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THE RE-TWEETS OF VICTORY, THE HASHTAGS OF DEFEAT

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ABSTRACT

Given the technological and informational revolution that has swept through baseball in the past decade, the experience of the avid fan has been similarly revolutionized since the turn of the millennium. Social media has provided new channels of communication, and the infusion of intellectualism into analysis has given the game a plethora of new and more accurate statistics to analyze player performance with. This thesis serves as a series of snapshots mapping these new phenomena, taken during the Pittsburgh Pirates' 2012 season. It focuses on two games and highlights the aforementioned concepts within the narrative of a thrilling Pirates campaign. The first game features a Pittsburgh win over the Detroit Tigers, recounted in prose as well as the tweets of various fans and commentators. A few "new school" statistical concepts—fielding independent pitching metrics, the eschewing of traditional numbers such as runs batted in, and the opposition to sacrifice bunting as a strategic device—are introduced while summarizing the game action. The second game, a decidedly more discouraging event, catches up with the Pirates during their late-season tailspin, and results in a gutting loss to the lowly Houston Astros. As the game progresses, the palpably disheartened tone of the Pittsburgh fan base only becomes more and more apparent once yet another winnable game begins to slip away.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to formally thank the tweeting observers of the Pittsburgh Pirates who unwittingly contributed to (and made possible) this project. Also, I feel that I should thank the Pirates themselves for providing a terrific season to follow, even if it ended in disappointment.

On the more tangible side, I must thank Drs. Hawhee and Selzer for endorsing this thesis effort throughout. It was a unique project and required a great deal of support on the advising side. I greatly appreciate their persistence, as well as the helpful advice of Dr. Rich Stoller who helped guide me through the honors thesis process.

Chapter 1

Frame

The objective of this thesis is to capture the experience of the modern baseball fan over the course of a season by examining selected events (specifically games) and narrating them through the prism of social media. It does so by approaching two games from the Pittsburgh Pirates' 2012 season and describing the events in a first person voice with the assistance of numerous tweets sent from various Pirates observers as the game unfolds. With the abundance of information and streams available in the Information Age, the profile of the average fan has changed drastically over the last several years. Devices such as Twitter allow baseball observers to enjoy the game in the virtual company of hundreds even if they are physically watching alone from their living rooms. There is an abundance of data—statistics, charts, reports—available at the click of a mouse (or even a scroll of an iPhone) that allow for unprecedented comprehension of game and season events. The purpose of my writing was to illuminate these phenomena, while also providing an entertaining first-person account of the ups and downs of following a season. In this case, the story becomes even more compelling because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Pirates' 2012 campaign: the franchise had suffered nineteen consecutive losing seasons, the team was on the heels of a once-promising but ultimately fruitless 2011, and this season proved to be another roller coaster ride—probably the most dramatic of any in recent Pittsburgh history.

The two chapters are both game accounts. The first relates the events of a game against the Detroit Tigers in late June, at which point the Pirates were really starting to emerge as a legitimate playoff threat. It provides context for that day's action (the team's play in the previous few weeks, a brief foray into trade rumors, background on the TV format) and then dives into the game itself. Much of the events are described in words, but (holding to the theme of the work) the Twitter reactions of various Pirates-related figures are also provided. The social media

component peaks when the explosive reaction to an Andrew McCutchen home run is revealed in the fourth inning. The juxtaposition of strategy preferences between the “new age”/statistically inclined commentators and Pirates manager Clint Hurdle also becomes a major theme. The chapter ends on an encouraging note, with a Pirates victory and signs that the winning ways might continue.

The second chapter comes at a decidedly more disheartening point in the season: it chronicles a September loss to the lowly Houston Astros which all but serves as the proverbial dagger to the heart of the team’s hopes for a winning season. This time, the lead-in allows tweeters to recount the disastrous events of the previous 14 games (which included a dismal 12 losses), indicating the city-wide disappointment in the conclusion to the year. With the downturn in record and mood comes a more pessimistic and sarcastic tone, both from the author and the other voices featured throughout the game. A bizarre series of events including a Hurdle ejection and a randomly dominant outing from one of the team’s worst pitchers culminates in a late Houston home run that all but seals the team’s fate.

The emphasis on Twitter becomes apparent early in the writing, and intentionally so. Sports and social media have proven to be successful marriage partners in recent years due to the conduciveness of athletic events, news, and personalities to the so-called “instant gratification” culture promoted by the ascendancy of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Social media enables fans to follow sports in a variety of ways: discovering trade rumors or injury updates, seeing what their favorite athletes have to say about a game (or their lunch), watching highlights on their phones instead of having to wait for the 11 p.m. *SportsCenter*, etc. But the dynamic also works in the opposite directions. Athletes can now directly interact with their supporters and relay messages to the public before and after games. Media outlets can gauge the viewing/reading preferences of their target audiences by examining the day’s hot topics of discussion. Teams are able to distribute official statements and manage public relations more

easily than ever before. The many dimensions of social media as it relates to sports all cross paths with each other, and this system is something I actively attempt to display throughout the thesis. The majority of the social media spotlight is cast on fan reactions and opinions, but there are also glimpses into the tweets of reporters and teams that provide a more panoramic view of the virtual landscape.

In order to highlight the sociological dimension of baseball (spanning both the use of social media technology and the interactions within the “Pirates community”), the chapters blend storytelling, informational lessons, and analysis in a way that both entertainingly narrates the game events and provides a handbook of sorts that guides a reader through the relationship between sports and social media.

What follows, then, is an attempt to display a variety of components that exist within the contemporary baseball viewing practice. These are trends or phenomena that have largely appeared only in the past several years thanks to the growing prominence of new age devices as they relate to baseball. As recently as ten years ago, it would have been impossible to collect dozens of fans’ season-long emotions (short of completing scores of detailed personal interviews), because the ability to broadcast one’s knee-jerk reactions to each pitch was not yet available. Further, the sheer amount of information available to interested observers in the 2010s represents a revolution in the overall fan experience. The four main effects I try to shed light on are:

- 1) the ability to map the psychological state of a fanbase—in this unique case, a long-suffering Pirates fanbase—through the aggregation of tweets over the course of several months, and how this condition changes as the season progresses
- 2) an explanation of the new age devices available and how they can be used to absorb and analyze games (mostly the effect of sabermetrics on player and strategy evaluation)

- 3) the Twitter dynamic as it relates to sports; that is, exploring the various ways the platform is employed by different parties (teams, athletes, fans, analysts/commentators) and how they fit together
- 4) the minute or subtle details/storylines that appear during a routine game, e.g. how much there is to say even during seemingly lackluster contests

The first effect begins to show during the “Pirates v. Tigers” chapter when it is starting to become clear that the Pirates are playing sustained good baseball, and a pivotal game event (in this case, the McCutchen home run) draws a reaction that is far more enthusiastic than usual. However, the second chapter is where the mood of Pirates Nation becomes more palpable. The introduction to the section is composed almost solely of tweets intended to narrate the abysmal performance of the previous two weeks. The near unanimous downturn in attitude is obvious and continues throughout the game, which ends, unsurprisingly, in a loss. The content of the tweets also reflects the extraordinary case at hand: people are more negative and sarcastic because so much—the reversal of a twenty year skid—was riding on this particular season, and the summer ended in such a stunning tailspin.

While the first chapter is somewhat lacking in the “collective narration” area, it draws heavily from the second point (the preview of new/advanced metrics to analyze the game). There are detailed explanations of modern statistics and how they relate to both players and strategy. The case study of injured pitcher Charlie Morton is used to show the value of peripheral or “defense independent” pitching statistics, and how poor results may in fact be a consequence of bad luck instead of a flawed pitcher. The main use of sabermetrics in the first chapter, however, is to explain the differences in game strategy philosophy between modern observers and Pirates manager Clint Hurdle. Hurdle frequently employs “old school” tactics like bunting and structured roles for relief pitchers, which goes against research that has come to guide the minds of modern strategists. In this particular game, Hurdle orders an early sacrifice bunt (which is,

fortunately, negated by a hit-by-pitch and followed up by the McCutchen homer) and calls for a bizarre suicide squeeze attempt late in the game, unwittingly putting him at odds with the online community. More analytics are discussed when the subject of McCutchen's bid for the National League Most Valuable Player award is broached in the broadcast booth. While it may feel like McCutchen should be the MVP, a closer look at his contributions reveals that he falls well short of Cincinnati's Joey Votto by any objective measure. The "Pirates v. Astros" chapter is more slanted toward the sentimental side of baseball, and as such hardly touches on statistical matters at all.

Twitter, arguably the center of the entire project, is explored in all forms during the two selected chapters. The quick coverage of potential Pirates trade targets shows the usefulness of Twitter as a news source, but most of the first and second games focuses on the platform's ability to serve as host for a fan community and display a wide array of responses to game events. A wide variety of voices contribute to the discussions, allowing for a multitude of opinions.

The final feature revealed in the chapters is the volume of commentary points that emerge during the course of a routine game. This is on display in both chapters, and it would have been nearly impossible to complete the work had the sport not lent itself to such meticulous description. By definition, any game account will examine small details and finding points of greater insight within them. There are myriad examples throughout the two chapters, including trivia questions posed by the broadcast network, the role of luck and timing that can turn a sure base hit into a rally killing double play, the poetic nature of a Pirates' outfielder losing his glove over the fence while chasing hopelessly after the home run that effectively ends the team's season, and dozens of others.

