With Major League Baseball expanding its playoff format to include a second wild-card team in each league this year, some Tribe fans see this as an end-around into October past the spendthrift Detroit Tigers. Or at the very least, an invitation to an extension of a watered-down playoff race.

(Others see the move simply as an MLB insurance policy virtually guaranteeing that both the Yankees and the Red Sox make the postseason every year...which, let's face it, gang, feels like the sole purpose of baseball these days.)

Coincidentally, the last time baseball tinkered with its postseason structure, the Indians immediately began the most wonderful era in their history. But while it's tempting to connect the dots between the expanded playoff structure and the Tribe's resurgence, is that necessarily the case?

Since the dawn of the wild-card, three-division structure in 1994, the Indians have made the playoffs seven times and contended 10 times. Many coincide the Indians' newfound role as contenders with the addition of two playoff spots in the American League.

Similarly, the Indians' front office was praised for accepting an invitation to move to the new Central Division rather than staying in the East and maintaining profitable rivalries with the Yankees and Red Sox. On the surface, it looks like the Indians got a free pass into the postseason by jumping into a division that couldn't produce another viable contender in the second half of the 1990s.

So the question remains: if baseball had kept the two-division format when Jacobs Field opened and the Indians came to life in 1994, would the next decade have been as memorable in Cleveland?

In a flight of fancy that only baseball fans can truly appreciate, here's a breakdown of each of those 10 American League seasons and how the Tribe would have fared if the Central Division - and the wild card - had never come about:

1994

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 70-43 -

Orioles 63-49 6.5 GB

Central

White Sox 67-46 -

Indians 66-47 1 GB

West

Rangers 52-62 -

Athletics 51-63 1 GB

Potential Division Series:

Yankees vs. Indians

White Sox vs. Rangers

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Yankees 70-43 -

Indians 66-47 4 GB

Orioles 63-49 6.5 GB

West

White Sox 67-46 -

Rangers 52-62 15.5 GB

Athletics 51-63 16.5 GB

ALCS:

Yankees vs. White Sox

VERDICT: *Saved* - The Tribe still would have been refreshingly in contention in the two-division universe, but had things ended the way they stood at the time of the strike, Cleveland would have made the playoffs in the new format instead of finishing four back of the Yankees in the East.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *White Sox* - Other than the fans, of course, it was Chicago that got the short end of the stick in the first year of the divisional shift. In the old system, the White Sox would have held a huge lead in the AL West with six weeks to play. Instead, they had the Indians and Kansas City nipping at their heels in the Central and a Baltimore club also in the mix for the wild card.

1995

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Red Sox 86-58 -

Yankees 79-65 7 GB

Central

Indians 100-44 -

Royals 70-74 30 GB

West

Mariners 79-66 -

Angels 78-67 1 GB

Division Series:

Indians over Red Sox

Mariners over Yankees

ALCS:

Indians over Mariners

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Indians 100-44 -

Red Sox 86-58 14 GB

Yankees 79-65 21 GB

West

Mariners 79-66 -

Angels 78-67 1 GB

Royals 70-74 8.5 GB

ALCS:

Indians vs. Mariners

VERDICT: *Screwed* - Granted, it was a light screwing, but under the new format the dominant Indians had to play a division series against Boston fraught with peril before advancing to the ALCS with Seattle. (For neither of which, it should be noted, did the 100-win Indians hold home-field advantage for the decisive games.)

WHO REALLY GOT SAVED: *Yankees* - They would have finished in third place in the division, 21 games out of first in the old structure instead of as the wild-card team with a near-division series win.

1996

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 92-70 -

Orioles 88-74 4 GB

Central

Indians 99-62 -

White Sox 85-77 14.5 GB

West

Rangers 90-72 -

Mariners 85-76 4.5 GB

Division Series:

Yankees over Rangers

Orioles over Indians

ALCS:

Yankees over Orioles

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Indians 99-62 -

Yankees 92-70 7.5 GB

Orioles 88-74 11.5 GB

West

Rangers 90-72 -

Mariners 85-76 4.5 GB

White Sox 85-77 5 GB

ALCS:

Indians vs. Rangers

VERDICT: *Screwed* - This one still hurts. After another dominant regular season, the Indians should have coasted into the ALCS against Texas. Instead, they had to toil with a hot Baltimore team (and un-suspended spitting aficionado Roberto Alomar), and even if they'd won, then would have had to face the Yankees, who beat the Tribe nine out of 12 times in '96.

