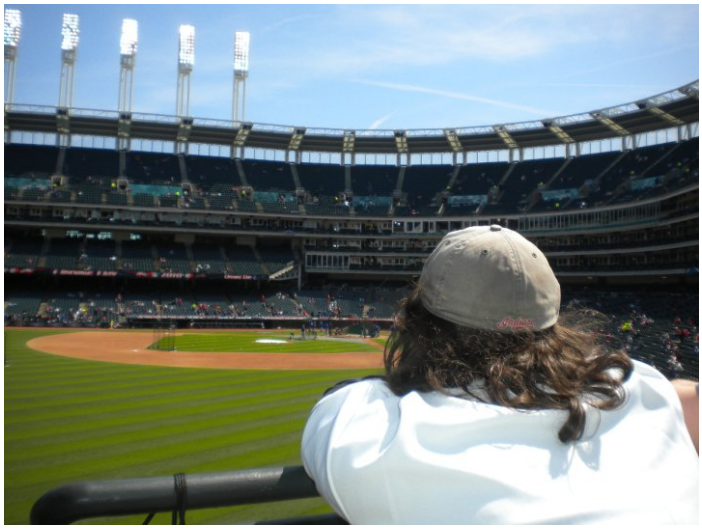

We've only seen 23 days worth of the baseball season and I already feel like I've had a few years taken off my life. The ebbs and flows of the month of April have reaffirmed my baseball addiction. Despite the fact that I occasionally find myself shaking like a heroin addict suffering from withdrawal or bouncing my leg around like it's the only part of my body experiencing an earthquake, I just can't get enough. Off days have become like those dreary, dark, snow-cloud filled days of winter. I guess I'd liken it to one-day seasonal affective disorder.

It's so good to have baseball back and to be getting back into the routine that I find so familiar from April through October. The fanfare of the first couple of weeks is gone and the newness of the season has subsided. Now, it's just waking up in the morning and waiting for first pitch to come so I can lock in for about three hours caring about pretty much nothing except the game on television. It's hard to get inside my head and really understand how I feel about Indians baseball unless you feel the same way. It probably sounds like an exaggeration to some fans, like I have some sort of agenda to push. That's not the case. Everybody has their escapes. Baseball is mine, no matter how high or how low the game can make me.

It helps because it makes this weekly column pretty easy to write. I rarely have to strain for topics and since this is really nothing more than an op/ed piece, I can just ramble about what I see. Which is what I'm going to do this week off the heels of one of my most read columns, last week's Indians/STO Drinking Game . It was actually a pretty good week to unveil that column as the same night it was posted, the Indians got into a bench-clearing fracas with the Royals resulting in a Manny Acta ejection (do a shot!), Casey Kotchman spent the weekend hitting balls out of the infield (including a couple HRs, so drink to that!), and a Jason Kipnis oppo HR (shot!).

Plenty has happened during this road trip as the Indians have won six of seven and turned their

ugly 1-4 record into a respectable 7-5. I have already mentioned in a couple previous VftP's about how I love early season long road trips. Evidently, the Indians do as well. Last year's Tribe had a 4-2 road trip from April 8-13 heading to Seattle and Anaheim. This year's Tribe has also had a very positive first road trip showcasing some offense, some defense, and next to no starting pitching.

The Indians have carried last season's modus operandi into this season as they're winning games in various fashions and doing so in a very exciting manner. The Indians, who looked so inept on offense at home, found the end zone and kicked the extra point in the first inning of the first game in KC. They would score 25 more runs over the next 27 innings. They rolled that offensive momentum into Safeco Field by answering the Mariners half dozen in the fourth off Justin Masterson with seven of their own the next half inning. This is what the fans have grown to love about this bunch of players. They don't quit, which was especially evident during a gutsy 2-1 triumph over the Mariners to win the three-game series in Josh Tomlin's best effort since, arguably, his Major League debut on July 27, 2010 when he held the Yankees to three hits over seven innings.