Chapter 2

Brad Lincoln: Tiger Hunter

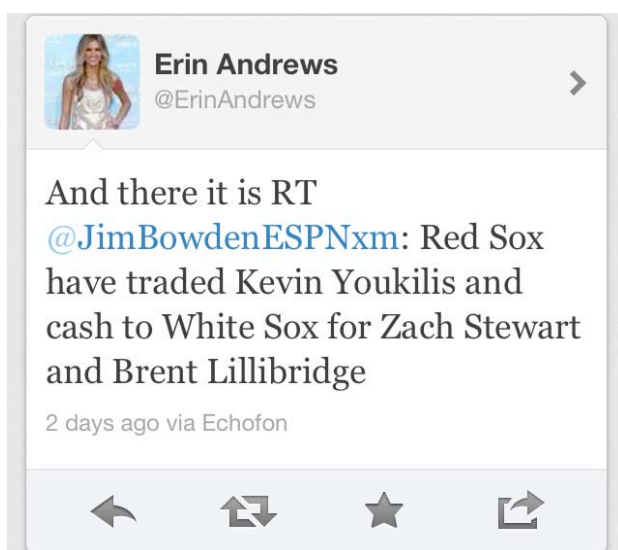
Before the 4:05 game, there's some talk that Pittsburgh is a potential destination for the biggest name currently on the trade block.



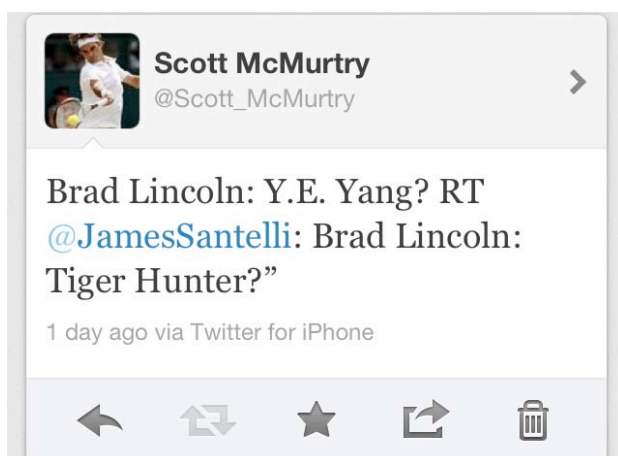
It's an intriguing proposition: Youkilis has become a household name amongst national baseball fans (after initially being known only to *Moneyballers* as the mythical "Greek God of Walks"), but it's pretty clear that his best days are behind him. He's the owner of a sorry .225/.311/.359 line in 2012, and he's missed significant time due to injury in each of the past two seasons. Youk isn't even starting for the Red Sox anymore; they've handed the third base starting job to Will Middlebrooks. It's also his last year of team control, so he isn't worth much at all in terms of return value. He could be an easy pickup, and it'd be cool to see a guy with a proven track record in the Pirates line...



Ookay then, that was fun for a little while. Wonder who's going to end up getting him?



Now that the Youkilis bit is through, the only thing left to ponder is, as always, the pitching matchup. Brad Lincoln, who was forced into the rotation after Charlie Morton's trip to the DL, is going for the Bucs.



His stint as a starter has been uninspiring to say the least.

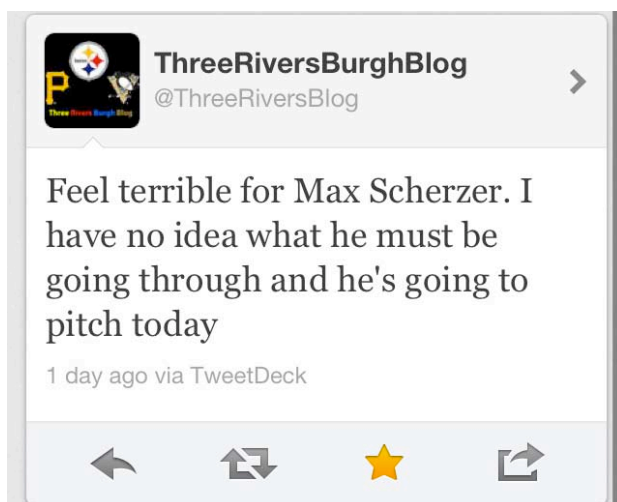


The evidence: 13 runs over 11.2 innings in his last three trips to the mound. 23 hits surrendered, four of which were home runs. He's a markedly different (read: worse) pitcher as a starter than as a reliever. Out of the bullpen, his 4-seam fastball/hard curveball combination has been untouchable: one earned run in 20 innings, with 23 strikeouts. But when he starts, his lack of a third pitch exposes him, he has trouble extending himself more than a couple innings, and he's far more hittable. Any history-conscious Pirates fan still looks at Brad Lincoln and thinks one thing: *This could/should be Tim Lincecum or Clayton Kershaw. Curse you, Dave Littlefield.* Good old DL picked Lincoln ahead of both of them in that infamous '06 draft. Lincecum won two Cy Young Awards before Lincoln threw a pitch in the major leagues. Kershaw was pitching for the

Dodgers at 20 and earned his own Cy Young last year. He turned 24 in February, and he might be the best pitcher in the game already. We have a failed starter whose future in the big leagues appears to be exclusively bullpen-bound.

The Pirates also would've been better off selecting Lincoln's adversary on this day, Max Scherzer. He was the eleventh pick of that draft, one spot behind Lincecum. He's shown some flashes of brilliance over the last three seasons—notably, an elite strikeout rate, the product of a filthy fastball-slider-changeup repertoire—even though his struggles with the BABIP and HR/FB gods have branded him as an underachiever. This year, Scherzer's fanned 100 hitters in 78.1 innings (including that 15 Ks in 7 innings [!] explosion against the Pirates), but he's got an 5.17 ERA thanks to a ghastly .383 BABIP and 16.9% HR/FB rate. If you normalize those numbers—xFIP to the rescue!—he'd be looking at closer to a 3.15 ERA.

Everything I just told you is completely irrelevant, because all you have to know about Max Scherzer's start is that his brother unexpectedly committed suicide two days ago, and that Scherzer is still taking the mound today. His xFIP-ERA differential is the last thing on anybody's mind, particularly his. I would have no issue with Scherzer coming out and throwing a perfect game, if only it would give him and his family a brief moment of joy in the midst of such a tragedy.



Let's Go, Bucs. But also: Let's Go, Max.

At 4:00, “Pirates Pregame” wraps up, and ROOT Sports shifts to their game broadcast. I immediately experience a feeling of longing for the old FSN theme music because (1) it's better than whatever they play now and (2) it reminds me the whole gameday experience was better under FSN. I heard the old FSN anthem at one of my brother's high school playoff games about a month ago, and it was like getting hit by a nostalgia bomb. All other things being equal, FSN was better based on music alone—but all other things aren't equal. On Opening Day in 2011, FSN was suddenly “rebranded” as ROOT in the Pittsburgh area, much to the surprise of longtime fans who had watched the Pirates and Penguins play on FSN for years. ROOT Sports has this wild obsession with crowd shots because they think they're “capturing the experience of the fan,” or something. You know what “captures the experience of the fan?” Showing what happens on the field. The focus on things outside the game often costs them to miss pitches and leaves the TV audience bellowing, “I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE ADORABLE BABY IN SECTION 316 HOW DID THAT BALL GET TO THE OUTFIELD?!!!” They missed the opening faceoff in Sidney Crosby's first game back from injury because they miscalculated how long their Crosby tribute video would run, giving Penguins fans the first real taste of what infuriated Pirates viewers all spring and summer.¹ For the first month or so of ROOT's existence, they read their promos in a cartoonish Pittsburghese accent, which was so agonizingly corny they were forced to scrap it.² And they brought in a truly awful sideline reporter, who was mysteriously canned a few weeks ago without explanation. Pretty much the only thing they've done that I've liked is the “Sabermetric Sunday” installment from last year (obviously), but it wasn't renewed for 2012. So it's mostly the same crap now, but people don't get a refresher course on FIP. I disapprove.

¹ Which led to the hashtag, #ThingsROOTSportsWouldMiss. It was a classic.

² The same guy still reads the promos; he just uses his normal voice.

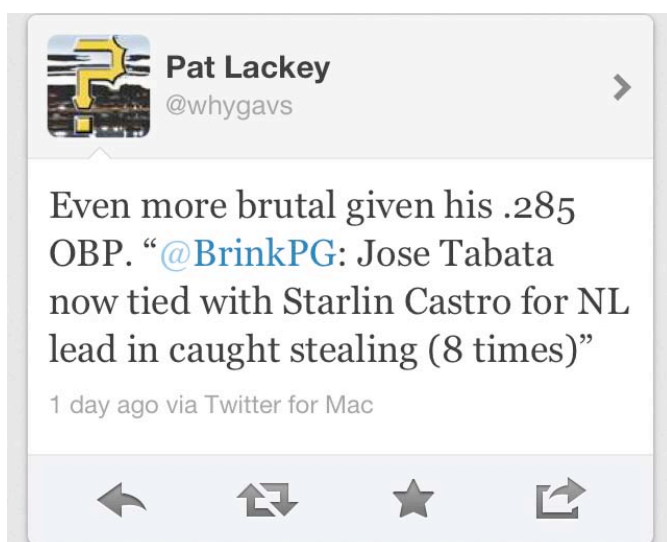
Eventually, I get over my FSN longing and Austin Jackson steps into the box. Lincoln falls behind 2-0, comes back with two aggressive fastballs that Jackson fouls off, and freezes him on a sharp 84 MPH curveball for a strikeout. Good start. Brennan Boesch, who is off to a terrible start in 2012, hits next. I used to make a big stink about lineup order until I learned that it doesn't really matter at all, and that using the worst possible arrangement would only cost a team about one or two wins over the course of a season. The old me would laugh at Jim Leyland for slotting a .644 OPS in the two-hole; the newer, wiser me doesn't bat an eyelash. Boesch works Lincoln to a full count before popping out foul to Alvarez on the eighth pitch. But the danger is just beginning (cue unsettling violin orchestra) as Miguel Cabrera digs in and Prince Fielder waits on deck. With 575 Pounds of Slugger™, the Tigers are never out of an inning. Particularly an inning against Starter Brad Lincoln. But Cabrera gets jammed by a first-pitch fastball, and grounds out to third. Danger averted until Fielder leads off next inning.

