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SEPTEMBER 25, 2017
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Sports Illustrated

Dwight Howard

“WHAT I’VE BEEN THROUGH,
I DON’T WANT ANYBODY ELSE
TO GO THROUGH.”

**What Happened
To Superman?**

BY LEE JENKINS

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\$5.99US \$6.99CAN



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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

PEAK CONCERN

After reeling off 22 straight victories, the Indians would seem to be the team to beat in October. History tells us that's hardly the case

BY MARK BECHTEL

■ THE 1916 NEW YORK

Giants would have given their manager, John McGraw, the red ass even if the roster hadn't contained two Reds (Dooen and Killefer) and a pair of Heinies (Stafford and Zimmerman). The volatile skipper known as Little Napoleon was driven to fits of rage by his team's inconsistency. After a 2–13 start the Giants won 17 in a row (all on the road). Then, following a ho-hum summer they ran off 26 victories without a loss in September, all at home. (They had one tie between wins 12 and 13.) Alas, New York still finished in fourth place, seven games back of the Brooklyn Robins. "They remind me," opined *The New York Evening Journal*, "of a fighter who has just been knocked out going down

the aisle licking everybody in the house."

Getting hot at just the right time is a tough needle to thread, but McGraw's charges somehow found a way to peak too early and too late. The idea that their team might be squandering its best run of baseball had some Indians fans both

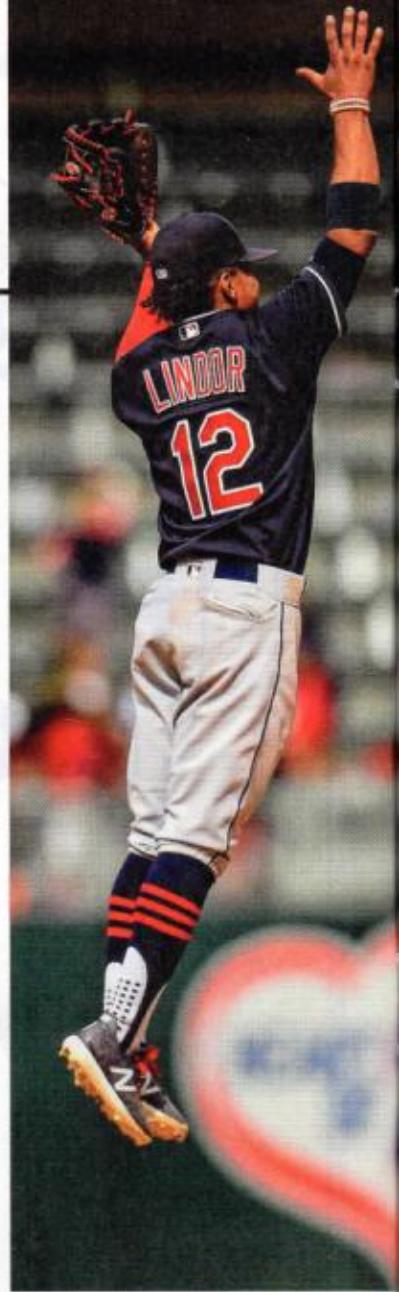
the gambler's fallacy, how past events do not affect future outcomes. Anyone who has watched the Mets or the Phillies knows there's a finite amount of good baseball to be played. Managers don't have a bottomless well of homers and shutouts at their fingertips. Light-hitting

Says a sports psychologist of poststreak malaise, "It comes down to how the players are interpreting this chain of events."

savoring the Tribe's 22-game winning streak—the longest without a tie in major league history—while secretly hoping it would just end already (which it did last Friday, with a 4–3 loss to the Royals).

