With the Tigers taking the first two games in this “must-sweep” series for the Tribe, it would certainly seem that the die has been cast in the AL Central and all that’s left in this divisional race is whether the Indians will be able to hold onto their grip of 2nd place and how many games the Tigers eventually win the division by.
Any flicker of hope that may have resided in the hearts of anyone on the morning of Labor Day has been sufficiently extinguished as the Indians have been passed up and beaten away by a team that is superior to them, as both teams are currently constructed.

While that may be tough for fans to read given that hope does spring eternal, the sheer math involved (and I know a lot of you hate math) just make it nearly impossible for the Indians to get back into this thing. Now that they are 8 ½ games back with only 23 to play (and the Tigers have only 20 games left to play), the Indians would have to go on more than just a considerable tear while the Tigers would have to go into a complete freefall for the outcome that we all see coming to be changed. Yes, they still have the 3-game set in Detroit to close out the season and the Indians are starting to welcome back the likes of Grady and Kipnis, but the Indians and Tigers would BOTH have to do a 180-degree turn from the direction each has been heading in for the past month for that final series of the season to be relevant.

That…that’s just not going to happen.

Though the thought was that the Indians might be able to take control of their own destiny by facing the Tigers (and the White Sox) so much down the stretch and make a play for the

division by doing the dirty work on their own, it is fairly obvious that the Indians are simply too short-handed as they exist in the 1st full week of September to make that push. The topic has been covered ad nauseum (in this space, admittedly), but with Sizemore, Hafner, Choo, Kipnis, and Brantley all either on the DL or attempting to recapture IMMEDIATE success when coming off the shelf, the Indians weren't going to win with what amounted to their "B" lineup for any extended stretch and that is about to bear itself out as the month wears on.

That's not to discount the fact that the Indians hung in this thing a lot longer than most would have assumed (and I'm talking recently…not the whole "they'll come back to Earth by Memorial Day" crowd), but as the injuries mounted and the offense that struggled to score runs even when healthier began to show itself for what it was (a lineup full of bench players and youngsters), it certainly foretold a finish out of the money this season. Though the likes of Hannahan and Donald and Duncan gave it their most valiant effort in the last week or so (to say nothing of the performance of Cabrera and Santana all year long), when the Tigers are able to stick Miggy Cabrera in the middle of their lineup and surround him with some nice offensive pieces, we're not talking about an apples-to-apples comparison in terms of available talent. Unfortunately, that gap in available talent is what has separated (and will continue to separate) the two teams down the stretch.

At Monday's game, I got into a conversation with a knowledgeable Tigers' fan in front of me (and, as a quick aside here, how nice is it when you can talk baseball intelligently with someone who comes from a different viewpoint, particularly in the context of a divisional rival) and the most striking words that he said all day were, "boy, the Tigers sure are lucky that you guys are as banged up as you are". What gets lost in all of this as the Tigers zoom right by the Tribe and continue to distance themselves is not only that the Indians were unlucky in all of this, but that the Tigers seemed to be catching breaks coming down the stretch in the last couple of weeks as often as the Tribe was experiencing breaks…and tweaks, and pulls.

Sure, Boesch went down with a thumb injury, but the Tigers are truly cresting at the right time, nearly fully healthy, with a monster at the top of their rotation and with all of their (older) players now productive after starting off the year so slowly. While the Indians came out of the gate fast and have limped their way around the final couple of turns, the Tigers just kept building speed as they now suddenly look like a legitimate playoff factor in the American League instead of the sacrificial AL Central lamb that is normally presented placed on the altar of the AL East Wild Card at the beginning of October.

Maybe a monstrous collapse still awaits Detroit, but that's awfully hard to see right now, given the way that they're going. Just as important, an unprecedented tear of victories for the Tribe is equally difficult to imagine with the team as bruised and battered as they are.
That's not to say that either situation is still inherently impossible, as the Tigers have coughed up leads this late in the season.
In case you don't remember, they had the bottom fall out in 2009, when they went saw a 7-game divisional lead on September 6th whittle away to nothing as September wore on, with the Twins catching them on the final day of the season, then losing a 12-inning one-game playoff to said Twins.

However, while it isn't inherently impossible or unprecedented for the Tigers to collapse, the likelihood of that happening PLUS the Indians catching fire to overcome such a large margin in such a short amount of time decreases with each passing game and drops off of a cliff with each passing loss, particularly the 10-1 beat down on Tuesday night with Verlander waiting on Wednesday. Though most have been waiting to write the Indians off for about 4 months now, the truth is staring them right in the face, that they don't have the horses to go to battle with Detroit and that the AL Central crown, which seemed silly to think about in the pre-season, won't be residing in Cleveland at the end of the year.

That's not to say that the Indians should simply step up to the podium for their concession speech, thank everyone for their support and move on as they still have a month of the season left to play to see what Grady looks like (though I think they pick up his option, just as they'll pick up Carmona's…Tuesday's implosion or not) and to give some of their players an opportunity to get healthy and perhaps even regain some momentum before the season ends.

At this point, it becomes about building on the positives and attempting to end the season on a positive note as the bright spots of this surprise season – Asdrubal's emergence, Santana's recovery, Masterson's dominance, the bullpen, Kipnis' first taste, the aggressiveness of the Front Office – have the potential to serve as building blocks for what certainly seems to be a

much brighter future than anyone would have (or did) predicted at the dawn of the season.

Certainly work needs to be done (and I'm not just talking recovery of principal players) as the Indians are far from a perfect team going forward, even if you can start to see a number of the pieces lining up for the future around the diamond and on the pitching staff. However, lest anyone think this slow crawl down in the "GB" column (which coincided with the Tigers becoming otherworldly hot) puts a dark cloud over the season as a whole, the Indians hung around the top of the division and were in 2nd place on Labor Day, still above .500, with talented young players who have all now essentially arrived and have started to acquit themselves to MLB, in the midst of a pennant race no less.

As disappointing as the Indians not being able to sweep the Tigers may be (and barring that major collapse by Detroit over the next three weeks), the Indians' 2011 season has been a ride worth taking. Now, as reality has set in on the team and as the Tribe tries to soldier through the final month of the season, the focus turns to an all-too-familiar place for Cleveland sports fans – next year.