Following an eight pitch Alex Presley leadoff at-bat that ends in a routine grounder to second, Jose Tabata gets things started for the Pirates with a line drive single to center. Those two (Tabata and Presley) have really got to turn it around soon (combined .224/.285/.332 coming into the game), or they're going to be looking at possible fourth outfielder status. A playoff-minded team has no room for .225 singles hitters in its lineup, and, as of now, the Pirates are a playoff-minded team. The longer Tabata and Presley continue to struggle, the louder the chants of "Free Starling Marte!" (the 23 year old outfielder who dominated Double-A last year) will get. To be fair, Tabata's been playing hurt for much of the season.

Though, apparently not hurt enough to keep Clint Hurdle from giving him the steal sign. Tabata takes off on Scherzer's 1-2 pitch to McCutchen, and gets thrown out by a wide margin.



He's been getting the green light A LOT more than he should be.



Jose is 8 for 16 on steal attempts for the season. A 50% conversion rate wouldn't be acceptable in the days of Honus Wagner. Not to mention the fact that this particular caught stealing was IN FRONT OF ANDREW MCCUTCHEN. He has clearly lost a step from his rookie year in 2010, but Hurdle continues to run him. Bob Walk, a former Pirates pitcher doing the color commentary for ROOT today, tries to find positives in both this failure and the Pirates season long inability to convert burglaries: "All the running has put pressure on the opponents and taken from the quality of pitches....even though the numbers aren't good."

“Not good” would be generous. They’re 46 of 70 on the year (65.7%). That’s bad enough. But aside from McCutchen (14/18) and the sneaky efficient Walker (7/8), and the mark drops to 22 of 44—exactly 50%. Abominable. The whole “put pressure on the opponents” thing is a Little League strategy, and there’s no hard evidence that constant running has an impact on the actual pitches.³ Despite Walk’s attempt to put lipstick on the pig, the Pirates’ disposition for running into outs still frustrates the living hell out of me.

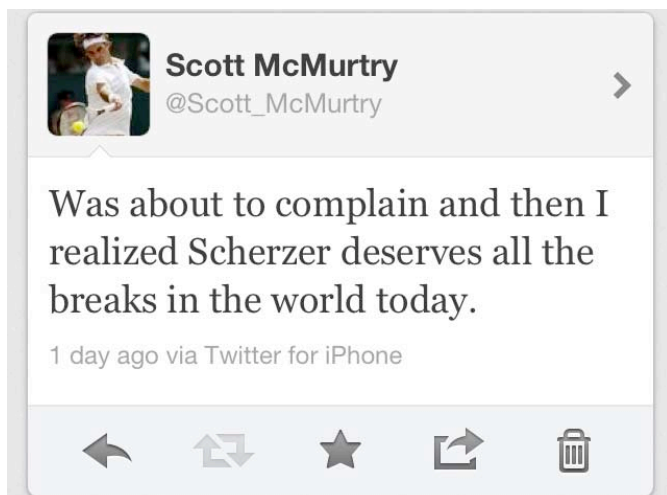
Cutch ends up striking out. I blame Hurdle, and also Tabata for not pretending to miss the sign. Lincoln returns to the mound for the second inning to face the other half of 575 Pounds of Slugger™, Fielder. I think he wears his shirt and pants even baggier now than he did with Milwaukee. Prince seems to embrace his corpulence, like he’s lining up a post-career gig as a plus size male model. Anyway, Lincoln starts him with a fastball for a called strike, then sends him snacking, er, packing with two straight changeups, both of which Fielder swings through. Very encouraging, and not just because we’re through the first round of 575 Pounds of Slugger™ with no harm; Lincoln is throwing the changeup—the below average third pitch that has inhibited his ability to be an effective starter—really well in the early going. He follows up the strikeout of Fielder by fanning Delmon Young for the second out. This time, he uses the hard curveball for the strikeout, getting Young to chase in the dirt.⁴ Detroit catcher Alex Avila works a full-count walk, but Lincoln gets Jhonny Peralta to fly out to McCutchen to end the inning. He looks good so far, but we’ll see how he holds up as the game progresses.

The Pirates’ half of the third looks promising for a moment, but ends just as quickly. Garrett Jones flies to center, Neil Walker draws a base on balls, and Pedro grounds into an inning-ending double play on a ball that should’ve gotten through the middle. Peralta was moving towards second to cover a Walker steal attempt, and the ball hit him in stride. From

³ Most pure steals involve the hitter taking the pitch anyway.

⁴ Not to take away from the roll Lincoln’s on, but I’m pretty sure I could get Delmon Young to chase a curveball in the dirt.

there, he took one step, touched the bag, and threw Pedro out by a good 35 feet. Just terrible luck, because we should've had first and third easily, except that it's not really that unfortunate in the grand scheme of things.



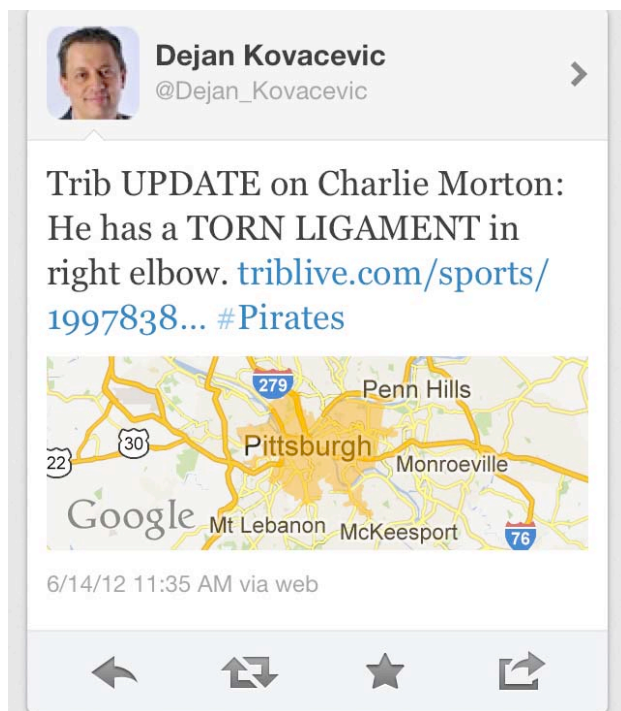
If you can't recognize this, your fan (and human being) credentials are hereby revoked. Get a life. And a heart.

Lincoln breezes through the third in ten pitches. After fielding a Ramon Santiago dribbler, fanning Scherzer, and barely keeping Austin Jackson in the park—a little scare, as McCutchen grabbed this one on the track—he's back in the dugout. Scherzer answers with his own easy inning: a flyball off the bat of Barajas⁵ and strikeouts of Harrison and Lincoln. He's in a groove now, blowing the bottom of the Pirates' order away with riding, mid-90s fastballs. At this point, you'd never guess that he's pitching with such a heavy heart.

ROOT returns from commercial with a "UPMC Health Update." The subject: poor Charlie Morton. On June 1, Electric Stuff was placed on the DL with "elbow inflammation." A fair amount of people thought it was a phantom injury, and the Pirates were just looking for a way

⁵ When you spend half your day perusing FanGraphs, you find out things like this: Rod Barajas is the second most flyball-prone hitter among all major leaguers since the inception of official batted ball data collection in 2002. 54% of his batted balls are sky bound (line drives counted separately), a figure matched only by Frank Thomas. "Inducing" a flyout from Barajas is not exactly a demanding task, it turns out.

to give him some rest without surrendering a roster spot. Well, just before he was set to return, this little bombshell dropped:



Torn elbow ligament=date with Dr. James Andrews=Tommy John surgery=finished until next July. You never want to hear this news for any pitcher. Injuries suck, but they suck harder when they happen to a guy who just worked his tail off to make himself a solid major league pitcher.

There's a good reason I followed Charlie Morton's starts with a fanatical zeal in 2011. It has a lot to do with how bad he was in 2010. Sorry, not bad. Humiliatingly awful. A 7.57 ERA in 17 starts. Gave up at least five runs in each of his April outings. Was rapidly approaching a four-digit ERA (like, over 10.00) when the Pirates sent him down to Indianapolis with "shoulder fatigue" after he got bombed by the Reds on May 27.⁶ After 14 Triple-A starts to get his head right, he returned to PNC Park on August 29—and, right on cue, gave up eight runs, seven earned, in three and a third against the Brewers. Now the ERA did crack four digits (10.03). A

⁶ This was almost certainly a phantom injury.

decent September knocked that number down to the final 7.57, worst in the major leagues for anyone who threw more than 50 innings. Calling Morton's 2010 a "nightmare" does not do justice to how dreadful it really was. It was like having a nightmare, waking up, falling back asleep, having another one—and doing that about a dozen times over the course of a night. Each day he pitched was a new chapter in a grisly horror novel: *What's going to go wrong this time?* I cannot imagine how embarrassed he was; a professional athlete, who strived his whole life to reach the pinnacle of his sport, was getting lit up each time he took the field to perform.