WHO REALLY GOT SAVED: *Yankees* - Instead of winning the World Series, they would have finished second place in the division, 7.5 games back of the Tribe.

1997

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Orioles 98-64 -

Yankees 96-66 2 GB

Central

Indians 86-75 -

White Sox 80-81 6 GB

West

Mariners 90-72 -

Angels 84-78 6 GB

Division Series:

Orioles over Mariners

Indians over Yankees

ALCS:

Indians over Orioles

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Orioles 98-64 -

Yankees 96-66 2 GB

Indians 86-75 11.5 GB

West

Mariners 90-72 -

Angels 84-78 6 GB

White Sox 80-81 9.5 GB

ALCS:

Orioles vs. Mariners

VERDICT: *Saved* - While the ’97 Tribe’s near-miraculous run to the pennant may have seemed unjust to many baseball fans, it made up for the colossal hosing the Indians took the previous year. Instead of an underwhelming third-place finish in the division and the fourth-best record in the American League, the Indians wound up two outs away from the world championship.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Orioles* - Their division series triumph over Seattle should have been for a trip to the World Series. (But like the Indians, this was basically a cosmic makeup call for 1996.)

1998

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 114-48 -

Red Sox 92-70 22 GB

Central

Indians 89-73 -

White Sox 80-82 9 GB

West

Rangers 88-74 -

Angels 85-77 3 GB

Division Series:

Yankees over Rangers

Indians over Red Sox

ALCS:

Yankees over Indians

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Yankees 114-48 -

Red Sox 92-70 22 GB

Indians 89-73 25 GB

West

Rangers 88-74 -

Angels 85-77 3 GB

White Sox 80-82 8 GB

ALCS:

Yankees vs. Rangers

VERDICT: *Saved* - With an unchallenged Indians' team repeatedly hitting the "snooze" button all season, they were spared the humiliation of finishing 25 games behind the Yankees. Instead, they got to enjoy a fun little division series win over Boston, then scare the hell out of New York in the ALCS before stumbling.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Rangers* - Wasn't much of a screwing, but under the old system, Texas would have been annihilated by the Yankees in the ALCS instead of the division series.

1999

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 98-64 -

Red Sox 94-68 4 GB

Central

Indians 97-65 -

White Sox 75-86 21.5 GB

West

Rangers 95-67 -

Athletcs 87-75 8 GB

Division Series:

Yankees over Rangers

Red Sox over Indians

ALCS:

Yankees over Red Sox

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Yankees 98-64 -

Indians 97-65 1 GB

Red Sox 94-68 4 GB

West

Rangers 95-67 -

Athletics 87-75 8 GB

White Sox 75-86 19.5 GB

ALCS:

Yankees vs. Rangers

VERDICT: *Neither* - True, the Indians would have had more to play for down the stretch, but it's doubtful the Indians would have overtaken the Yankees in a tight division race. On the other hand, finishing a respectful second in the division was probably more dignified than blowing a two-games-to-none lead and turning their division series with Boston into a pinball game.

WHO REALLY GOT SAVED: *Red Sox* - They would have finished third in the AL East in the old system, but instead wound up in the ALCS.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Rangers* - Though just like the year before, this is a matter of semantics.

2000

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 87-74 -

Red Sox 85-77 2 GB

Central

White Sox 95-67 -

Indians 90-72 5 GB

West

Athletics 91-70 -

Mariners 91-71 0.5 GB

Division Series:

Yankees over Athletics

Mariners over White Sox

ALCS:

Yankees over Mariners

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Indians 90-72 -

Yankees 87-74 2.5 GB

Red Sox 85-77 5 GB

West

White Sox 95-67 -

Athletics 91-70 3.5 GB

Mariners 91-71 4 GB

ALCS:

Indians vs. White Sox

VERDICT: *Screwed* - This was the first time in the wild-card era the Indians missed the playoffs and, appropriately, they were shafted. Actually posting a better record than the eventual world-champion Yankees, the Indians missed the playoffs only because Chicago shook off five years of colossal underachievement to finally put together a decent season. It marked the third time in the wild-card era that the Indians finished with a better record than New York - and the Yankees still made the playoffs all three times.