Numerous times this week, this team has justified itself as being easy to root for. While we can discuss Shin-Soo Choo's response to being hit by Jonathan Sanchez last Saturday in KC (and I will in a minute), Jeanmar Gomez immediately came to his defense by hitting Mike Moustakas to lead off the next inning. Jack Hannahan and Asdrubal Cabrera stepped into the middle of the pile as the leaders and veterans that they are on this ballclub. In that same game, the Indians blew a 9-2 lead but still prevailed in extras. On Sunday, Ubaldo Jimenez labored through five gutty innings and the Indians offense answered a crooked number by the Royals in the second with a six-spot of their own. Also, the aforementioned fifth inning in the series opener against the Royals. Then, forcing the blown save off Brandon League on Thursday night. That's easy to root for.

Back to Shin-Soo Choo. Many people have criticized Choo for his reaction to last Saturday's

beaning. Jonathan Sanchez was not throwing at him nor did he have any idea where the ball was going when it left his hand. Without the context of Sanchez hitting Choo last season in San Francisco and breaking his thumb, I doubt Choo says or does anything. Choo, who has not hit particularly well so far, and who has been hit a league-leading three times, was simply frustrated.

Some have argued that Choo, instead of yelling something at Sanchez, should have just charged the mound if he was going to do anything. That's a fair criticism, however, that's not in Choo's nature and we all know that. By saying something and showing minimal aggression, the benches cleared and teammates of Choo's were forced into the fray. I won't support or denounce what Choo did. I think Choo is entitled to being pissed off, just as anyone else is. I don't fault him for his reaction nor do I think less of him for it. I do, however, applaud his teammates for coming to his aid...

And I especially applaud Jeanmar Gomez. The Indians have gotten a bit of a "bad boy" rep so far. First, there was the Ubaldo Jimenez-Troy Tulowitzki incident in Spring Training. In my opinion, that's unfair to put on the team as that was a personal beef between those two men. Either way, close-minded people will paint every Indian with the same brush. Depending on who you talk to, the Indians intentionally threw at Kelly Johnson when home plate umpire Tim Welke issued warnings on Opening Day. Not only are those people complete dumbasses, they also know nothing about baseball. Why Masterson would hit Kelly Johnson in a 4-0 game with Jose Bautista on deck is beyond me. Then, there's the Jeanmar Gomez pitch to Moustakas.

Call it what you want. I call it camaraderie. Gomez knew he would get tossed for hitting Moustakas. He even began walking off the mound before the umpire ejected him. But, it served two purposes. One, it shows that the Indians will protect their teammates. Two, it gave Gomez mad respect in the clubhouse. Manny Acta's not the type of skipper to instruct Gomez to do that. Gomez did that on his own accord and kudos to him for that.

Honestly, to me, it speaks to a bigger problem in baseball. Umpires don't let the players police themselves. Players used to expect to get hit in retaliation. Now, it comes as some big shock

when a guy gets beaned as revenge. Warnings were issued, which is somewhat understandable, but, at the same time, there's just going to be a carryover into the next game unless it gets settled on that night. Had Gomez not hit a Royals hitter that night, Ubaldo would have hit one the next day. Better to have it done and over with than let it fester and linger into the next game. Let the players take care of it themselves. They have a MUCH better feel for the game than the umpires do.

In any event, Gomez got a five-game suspension for purposely hitting a player after warnings were issued. I don't think I have to give you my thoughts on that. The Indians look like they're going to screw the system again with Gomez appealing so he can make his next scheduled start and then drop the appeal to serve the five games and then pitch in the sixth game. Nothing says effective like a system that is easily circumvented.

Fighting and bickering aside, while the Indians have started this road trip on a great note, there are two glaring concerns with the pitching staff and they are two key guys to this team. The first one is Justin Masterson. Masterson has gone just 8.2 innings in his last two starts, giving up 13 runs, 11 earned. The two-start stretch is the worst that Masterson has had since July 2010. Even then, he pitched 12 innings in two starts giving up 12 runs, 11 earned. Left-handed batters have torn the cover off the ball against Masterson with a slash line of .378/.405/.486/.891. This was the fear about Masterson all along, one that he quieted last year by dominating RHB. This year, RHB are just 3-for-27 off him, but lefties have done enormous damage. Last year, lefties hit .290 against Masterson.