The worst part was that he had the talent to not only get by, but to dominate. The "Electric Stuff" moniker started as a tongue-in-cheek meme ("Oh, don't worry, we've got 'Electric Stuff' on the hill tonight," as he was in the midst of his struggles), but it was only half-kidding. He had the world in terms of "stuff": a riding, 92-93 MPH four-seam fastball, the classic 12-to-6 overhand curveball, and plus action on both his changeup and slider. The team had high, justified hopes before the season that he could harness that dazzling repertoire and emerge as the staff ace. And yet, he was getting *killed*. To me, it was incomprehensible. Was his location terrible? Yeah, Morton was throwing his fair share of balls down the middle. But no one with stuff that good should've been getting hit that hard, even if he was throwing every pitch center-cut. If you've ever pitched, you know that there are just some days when everything goes wrong: Every blooper falls in for a hit. Every groundball finds a hole. Every bad pitch you throw gets mashed, and they even rip some of the good ones, too. You can never seem to get the third out, or escape a jam. That was *every* start for Charlie Morton in 2010. I must've said, "He just cannot catch one break!" 500 times that year. It was a tough argument to sell, especially after some of the more brutal poundings. But I still saw the raw talent, the "Electric Stuff," and believed he still had a future as a big league pitcher.

Of course, bad luck turned out to be a major contributor towards Morton's terrible results. His season BABIP was .353, and his strand rate was an impossibly low 53.2%—the third worst

season LOB% since 1950 among pitchers who threw at least 70 innings. 18.1% of the flyballs hit against Morton ended up over the wall, nearly twice the standard rate. His FIP was still an ugly 5.29, but his xFIP came in at a respectable 4.11. Now, I'll be the first to admit that there is no way in the world he should've been a 4.11 ERA pitcher in 2010. But the true mark lies well south of the 7.57 it ended up at. There was still hope.

Morton's statistical turnaround in 2011 was inspiring enough: the ERA plummeted to 3.83, the home run rate per 9 sank from 1.69 to an MLB-best 0.31, and he threw nearly twice as many big league innings as he did the previous season. But it was the way he transformed himself that made headlines. In spring training, Morton totally rebuilt his delivery in the mold of Roy Halladay. If you're going to copy the mechanics of one pitcher, I'd say that's the guy to go with. The results were immediate. With a lowered arm slot, the power 4-seam fastball turned into a devastating sinker. That sinker became Morton's signature pitch, and he used it to induce a groundball 58.5% of the time contact was made. The hits were still falling in—BABIP remained poor at .320—but when so many balls ended up on the ground, they couldn't soar over the fence. Charlie Morton became, for me, 2011's best feel-good story in baseball. I pulled for him like crazy, because I felt like he deserved to have success after that atrociously unfortunate 2010 *and* because of the work he put in to overhaul his approach. I cannot imagine that anyone tweeted the #ElectricStuff hashtag more than I did from April to September. I was beyond thrilled for Charlie.

It was entirely conceivable that Morton could build on his 2011 success and be even better in 2012. With another winter and spring to refine that delivery further, he could become more consistent with his new mechanics and reduce his walk rate while improving the quality of his secondary pitches. A hip strain that required offseason surgery set his timetable back, but he was in the rotation by April 14. At least it wasn't an arm problem, right? His first three starts of 2012 were solid, but he was hit around for a 5.67 ERA in May. That was when the team put him

on the DL. The news that it wasn't routine elbow discomfort, but instead major, surgery necessitating damage, was awful. Charlie had defeated his pitching demons, held them at bay for an entire season. And now he was being betrayed by his own ligaments. Baseball is a cruel game, indeed. The "update" reports that his Tommy John procedure was successful, and that he'll start a rehab program in the coming months. Best of luck, Charlie. I'll still be rooting for you.

Brennan Boesch leads off the top of the fourth for the Tigers, and *now* I'm glad he's hitting second, because Lincoln could use an easy out with 575 Pounds of Slugger™ on deck and in the hole. Boesch keeps being Boesch, and grounds out on the third pitch. Cabrera approaches the plate while Fielder steps out of the dugout, and I feel a seismic impact at my house, 15 miles south of the ballpark. Sorry, these Fielder/Cabrera fat jokes are just too easy. If the ground under Lincoln's feet shakes, he ignores it—He Who Is Not Tim Lincecum throws a 1-2 fastball past Cabrera for the second out. Miggy is considered one of the best pure fastball hitters around, but a 27-year old right-hander who's been thought of as a bust since before he wore a Pirates uniform just *gassed* him.

Greg Brown comments on "what a start it has been" for Lincoln thus far. Careful there, Brownie. Lincoln is throwing the ball extremely well—he looks like his reliever self, stretched out over multiple innings—but we might want to guard against the unbridled euphoria. Keep in mind that Lincoln gets significantly worse the second and third times he goes through the order, and that his suddenly effective changeup could desert him at any moment. Also, Fielder could spoil the party with one swing. But the big Texas right-hander keeps neutralizing Detroit's big bats. Fielder waits on a 1-2 curve and slices it into left, but he gets under it enough that it's an easy play for Presley. 575 Pounds of Slugger™ is now 0-for-12 in the series. The Bucs are executing the "How to Beat the Tigers" blueprint to a T: hold down the big bats and try to avoid facing Verlander. (He's pitching again tomorrow, so they'll fail the second step by default.)

Bottom of the fourth means AFLAC TRIVIA QUESTION TIME! Which former MLB pitcher was selected in the 4th round of the 1984 NHL Draft?

Of course, the 2012 NHL Draft is currently being held a few blocks away in the Consol Energy Center, home of the Penguins. Subtle ROOT Sports cross-promotional tactics! This exact question is probably used in some form (television, in-game contests, etc.) by every team in baseball. The answer is Tom Glavine. I'm 700% sure. If you watch enough baseball, this becomes a no-brainer after you hear it for the thirty-seventh time. I can't wait until Tom Glavine's Hall of Fame induction ceremony rolls around, when he'll be asked about his hypothetical hockey career in 473 separate interviews.

End AFLAC Trivia Question Time.

I also notice that ROOT has gone crazy with the crowd shots. Last inning, they focused in on a guy wearing a full "Tony the Tiger" suit (complete with Detroit hat and jersey, which brought his external temperature to approximately 135° F), and I think that inspired them to go to town. The storm is upon us, people.

Alex Presley fights off a handful of 3-2 offerings from Scherzer and lifts the ninth pitch of the at-bat into deep right-center for a double. Here's a chance to break the deadlock. But I know what's on the way. Leadoff double, a cold Jose Tabata coming to the plate—it's a foregone conclusion. The sacrifice is coming. Clint Hurdle loves sac bunts like Tim Duncan loves bank shots. The difference is that Duncan's constant use of the backboard *improves* his scoring production, while Hurdle's infatuation with trading outs for bases *lowers* the Pirates' offensive output. I know this because I've seen enough studies and run expectancy charts, which uniformly spell out that the overwhelming majority of non-pitcher sacrifice bunt attempts are counterproductive. There is an insurmountable mountain of data that establishes why bunting isn't advisable. And yet, nearly every manager in baseball ignores the factual conclusions, and

strategizes as if they had never been discovered. Clint Hurdle is not alone in his irrational love affair with the bunt. But that doesn't make it okay.

As expected, the sacrifice attempt is on. Tabata, as noted earlier, is not hitting well at the moment. But he is *well* above the “this guy is a decent enough hitter that the bunt is a bad play” threshold.⁷ Scherzer misses up with a first pitch slider. I think of a story from Tim Kurkjian's book about Earl Weaver, the legendary Orioles' manager who was decades ahead of his time when it came to eschewing small ball. Kurkjian said that when one of Weaver's pitchers threw a ball to a hitter attempting a sacrifice, the fiery Earl of Baltimore would shriek, “They're giving us an out! Throw the ball over the plate!” God bless that man. Scherzer then throws a fastball on the very outside corner of the plate, which Tabata taps foul in his attempt to surrender one of the Pirates' precious 27 outs. The next pitch would send Earl Weaver into cardiac arrest: Scherzer *hits* Tabata on the hand, sending him to first and rejecting the gift Hurdle had offered the Tigers.



So instead of a man on second and one out (worth about 0.66 runs, according to Baseball Prospectus' latest 2012 run expectancy table), the Pirates have first and second with no outs (1.44 average run value). And [best Vin Scully voice] *look who's coming to the plate*.

⁷ According to *Baseball Between the Numbers*, anyone better than a .195/.221/.178 (yes, it is impossible to hit .195 and slug .178, but they were computed independently) shouldn't be sacrificing with a man on first and no outs unless it's the late innings of a tie game and he's on the home team. In which case the line moves up to .199/.224/.174—eliminating virtually no one. This is why I dislike bunting.

“The centerfielder, number twenty-two, ANN-drew, muh-CUTCH-EN,” I say, aloud, to the zero people in the room. When the franchise savior’s up with a chance to break the game open, pseudo-psychotic behavior is acceptable.



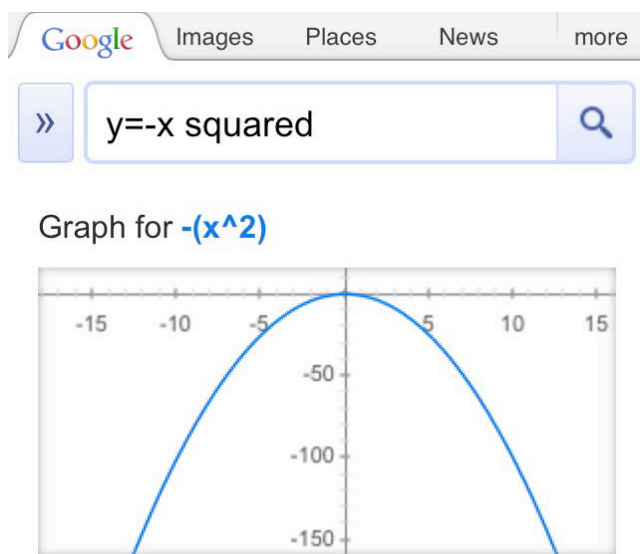
I think this is a joke. I hope this is a joke.

