-old Jones pitched pretty well, too (3.45 ERA, 28 K's to 6 BB), even adding one more save to his franchise leading total. As it happened, bringing back arms from the Tribe's lackluster late '80s teams was actually a weird trend during the glorious '90s. Along with Jones, John Hart also re-signed the likes of Tom Candiotti, Greg Swindell, John Farrell, and Bud Black—none of whom quite found the fountain of youth.

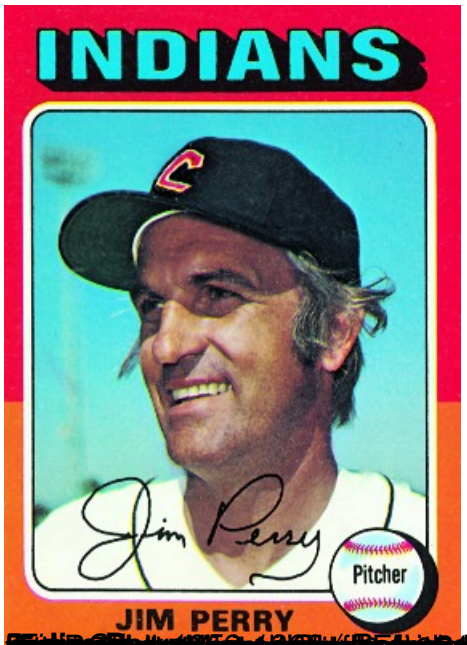
Jones' First Game Back in Cleveland: July 26, 1998. I ER, 3 H, and 1 K in 8-1 loss to Tigers.

6. Julio Franco

First Stint: 1983-1988 / Return: 1996

The ageless Dominican—who'd primarily been a shortstop during his initial run with the Tribe—rejoined the club during the "Era of Champions" as a new, much bulkier man. In 1996, after a year in the Japanese league, the 37 year-old replaced Paul Sorrento as Cleveland's everyday first baseman and proved very productive in 112 games: .322 AVG, 14 homers, 76 RBI, .477 OBP, and .877 OPS. Julio also wound up spending 11 more years in the Majors.

First Game Back: April 2, 1996. 1-4 with 2 walks and a strikeout in 7-1 loss to Yankees.



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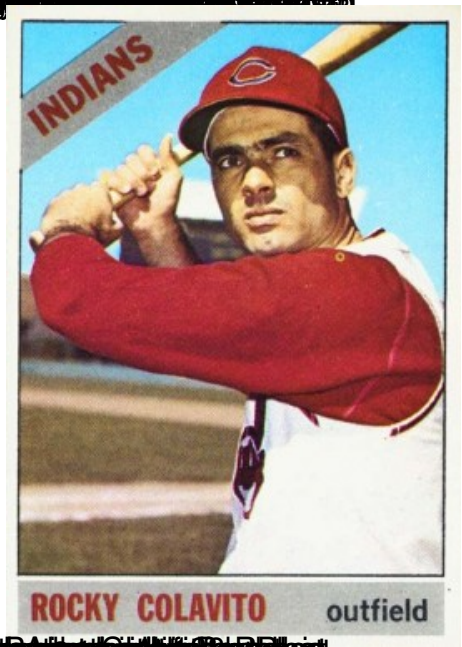

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