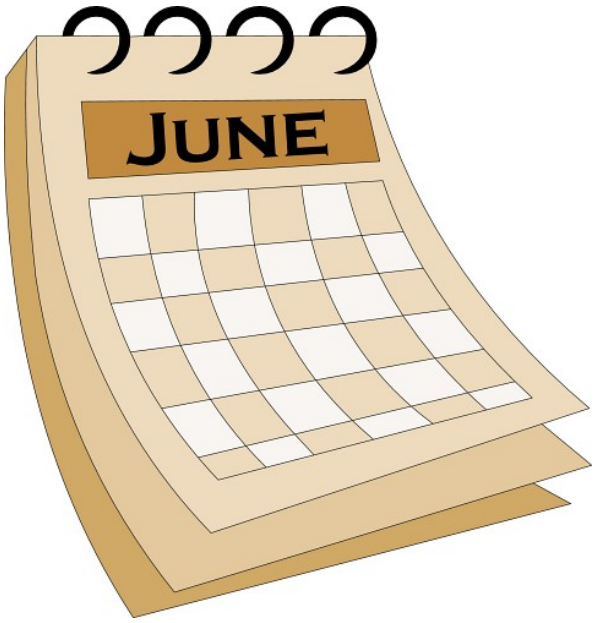

Remember when the month of June used to be the dog's bollocks?

It was almost mythical, something you'd blindly chase over the previous nine months knowing that Rogers & Hammerstein euphoria awaited you when you finally caught up to it.

Early on in that golden month, the school bell would ring one last time and in that moment, you were Andy DuFresne, hoisting your arms up into the rainy sky outside Shawshank State Prison. You were suddenly as free as the happy, chirpy birds that bounce around outside and poop anywhere they want with impunity.

For the rest of June you'd bask in the afterglow, then whistle through two more months of emancipation before the cycle started all over again and June once again became the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

All too soon came the mindless summer jobs that turned a good portion of your vacation into a trip to the doctor's office. Not long after that, you hit the painful wall of adulthood when there is no such thing as "summer vacation" and June is simply another month at the office, filled with the same deadlines and headaches, albeit with more humidity.

And then eventually, that last ringing of the school bell provides no joy, but rather the instant panic of realizing your daycare situation doesn't work anymore.

In recent years, our Indians have reflected this "mature" version of June rather than the care-free, let's-eat-popsicles-for-lunch-and-then-play-with-the-hose-for-three-hours spirit of the Junes of our youth.

We need look no further than last year to equate June with the painful reality of middle age. The Indians got off to a romping start, surging 15 games over .500 and building a seven-game lead in the division. It was like a wonderful, completely unexpected dream. Then June came along and served as the shrill, fire-alarm shrieking of an old-fashioned alarm clock.

They stopped hitting almost altogether, the overburdened pitching staff ran out of gas, and the team generally fell apart before our eyes, losing 17 of 27 games while watching the division lead melt away like the Wicked Witch of the West. They leveled off a bit later in the summer, but it was June that carpet-bombed the season to a point from which they couldn't recover.

And it wasn't the first time.

Over the past four seasons, the Indians were a combined 43-67 in the month of June, a winning percentage of just .391. And while the Indians have finished below the .500 mark in each of those seasons, their overall winning percentage in that period is .461 - meaning they played decidedly better outside the month of June.

Looking at it another way: if the Indians were to play a season filled with Junes, they'd finish 63-99. They haven't finished with an overall record that bad in 21 years.

And June doesn't just spoil nice starts like last year. The 2009 Indians were going nowhere when June arrived, but a 9-18 mark over the next 30 days allowed the bottom to completely fall out (and justify a new round of the kind of fire-sale trades that the Indians' front office gets out of bed for).

Three years before, the ’06 Tribe was already in trouble, hovering around .500 and digging an eight-game hole by Memorial Day. At the end of a disastrous June, the deficit was 19 games, and it was “See you next time on *The Muppet Show*.”

While the post-2007 history of the Indians has been a bit stale, five of their last six Junes have been downright botulistic. The only acceptable one in the stretch was a modest 15-13 June in the ’07 campaign - though it’s worth noting the Indians’ division lead going into June was actually trimmed by two games by the end.

Same thing happened in 2005, when the Indians actually put together their best June of the new century, winning 17 of 27 games. But even then, they dropped two games further back of the eventual world-champion White Sox.

Since the beginning of the Dolan Era 12 years ago, the Indians have posted losing June records nine times. Even in the wobbly final two years of the golden portion of the Jacobs Field era - 2000 and 2001 - the Indians lost more games than they won in June, marking their only losing month in each campaign.

Put simply: as goes June, so goes the season.

Perhaps reflecting the seasonal symbolism at the heart of the game, the tone for a baseball season is set not in April, but in June. Even chumpy teams can put together good records in April and September, when things just aren’t right for many clubs. But to do it in June requires a *gravitas*
that proves you might just be for real.

While many Indians’ teams - good and bad - have had fast and poor starts and strong and weak finishes, June has always been the proving ground. Of the 11 Indians’ teams that have reached the postseason (throwing in the strike-robbed 1994 club for argument’s sake), 10 have posted winning records in June. Yes, each of those 11 teams was obviously strong and would be expected to have good records in most months. But it’s worth noting that seven of those teams posted losing records for a month at some point in their respective seasons. Only one was in

June.

As in any article written about the Indians, let's reflect back on the 1990s. From 1994-1999, the Jacobs Field glory years, the Tribe went a combined 96-64 in June - basically the stark opposite of what they've done since. That's not a coincidence.

So why is this? Back in the '90s, Tribe fans would always anticipate June as the start of the party - just as we did when we were kids. Once the weather warmed up, the Slip-N-Slide would come out and the batting averages would go up, as sluggers like Belle, Thome, and Ramirez would start to blast moon shots deep into the mid-summer nights.

More recently, the results for the Tribe have swung the other way when the calendar turns. But is it for the same reason? Is it that all the other teams (the ones near oceans that have legitimate power hitters, anyway) begin to hit and the Indians' April/May equalizer vanishes with the arrival of the summer solstice?

Another school of thought is that June is generally when a team's injuries begin to pile up. The good teams, the ones with enough depth, are able to persevere until returning to full strength. While the Tribe's pitching coffers have swelled in recent years, even with everybody healthy, the Indians' everyday lineup is average. At best.

Whatever theory you subscribe to, you have to agree that June has become the Indians' crossroad.

This year will be no different - albeit with a little more at stake. With the Tribe drawing roughly the equivalent of your local library's toddler storytime on Thursday mornings, another case of a cocktease spring followed by a quick collapse the minute summer arrives would be crippling for ticket sales. Not only for this year, but for next.

More importantly, another June swoon might etch that eggshell mentality among the players - that little nubbin of doubt in the back of their minds that tells them no matter how well the season starts (assuming it starts well, that is), it's going to hell the minute everybody starts

paying attention.

No matter what happens over the next few weeks, there will still be three months of baseball to play. But history shows us that if the Indians are going to hang around, they have to prove they can survive June's 30 days of night.

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