Max Scherzer is undaunted by Cutch’s presence. He rips off a nasty first-pitch slider that Andrew chases out of the zone. 0-1. He stays down in the zone with another slidepiece, which McCutchen barely fouls off. 0-2. Scherzer is one pitch away from sidestepping a major threat. He tries to change McCutchen’s eye level with a high, inside fastball and WE HAVE LIFTOFF.

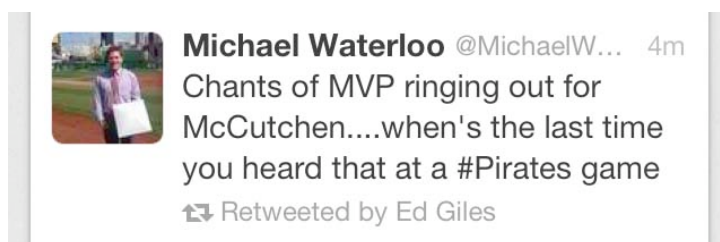




I cannot describe in words how quickly Cutch got his bat through the zone in order to muscle this ball over the left field fence. He took a letter-high, inside corner, 96 MPH fastball and turned it into an absolute-no-doubter flyball home run. This thing was so majestic, it could've cleared two Green Monsters stacked on top of each other. It's what I like to call a "y equals negative x squared" ball because the trajectory is so wonderfully parabolic.



After the raw, emotional CUTCH IS SO GOOD AT BASEBALL outburst dies down, something else erupts.



It's a legitimate chant right now, and the guys in the booth shift their discussion to the possibility of McCutchen taking home the National League Most Valuable Player award. Walk (after imploring fans to "get on your laptops" and #VoteCutch into the All-Star Game), weighs in on the topic. His main points:

- The MVP should go to the "most important guy on a team that wins."
- "I don't think of it as the 'player of the year' award."
- "You can't be valuable if your team comes in third."
- His NL MVP pick last year was Diamondbacks pitcher Ian Kennedy. Why? It had something to do with Kennedy's "21-4" "won-loss" record.

Okay, let me start by saying it's awesome that we can even have this conversation. There has not been a legitimate Pirates MVP candidate since a lithe, fleet outfielder named Barry Bonds took the award home for the second time in 1992. Our best player getting a major national recognition would be, in some respects, better than breaking the losing streak.

Problem: Andrew McCutchen is not, currently, the correct choice for MVP.

You're baffled. 76% of this book is a rambling ode/borderline creepy platonic love letter to Andrew McCutchen, and the author is going on record as saying that if the season ended on June 23rd, he does not believe McCutchen should win his league's Most Valuable Player award. The trouble with handing McCutchen a Kenesaw Mountain Landis Memorial Baseball Award plaque is that the most "valuable" player is, by definition, the "best" player—and McCutchen isn't currently the best player. Joey Votto, who is hitting an inhuman .363/.483/.650, is the National League's best player. David Wright (.361/.457/.574) is the next best, although he isn't even in Votto's stratosphere at the moment. McCutchen is putting up crazy good offensive numbers from centerfield—a primarily defensive position—but it isn't enough to bump him ahead of those two. There's also the question of his fielding. UZR has Cutch at -7.9 runs for the year. Defensive Runs Saved rates him slightly more favorably, but still in the negatives. Now, there is no way you can tell me he is one of the worst defenders in baseball. His routes and jumps are not always the best, but *please*. I'm willing to throw this out for the most part, but it seems clear that defense shouldn't be cited as part of his MVP case.

Unfortunately for Bob Walk, the MVP has to be a "player of the year" award. Every player in baseball is worth some amount of runs. We do our best to quantify exactly how many using things like WAR, and even though it isn't perfect, the idea is that the best player should accumulate the highest WAR. Now, if Joey Votto finishes the season with 8 WAR (a typical MVP season is between 7-10), that means he contributed eight more wins to his team than a replacement level player would have. It doesn't matter if he played for the Cincinnati Reds, the

Pittsburgh Pirates, the New York Yankees, or the Pensacola Blue Wahoos.⁸ He would be worth the same amount to every team. Because of the “narrative factor” in the MVP deliberations, someone like McCutchen gets a bump because he is so clearly the best player on an otherwise weak team. It *appears* that he is worth more to the Pirates than he would be to the Texas Rangers, but at the end of the year, he’ll be worth something between six and eight wins irrespective of which team he played on. You might think that the Pirates would totally collapse and score 1.6 runs per game if McCutchen went down, but that simply wouldn’t be the case. They’d surely be worse. They wouldn’t devolve into a high school team, however.

I also take exception to the idea that the MVP has to go to a player whose team wins. We don’t have a separate, “best player” award whose description reads “To be awarded to the player who plays baseball the best but wasn’t lucky enough to play on a team of twenty-four other good baseball players.” There’s no bullshit qualification between a “best player” and a “most outstanding player,” like in the college football award voting.⁹ There’s one award for goodplayeriness, so you can’t discriminate against guys who don’t play for “winning” teams. If we had a “most valuable player on a good team” award, I would be flabbergasted, but you could reasonably get away with voting for the guy who scrappily willed his mediocre team to a wild card spot. That’s not what the MVP is, though. You are valuable if you’re good, and you are not a meaningless hunk of bone and flesh if you’re good but your team doesn’t qualify for the postseason. If Noluck McBadbreak has a 25 WAR season, but his team loses 115 games, you can’t punish him for not being on a playoff squad.¹⁰

⁸ Actually, he couldn’t have played for the Blue Wahoos, because that wouldn’t be against major league competition. But you get the idea.

⁹ Where the Maxwell Award is supposed to go to the “best” player and the Heisman to the “most outstanding.” But really, the Maxwell usually goes to the guy that’s going to finish second in the Heisman race because the voters are trying to be nice and make sure he gets a shiny award, too.

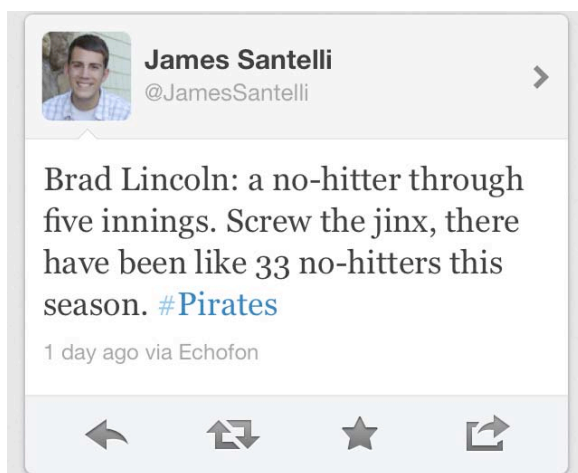
¹⁰ Estimated stat line for a 25 WAR season: .835/.990/1.644, 113 HR, 270 RBI, +74.3 UZR. I have no numbers or words to describe how bad a team would have to be to lose 115 games despite having a player like this.

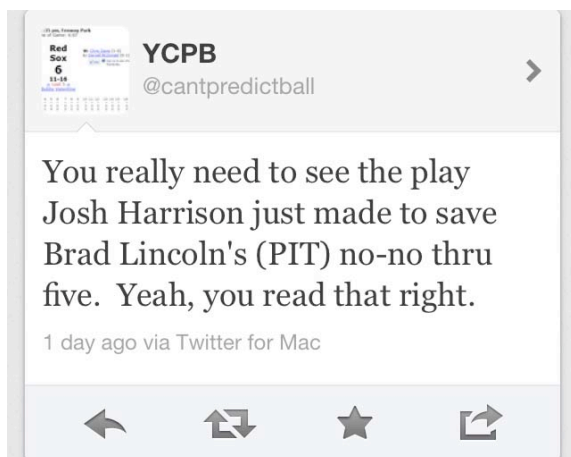
So, to recap: the MVP is the best player, and the best player can play for any team. And McCutchen is not currently the MVP. Sorry. Great, glad we got that over with. Now we just have to replace the vast majority of baseball writers who hold MVP votes and buy into this “narrative” crap.

After the non-MVP’s bomb, Scherzer settles down to retire Jones, Walker, and Alvarez. Lincoln returns to the hill for the fifth and continues to cruise. Six straight strikes retire Young and Avila on a strikeout and a grounder, respectively. Jhonny Peralta, with no apparent interest in working Lincoln’s pitch count, swings at the first pitch and hits a weak dribbler to the right of the shortstop, Harrison. I’ve made Josh something of a whipping boy so far, but on this play, he demonstrates why he has value to an MLB team. Harrison backhands the ball near the lip of the grass and, his momentum pulling him away from the target, sidearms a perfect toss that reaches Jones in the air and gets Peralta by two full steps. Josh Harrison may never post a .300 OBP in the big leagues, but he can hang around as a utility backup because he plays above average defense at multiple positions. He’s seen time at second, short, third, right, and left this year already. That’s worth a bench spot on my team. Here, he makes a terrific play to end the inning.

But let’s see how good you are. Why was this play extra significant?

