The first minor league baseball game I ever went to was in 1991. I was 9 going on 10, and my dad took me to go see the AA Canton-Akron Indians. The tickets, parking and food were all cheaper than the big league club, and the baseball was almost as good. Plus, the Indians had a couple of hot corner infield prospects on the team that Dad wanted to see live and in person. Reggie Jefferson was destined to be the Indians first baseman of the future, and 1989's 13th round draft pick Jim Thome seemed likely to man the hot corner for years to come. Thome didn't start that game, but a stir went up around the ballpark when he was announced as a pinch-hitter late in a close game. This was our chance to see the Indians future 3B, and he had a chance to give the Indians a come-from-behind victory. After a long at-bat in which Thome fouled off several tough 3-2 pitches, the future Hall of Famer struck out, the Indians lost and that was that. I remarked to my dad that Thome didn't look all that amazing, and thus began a future in very poor scouting on my part.

Thome was born in Peoria, Illinois on August 27, 1970. Athletic ability runs deep in Thome's family, as his grandmother reportedly held her job at a local Caterpillar plant in part due to her softball prowess. Thome was actually a shortstop in high school, and moved to 3B when he enrolled at the legendary baseball factory of Illinois Central Community College. After one season at ICC, the Indians selected Thome in the 13th round of the 1989 draft, a draft that saw the Indians land Jerry Dipoto (2nd round), Alan Embree (4th round), Curtis Leskanic (8th

round) and Brian Giles (17th round).

In Thome's first full minor league season, he hit .340/.446/.609 with 16 HR and 50 RBI in 67 games between Rookie-level Burlington and high-A Kinston. As a 22-year old in AAA Charlotte, he posted a 1.026 OPS with 25 HR in 115 games, and GM John Hart decided that the slugging young 3B was ready for an extended look at the major league level. While he wasn't technically a rookie in 1994 because of 369 AB collected during various cups of coffee in the prior three seasons, Thome burst onto the scene in 1994 in the first year that Jacobs Field was open for play. Thome hit .268/.359/.523 with 20 HR and 52 RBI in 1999, and his .882 OPS that year remained a career low until his injury-plagued 2005 campaign with the Philadelphia Phillies.

Thome is the Indians career leader in HR and walks, and is 3rd in franchise history in RBI, SLG and extra base hits. He was named to three all-star teams as an Indian, and would have made several more if he hadn't been a notorious slow starter. He finished with an OPS over 1.000 and ranked in the top-10 of AL MVP voting three times while calling Jacobs Field home. From 1994 through 2002 he hit 20, 25, 38, 40, 30, 33, 37, 49, and 52 HR's for the Indians, and was one of the most feared hitters in baseball during his time with the Tribe.
He could hit the ball quite literally out of the ballpark.
And not just out of Jacobs Field
.
Seriously, check this out.
He added 17 HR in 55 playoff games with the Indians, saving some of his most prodigious blasts for postseason play.

One of my all-time favorite Thome home runs came in the 1995 ALCS against the Seattle Mariners. It was during game 5, and the series had been getting a little chippy. Jay Buhner had a very pronounced bat flip after his HR, and the Indians were taking exception to the way he would continually show up opposing pitchers after he made contact with the baseball. The Indians were trailing 2-1 in the bottom of the 6th inning, and the Indians were in danger of going down 3-2 with the series headed back to Seattle. Thome stepped up to the plate with a runner on base, and launched a 2-run shot that put the Indians ahead for good. For good measure, Thome flipped his bat halfway to the first base dugout to make sure Seattle had no doubt that the ball was going to land well beyond the fence.
It's at the 1:20 mark of this fantastic video that was put together by MLB.com
, and in watching it I think the bat flip was even more dramatic than I remembered it.

Following the 2002 season, Thome was a free agent and was planning to test the open market. He had just concluded his bets season as a professional, having hit .304/.445/.677 with 52 HR and 118 RBI. He led the American league in SLG, OPS, OPS+ (197) and walks, and finished 7th in MVP voting for the 74-88 Indians. Manager and long-time Thome mentor Charlie Manuel was fired mid-season and replaced by Joel Skinner. The Indians started with a pretty low number, but eventually offered Thome a back-loaded contract that would pay him $70 million over six years. The contract offer included stipulations aimed directly at Thome's heartstrings, including naming the mezzanine in Jacobs Field "Jim Thome Terrace" and offering to build statue of Thome outside the stadium. The Philadelphia Phillies came in and offered Thome a 7-year, $94 million contract. The Phillies were on their way to becoming perennial contenders in the NL, and it was clear that the Indians were entering a rebuilding period. Thome took the extra year, the

extra $24 million and the chance to again play for a contender, and the Indians were spared having an albatross of a contract hanging around their necks when Thome was injured in 2005 and hit just 7 HR for Philly. The deal really ended up being the best thing for both teams, and while Indians fans were pretty angry at the time, over the years it has become clear that not only did the Philles have the superior offer on the table, the Indians would have been in more trouble with Thome than without him during their rebuilding period.

The Phillies traded Thome after just 3 seasons of his megadeal, shipping him off to the White Sox in return for Aaron Rowand and a PTBNL. Interestingly, the PTBNL ended up being Gio Gonzalez, the lefthanded starter who finished 3rd in the NL Cy Young voting last year. Thome won the AL Comeback Player of the Year Award in 2006 with the White Sox, hitting 42 HR and posting a 1.014 OPS with Chicago. He hit 134 HR in 3+ seasons from age 35-38, showing that he wasn't slowing down too much with age. After bouncing around between the Dodgers and Twins from 2009-2011, Thome returned to Cleveland on August 25, 2011. The Indians sent cash to the Twins in return for the leading slugger in team history, bringing him back for one final tour with Chief Wahoo's Tribe.

When he did return, the fans were extremely receptive . In his 2nd AB in his first game back in Cleveland, Thome did this . Naturally. Thome is still looking to get picked up by an MLB team this year, but whenever he does retire he should be five years from entering Cooperstown wearing an Indians cap. That's an induction ceremony I'd like to attend. Despite some friction when Thome initially left town, there's a statue of him in Heritage Park and he remains a fan favorite, reminding Tribe fans of those powerful teams of the 1990's. Thome was a frequent fixture in children's hospitals around Cleveland, and did so with no fanfare or media attention. He's as good of a person as he is a baseball player, and as mentioned he is a Hall of Fame quality baseball player. His career numbers rank with any player of his era; a .276/.402/.554 batting line with 612 HR, 1669 RBI, 451 doubles, 1747 walks and career OPS+ of 147. He's still one of my favorite players, and I'm really glad I got the chance to watch him play every day for so long.

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