Never mind the lesson in statistics class about

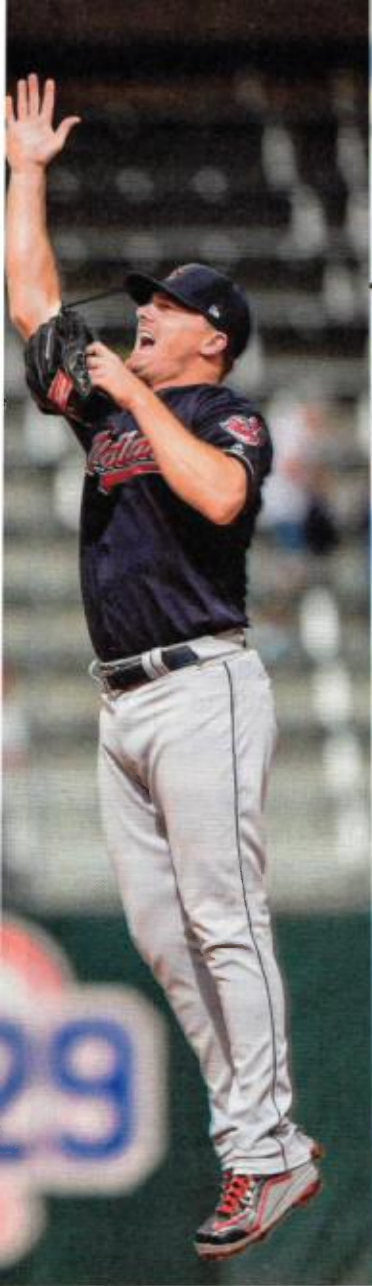
Cleveland utilityman Erik González is only going yard so many times in a season, so what's the point in having him do it twice in an 11–2 drubbing of the White Sox on Sept. 7? E-Gon gonna go deep when E-Gon gonna go deep, but it'd be nice to



save that meaningless ninth-inning jack for later.

And at some point that theoretical tater in González's back pocket would probably come in handy. The annals of the game are littered with teams that went on late-season jags then found they had already—pardon our scientific terminology—used up all their good juju come playoff time. The Indians are the sixth team to have a winning streak of more than 15 games stretch into

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September. McGraw's Giants didn't make the postseason. The other four did—and only one, the 1909 Pirates, claimed a World Series title.

The 1935 Cubs had a 21-game run snapped two days before the end of the season; they dropped their final two games then lost the Series in six. The '77 Royals had a string of 24 wins in 25 games, including 16 in a row, come to an end a week before the campaign closed; they lost to the Yankees in the ALCS. And the 2002 A's

of *Moneyball* fame meekly bowed out in the first round to the Twins after winning a then AL-record 20 straight.

Teams that carried hot streaks into the postseason have been almost as unfortunate. Earl Weaver's Orioles entered the playoffs on a run of at least nine straight W's three times in five years and came away with just one championship. And those mysterious readings on seismographs at the University of Colorado in October 2007? Those were caused by the Rockies' bubble bursting. After winning 14 of 15 to end the regular season and going 7-0 to reach the World Series, Clint Hurdle's crew was swept by the Red Sox.

Postsuccess malaise shouldn't be a thing, but it is. (And it's not just baseball. The 1971-72 Lakers followed up their 33-game winning streak by losing four of six.) "It comes down to how the players are interpreting this chain of events," says J. Kip Matthews, a performance and sports psychologist. "When the streak ends, it doesn't have to lead to dire consequences for the playoffs. If the players don't allow it to alter their perceptions of their performance and skill, it's not going to be a big deal."

The aforementioned gambler's fallacy tells us that if a coin flip comes up heads 10 times in a row, the 11th toss is still a 50-50 proposition. So

just because a team that's expected to win 60% of the time has won 20 straight, there's no need to issue a drought warning. The universe doesn't go around correcting itself, right?

Try telling that to the peaked-in-high-school jock who shows up at his 10-year reunion in worse shape than the scrawny kid he used to pants in the locker room. For what is life if not a series of regressions (and progressions) to the mean? "Normalization's a bitch," Oakland executive Billy Beane told *The Athletic* last week. He was talking specifically about the first-place Dodgers' recent tailspin that included an 11-game losing streak, but it applies to a whole lot of teams—his '02 squad included.

So what gives? Well, as Pedro Sant'Anna, an economics professor at Vanderbilt, pointed out to me, baseball games aren't coin flips. A team's current form—and the mind-set it creates—can easily impact its performance. That dovetails with Matthews's assertion that postpeak struggles don't come from kismet or one's endorphins being out of whack, but rather from inside the players' heads.

So what is Tribe Nation to do about the suddenly ominous future? Live in the present. Says Matthews, "The main thing is for the team and the fans to enjoy the ride." □



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Homeruns by the Yankees against the Orioles this season, the most by one team against an opponent since the Expansion Era began, in 1961

70,425



Attendance at Atlanta's new Mercedes-Benz Stadium for last Saturday's match between the Orlando City Lions and Atlanta United, the largest in MLS's 22-year history. The teams played to a 3-3 draw.



Female referees in Big Ten history after Amanda Sauer called last Saturday's 85-0 win by Rutgers over Morgan State in Piscataway, N.J. Sauer had previously refereed in the Mid-American Conference.