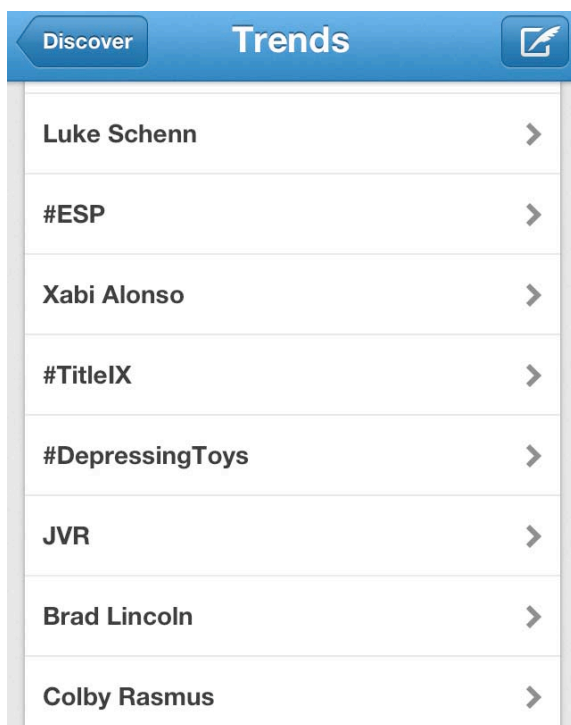
(Jeopardy music.)





Brad Lincoln is 55% of the way to a no-hitter. I didn't realize it until the end of the fourth myself; I was too thrilled with how good his stuff looked to even notice the overall results. In truth, any no-hit bid (even a Verlander effort) could be a @YCPB feature, but this one is super duper surprising. If he were to somehow navigate through the next four innings with no hits allowed, the sanctity of the no-hitter might be violated.

A no-hit alert also means PIRATES SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE!!!

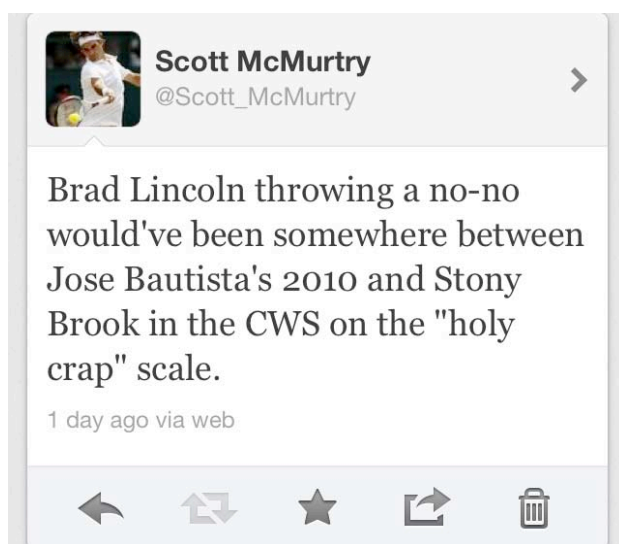


Awesome, except that now more people might know Brad Lincoln's name than James McDonald's. Perhaps this was a double-edged sword.

The 7-8-9 hitters get nothing off Scherzer in the bottom of the inning. Good thing, otherwise we might've spent more than a few minutes speculating about Brad Lincoln's chances to attain baseball immortality. Getting through that fifth inning seems to officially set off the "no-hitter alarms"; the news might show up on ESPN's bottomline, the announcers talk about it (sometimes in euphemisms to avoid jinxes that don't exist), and the fans at the ballpark are in on the situation.

The first pitch of the sixth inning is delivered with significantly increased anticipation. Lincoln completes his warm-ups and fires a first-pitch fastball to Ramon Santiago. Santiago isn't waiting around. He slaps it toward the right side, and there's no play for Neil Walker or Garrett Jones. Base hit. Lincoln remains seven no-hitters behind Nolan Ryan.

To the surprise of exactly no one.



Leyland wants his starter to pitch the sixth, so he allows Scherzer to bat for himself and bunt Santiago to second. Lincoln doesn't shrink after his no-hit bid gets wrecked—he continues pitching at his never-before-seen-as-a-starter level. Jackson goes down swinging on a 93 MPH

fastball. Boesch tries to follow Santiago's lead and jumps on a first-pitch fastball, but he gets under it enough to produce a flyball out to left. The no-hitter's gone, but Brad Lincoln has thrown six scoreless innings—something he's only done twice in 22 major league starts.

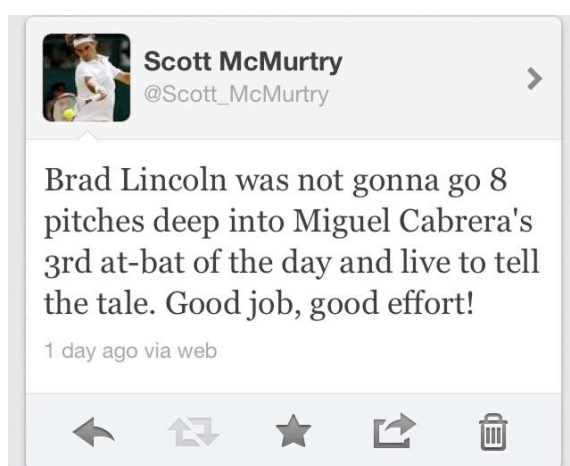
Max Scherzer makes quick work of the Pirates' top three hitters, and his day comes to an end after a characteristically misleading six innings and three earned runs. He was utterly dominating, save for three wayward at-bats in the fourth inning that culminated with the McCutchen round tripper. His only real sin was the HBP of Tabata; the homer was the product a superhuman swing by one of the game's most talented hitters. Scherzer struck out seven and walked just one. Today was a microcosm of his 2012 season: plenty of whiffs, but one costly pitch (that wasn't even totally his fault) did him in. Deceptive, unlucky, whatever you want to call it—all that really counts is that he honored his brother just by taking the mound. And for that, he deserved better.

So the Pirates take a three-run lead into the seventh inning. A home team with a three-run lead after six wins the game about 91% of the time, according to win probability charts.

CAVEAT: If there were ever a gloomy three-run lead, this would be it. 575 Pounds of Slugger™ is due up for the Tigers. Brad Lincoln has pitched unfathomably well, but we all know his track record when it comes to facing opposing hitters for the second and third time in a game—much less facing opposing hitters with career slugging percentages in the mid .500s three times on one afternoon. In two pitches, this could be a 3-2 game. That's not even pessimism. That's realism.

Lincoln and Cabrera fight a great battle. They both know the importance of the at-bat—its result could make way for an easier (Fielder still on deck) seventh or open the door to a crooked number. For the first five pitches, Lincoln's giving Cabrera all he can handle with fastballs to both sides of the plate. But he misses with two breaking balls on his sixth and seventh pitches, and suddenly it's a full count. Lincoln, weary of walking Miggy and bringing Fielder up

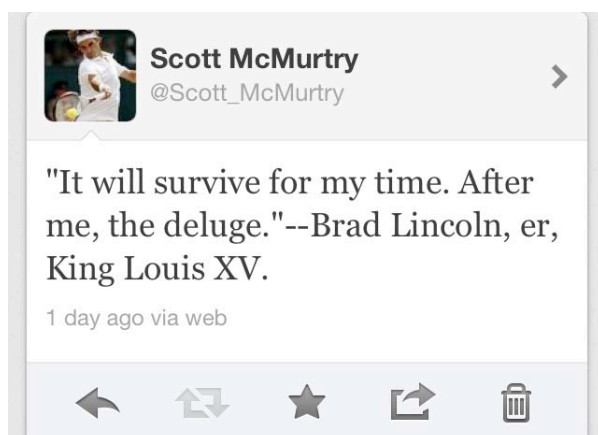
with a man on base, throws a 3-2 fastball right smack down the middle. Cabrera waits back long enough that it looks like he's plucking the ball out of Rod Barajas' mitt and puts a nice, easy swing on it. It's the kind of swing a normal right-handed hitter uses to guide a soft liner over the second baseman's head. When Miguel Cabrera swings like this, the ball carries some 380 feet over the Heinz sign on the right field fence. A picture perfect opposite-field home run. 3-1. Hurdle doesn't want to take his chances with the equally formidable Fielder waddling to the plate, and Lincoln's day is done. Cabrera has played the role of John Wilkes Booth, cutting down a Lincoln shortly after his moment of greatest triumph. Disappointing, but not terribly surprising.



And a good decision by Hurdle to hook Lincoln even though he's only thrown 79 pitches. I'd be watching through my fingers if he stayed in to face Fielder.

Juan Cruz replaces Lincoln, and assumes the role of Andrew Johnson—he does nothing to right the ship.¹¹ Fielder smashes a fly ball over McCutchen's head that nearly goes for another bomb. I was not naïve enough to think 575 Pounds of Slugger™ was going to go quietly in this series. Then he falls behind Delmon Young 3-1. Things are not looking good at all.

¹¹Get it, because Andrew Johnson became president after Lincoln's assassination, and he screwed up Reconstruction before getting impeached and nearly removed from office because he was wildly unpopular, and oh my God I really am a history major.



So many history references.

Cruz recovers to get a groundout on the seventh pitch of the at-bat. If he'd walked Delmon "I Have Fewer Walks In My Six Season Career Than Jose Bautista Had In 2011" Young to put the tying run on base, the tennis racket in my hand would've been in grave danger of being smashed against the wall. Hurdle goes to a southpaw, Tony Watson, to face the lefty Avila. He grounds out to second, and Jhonny Peralta flies out to center. I feel lucky to escape with only one run.

A little insurance would be nice, even with the Grilli/Hanrahan combo on hand to clean up the eighth and ninth. Sure enough, Casey McGehee (hitting for Jones since Leyland brought lefty Phil Coke in to pitch to Jones, who hasn't registered a hit off a lefty since last August)¹² smacks a double, and Walker pulls out a sand wedge to awkwardly lift a Coke slider out of the dirt for a single. McGehee scores, and the lead is back to three. Pedro follows with his monthly base hit off a left-hander, singling Walker to third with no outs. Flyballand's Ambassador to the United Nations, Barajas, lives up to his title by popping up to the infield—one of just two things you absolutely can't do with a guy on third and no outs (the other being a strikeout.). To say I saw that coming would be a gross understatement. Now it's Harrison's turn to try and bring the run home. He takes the first pitch (!), swings through the second, and lays off the third, a slider

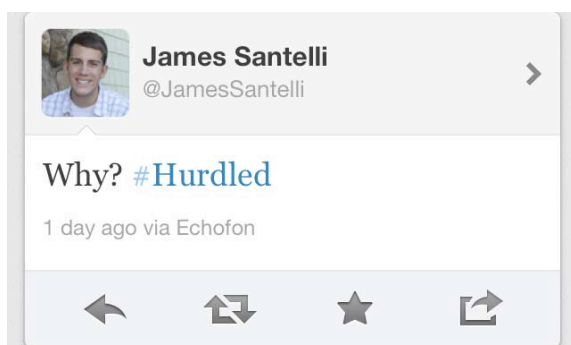
¹² True story.