WHO REALLY GOT SAVED: *Yankees* - Just like in 1996, the wild-card format allowed Steinbrenner's boys to transform from a divisional runner-up to a world champion in a puff of big-market pixie dust.

2001

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 95-65 -

Red Sox 82-79 13.5 GB

Central

Indians 91-71 -

Twins 85-77 6 GB

West

Mariners 116-46 -

Athletics 102-60 14 GB

Division Series:

Yankees over Athletics

Mariners over Indians

ALCS:

Yankees over Mariners

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Yankees 95-65 -

Indians 91-71 4 GB

Red Sox 82-79 13.5 GB

West

Mariners 116-46 -

Athletics 102-60 14 GB

Twins 85-77 31 GB

ALCS:

Yankees vs. Mariners

VERDICT: *Saved* - In the two-division universe, this would have been another ho-hum season reminiscent of the Tribe's bridesmaid campaigns of the 1950s. As it happened, the Indians got to squeeze one more division title out of Dick Jacobs' championship juicer and then pester the mighty Mariners in an entertaining division series.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Nobody, really* - The Mariners' historic regular season seemed to earn them a trip to the World Series, but they still would have lost to the Yankees in the ALCS. (Though you could argue that they might have fared better if not pushed to the limit by the Indians in the first round.)

2005

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Yankees 95-67 -

Red Sox 95-67 -

Central

White Sox 99-63 -

Indians 93-69 6 GB

West

Angels 95-67 -

Athletics 88-74 7 GB

Division Series:

Angels over Yankees

White Sox over Red Sox

ALCS:

White Sox over Angels

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Yankees 95-67 -

Red Sox 95-67 -

Indians 93-69 2 GB

West

White Sox 99-63 -

Angels 95-67 4 GB

Athletics 88-74 11 GB

ALCS:

Yankees vs. White Sox

VERDICT: *Neither* - Since they were already chasing New York and Boston for the wild-card spot, the Indians' choke-job down the stretch would have simply cost them the AL East crown under the old system.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Yankees & Red Sox fans* - They not only missed out on a chance to witness what would have been a classic title race, but also a golden opportunity to toss a Molotov cocktail on their inferno of hate for one another.

WHO REALLY GOT SAVED: *The rest of America* - For not having to watch that.

2007

Actual finish in three-division format:

East

Red Sox 96-66 -

Yankees 94-68 2 GB

Central

Indians 96-66 -

Tigers 88-74 8 GB

West

Angels 94-68 -

Mariners 88-74 6 GB

Division Series:

Red Sox over Angels

Indians over Yankees

ALCS:

Red Sox over Indians

How they would have finished in two-division format:

East

Indians 96-66 -

Red Sox 96-66 -

Yankees 94-68 2 GB

Tigers 88-74 8 GB

West

Angels 94-68 -

Mariners 88-74 6 GB

ALCS:

Indians/Red Sox vs. Angels

VERDICT: *Saved* - Though they finished with identical records, it's difficult to imagine the Indians fending off Boston for the AL East title (particularly after the way the Indians doused their drawers against the Red Sox in Games 5-7 of the ALCS). Thus, a fantastic Tribe season would have netted nothing other than a second-place divisional finish.

WHO REALLY GOT SCREWED: *Angels* - Like the Rangers of the late 1990s, the Halos were denied a trip to the championship series by the logistics of the new system.

So if you're keeping score at home, that's five times the Indians have been saved by the wild-card system, three times they've been screwed, and twice when they essentially would have met the same fate under the old system.

And taken altogether - with a *Shawshank Redemption*-type of screwing in 1996 balanced by a *Shawshank Redemption*
-type of salvation in 1997 - the scales tip in the Indians' favor when analyzing the impact of the wild-card format.

Will the creation of a new playoff spot benefit the Indians or find new ways to twist the dagger of irony deeper into our solar plexus?

Or worse still - will it have no effect at all?

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