The question is if we allow this to be something to be really concerned or just learn to live with. Masterson's next start will come against the light-hitting Oakland A's who have scored just 46 runs in 15 games. In a ballpark that heavily favors pitching, if Masterson gets tagged again, I may start to be concerned. If not, I'll put my faith in him that he makes a concerted effort to pitch

more effectively against LHB. That includes throwing more early-count breaking balls. According to Fangraphs, in Masterson's three starts this season, he's thrown 85.2% fastballs and at 3.1 mph slower than his 2011 average fastball speed. This is an adjustment that should be made, especially if his velocity hasn't caught up to him yet.

The other big concern is Tony Sipp. I'll preface this by saying that I'm not a big fan of Tony Sipp. He took to Twitter numerous times last year whining about not having enough days off and various other things. On the field, he looks about as apathetic as possible, especially when it comes to his body language. Last year, during a rain delay, I was under cover in the bottom level of Heritage Park and Sipp came out of a door down there to watch the rain. I asked him if he'd heard if they'd be starting the game up again (it was pouring and pea-sized hail was failing). His response: "I hope not. I don't want to pitch tonight."

Being a left handed reliever has to be the best job in sports. You face maybe one or two hitters a night. You definitely only pitch in close games unless you need to get some work in. You also know exactly what your role is and what is expected of you. In that role, you're one of the most important parts of the ballclub. If that's not enough for you to want to do your job, then GTF off my team.

Sipp was on the fast track to the bigs in 2006. He was lighting up Double-A with an 11.93 strikeouts per nine innings (K/9) ratio. Terms like "future closer" were being thrown about. And then Tony Sipp needed Tommy John surgery. The 45th round pick had his career halted for over a year. He fought his way back and made his MLB debut in 2009. He posted a 2.92 ERA in 46 games and was back atop that perch as a bullpen arm to watch. Since that time, while Sipp has had varying degrees of success, advanced statistics consider him a below replacement-level pitcher and he has given up home runs at an alarming rate for his role. Not to mention, in two of his three seasons, he's had a walks per nine innings (BB/9) of over five and

over three in his other season. Guys in his role cannot walk people. There's no denying his potential as a three-pitch lefty specialist who can miss bats but he needs to start pitching up to it. Sipp was bad again on Friday night allowing a leadoff triple to a left handed hitter and then walking a guy before striking out his final hitter and then giving way to Joe Smith.

Tony Sipp still has three options remaining on his contract. Nick Hagadone has looked impressive (read: erratically effective) in his two appearances this season and last year's cup of coffee at the big league level. If you'll allow me a bad pun, Tony needs to get his Sipp in order or he'll find himself in Columbus. Quite frankly, I think the only reason it hasn't happened yet is because the Indians are afraid of his attitude if he were to be humbled by that two-hour drive down Interstate 71. It could do irreparable damage to his psyche or cause him to "check out" completely.

I like to end my observations with something positive. This specific observation is a team effort and something that probably goes unnoticed by most fans. The Indians coaches and Shelley Duncan are doing an outstanding job with his positioning in left field. They're really studying the scouting reports and having Shelley in the right position to field fly balls. He rarely has to move a lot to make plays. They've done a tremendous job hiding his lack of range in the OF. As something that could have been a serious issue for the Tribe, the fact that Duncan has not been exposed in LF is a testament to everyone involved, including Duncan himself. He and the other coaches have played things beautifully with Duncan in LF. (Naturally, 10 minutes after I typed this out, Duncan overran a ground ball single and allowed the runner to go to second. 20 minutes after that, Duncan had a ball hit him in the glove at the wall and fall to the warning track for a double.)

Finally today, not that he, or any Tribe players read this, my condolences to Asdrubal Cabrera and his family for the loss of Asdrubal's grandfather in Venezuela this past week. It was nice to see the Indians play well in his absence and hopefully he'll be able to work through his grief and get back to the business at hand next week in Cleveland.