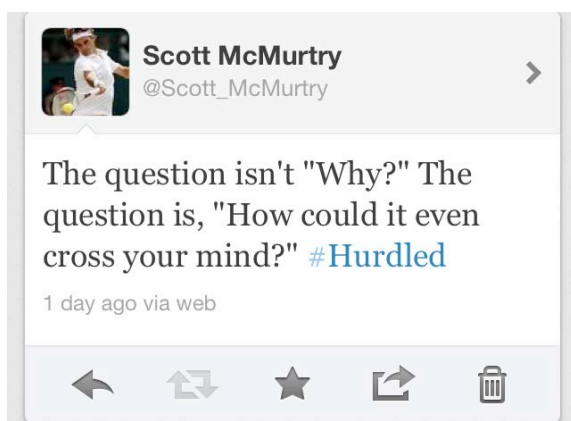
off the corner (!!). I kid you not: Josh Harrison is ahead 2-1 in a count. He has seen three pitches, and has refrained from swinging at the two that crossed the plate outside the strike zone.

Let us all take a moment to appreciate this joyous occasion.

Or we could call for a suicide squeeze, which could fail, which could hang Walker up between third and home, which could make the second out, which could reduce our run expectancy by 0.68, which could be a colossal waste, especially considering that we have a high-contact hitter at the plate who is currently in a hitter's count and has a very good chance of driving the runner in from third anyway.

Which choice do you think Clint Hurdle makes?





#Hurdled is the universal reaction to a strategic blunder made by the Pirates manager. It's kind of nice that his name lends itself to such a simple saying. What do Brewers fans say when Ron Roenicke bunts into a double play? Roenicke'd? Doesn't come off the tongue quite as cleanly. Jared Hughes (and not Joel Hanrahan) pitches the ninth inning of a tie game on the road, and gives up the winning run? #Hurdled. Botched substituting leads to Clint Barmes playing first base in an extra inning game against the Astros? #Hurdled. Matt Diaz and Lyle Overbay hit third and fourth, respectively, in the lineup? #Hurdled (even though this doesn't matter that much). Clint Hurdle is far from the worst strategic manager in the major leagues—last I checked, Ron Washington and Jim Tracy are still employed by professional baseball teams. But in an age when a growing number of fans are aware that “old school” tactics are often, in fact, tactless, managers are no longer immune from criticism if they do things like order a suicide squeeze up three runs in the bottom of the seventh. So Hurdle gets roasted. Not the first time, surely not the last.

Of course, Harrison ends up striking out to end what was once a threat. In comes the first half of the Pirates' Batman & Robin relievers, Grilli. Although at this point, it's not clear which one's The Dark Knight and which one's the loyal sidekick. The opposition is hitting .155 against Grilli, with 43 strikeouts in 27.2 innings. He continues to exceed expectations, and receive acclaim amongst observers.

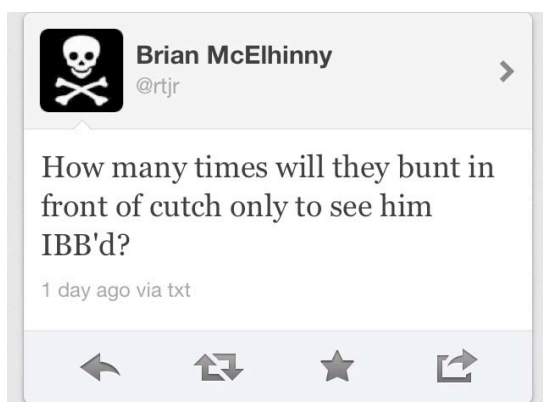
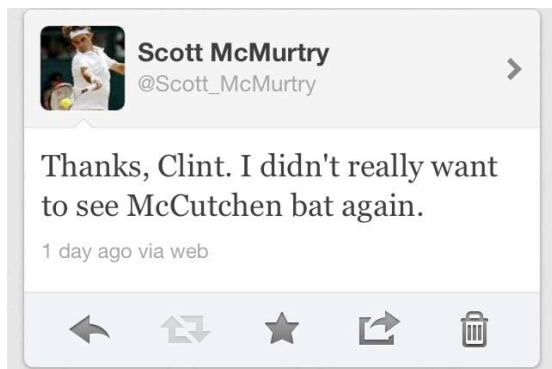


A few weeks back, Grilli made a comment about being “wired” on the mound, leading to the Twitter account @IsGrilliWired. The usual verdict: #wired. Today: #wired. Two strikeouts and a soft groundball out, and Grilli retires to the dugout with a 1.88 season ERA. I enjoyed the second strikeout in particular: Grilli threw off Austin Jackson’s rhythm by slide stepping—even though there was nobody on base—on the final pitch after several foul balls. He’s got stuff *and* slyness.

Last chance for the Pirates to get some insurance. Clint Barmes, who entered in a double switch last inning, starts the bottom of the eighth with a single off Octavio Dotel. By the way, would you have ever guessed that “Don’t Ask, Dotel” has the second best strikeout rate in baseball history among all pitchers who have thrown as many innings as he has? I just looked that up, and I still can’t quite believe it. Octavio Dotel has struck out more hitters per nine innings than Randy Johnson did. There’s a 3,200-inning difference, but still. Crazy. Alex Presley, who I can almost guarantee does not know the exactitude of Dotel’s whiffing ways, slaps an infield single in the direction of Cabrera. The major leagues’ largest third baseman has no play. First and second, nobody out. Tabata coming to the dish.

Say it with me: *Here comes the bunt.*

As you're probably aware, Andrew McCutchen is on deck. If Tabata bunts the runners to second and third, what do you think Dotel is going to do when McCutchen steps in?



(Parody account; Clint Hurdle neither tweets during games nor lampoons his own moves.)

I'll bet that when Tabata squared around, Dotel was happier than Carlton Banks at a Tom Jones concert. Free out, plus a pass on staring down the hottest hitter in the sport. Instead, he

gets to face McGehee with the chance for a double play. Dotel doesn't need a twin killing: he fans McGehee on seven pitches and catches Walker looking on a 3-2, backdoor curveball. No runs, no Andrew McCutchen watching, no fun. #Hurdled. On to the ninth with a three run lead.



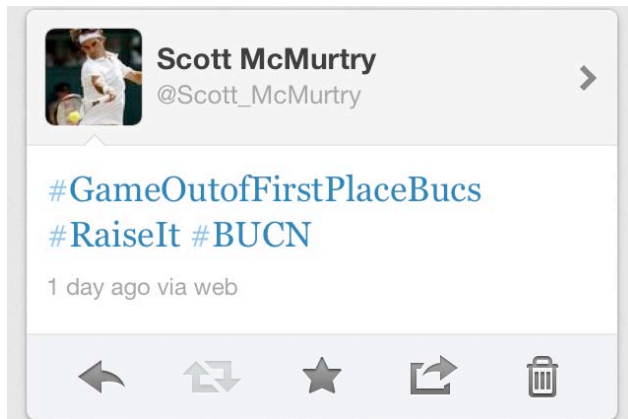
Aha! Because you need your best reliever out there to prevent the other team from scoring three runs before you record three outs!

Sarcasm aside, let's be clear about one thing: I do not believe that Clint Hurdle is dumb. I believe that he is a product of his environment; his managerial education came from the small ball, pre-existence of run expectancy charts era, and he has never abandoned it. And, again, he is far from the only skipper who prescribes to the "traditional" notions of how to manage a baseball game.¹³ I also believe that Clint Hurdle does the non-strategic aspects of his job—communicating, motivating, fostering a positive clubhouse attitude—extremely well. I just wish he could fuse his mastery of the human components with an embracing of the new information. Being a good communicator and employing *Moneyball*-style strategy are not mutually exclusive: Joe Maddon (my favorite manager ever) represents the perfect marriage of the two, with fantastic results.

¹³ Don't *ever* say "coach" when it comes to big league managers. Your little league coach was a "coach." Clint Hurdle is a "manager." "Managing" and "coaching" are two entirely different things.

I like Clint Hurdle. I really do. When you listen to him talk, you can't help but like him. When he was interviewed at his first "Piratefest," the preseason Pirates convention in Pittsburgh, he said that remaking Pittsburgh back into a baseball town "is the greatest opportunity in all of sports." You say: that's hyperbole. I say: that's awesome. I'd love to have a conversation with him about, well, anything, really, but more specifically strategy and ask him why he does the things he does. I think it would go smoothly, but I can also picture it going down like the famous courtroom scene in *A Few Good Men*.

Since it's a save situation, Hammer Time begins in the ninth. Boesch completes an 0-for-4 by flying out to left on Hanrahan's second pitch. One last confrontation with 575 Pounds of Slugger™ stands between the Pirates and a 38-32 record. Cabrera lifts a 1-2 pitch into right for an easy out, but Fielder refuses to capitulate and ropes a single to left center. It's a small measure of revenge for Hanrahan striking him out to end the Pirates' victory in Detroit on May 19. The Hammer got him swinging on a slider that was so dirty, Fielder looked to the mound and nodded, as if to say, "too good." I'm starting to like Prince more and more now that he doesn't play for the Brewers anymore. I'm not thrilled with him prolonging this game, though. His single is followed by a Delmon Young walk, which—gah, we've already touched on how rare those are. Fortunately, Hanrahan bears down with the tying run, Alex Avila, at the plate. He starts Avila with a backdoor slider that the Detroit catcher takes for a strike. Bob Walk notes the significance of the pitch: Hanrahan trusts his slider enough to throw it on the first pitch after a base on balls. A good sign. Two more sliders, the second of which Avila flails at as it collapses into the dirt, and the ballgame is over.



Can't quite go #FirstPlaceBucs yet, but had to get it in there somehow.

Chapter 3

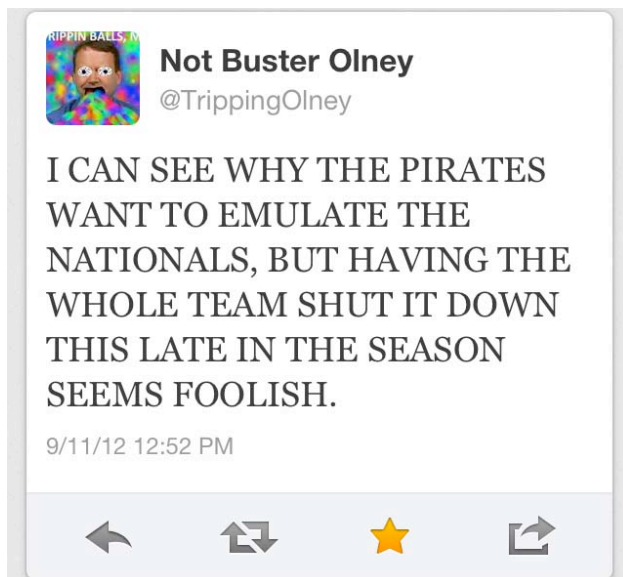
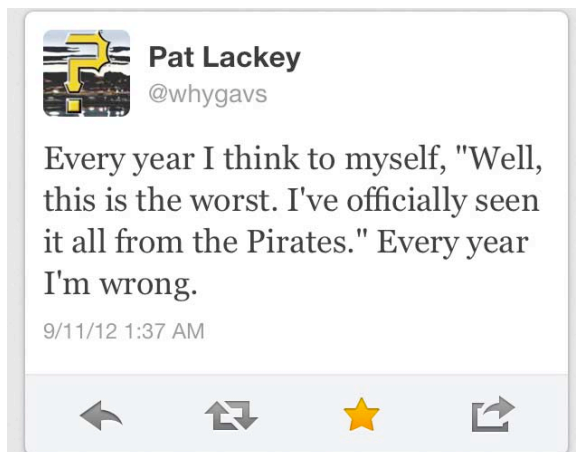
Look Out, Sisyphus!

I feel stupid for not thinking of it earlier.



It took the final straw—falling back below .500—for me to realize the most apt characterization of Pirates fanhood. Brief refresher if you’re not familiar with Greek mythology: Sisyphus was a king who the gods punished in the afterlife by commanding him to forever roll an enormous boulder up a hill, only to watch it fall back down every single time. Supporting the Pirates in my lifetime has produced a similar result. No matter what, the ball is doomed to end up back at the bottom of the hill. Sometimes (almost every year), you never make it very far up. Once in awhile (this year, last year, 1997), you *almost* reach the crest of the hill, but ultimately you won’t be able to taste the summit. In our case, there’s a big “81” etched in the ground at the top of the hill. All we want to do is take that boulder to the peak and drive it right through the “81,” grind it against the soil until the “81” becomes unrecognizable, and then, if we have the energy, toss the boulder over the other side and follow it into Playoff Land. We were *this close* to reaching the top in 2012. But, as always, it wasn’t to be.

I don’t think you need the details from any of the last 14 games. Just know that we’ve won two of them and lost 12. Take it away, people:



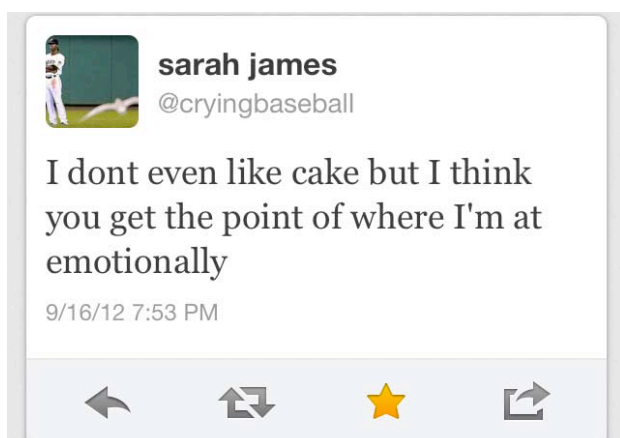
In re the Nats' decision to shut down Stephen Strasburg at 159 innings.



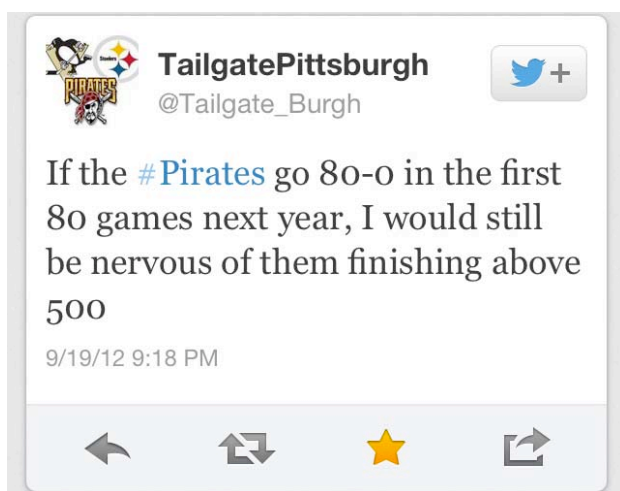


It was only a matter of time. He has a 7.08 ERA since the break. Seven-zero-eight.

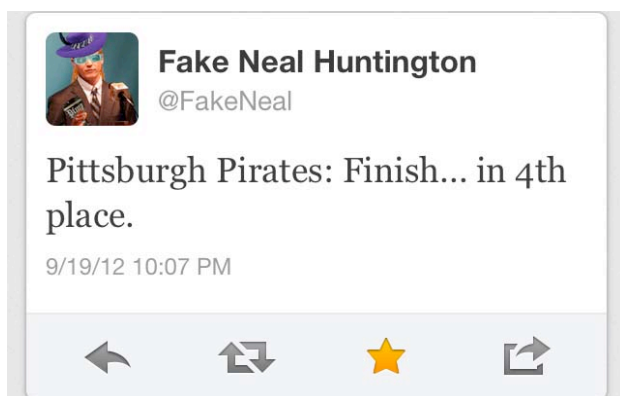




Yes, I do.



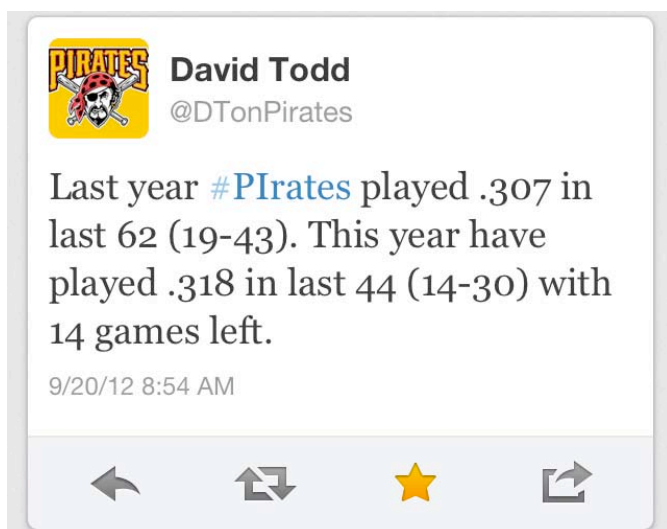
That's the spirit.



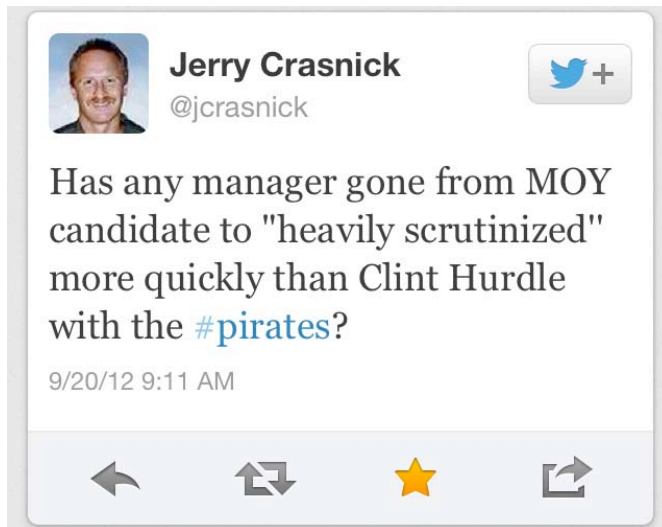
Every couple of months, Hurdle promotes a new unofficial team slogan. Since about early August, it's been "Finish." Yeah, about that.



When you're from Pittsburgh and you go to Penn State, one of your primary concerns in life is holding bragging rights over your Philadelphia-bred colleagues. On July 28, we were FOURTEEN GAMES AHEAD OF THEM. I was so looking forward to making all kind of "\$170 MILLION ONLY BOUGHT YOU THE SECOND BEST BASEBALL TEAM IN PENNSYLVANIA!" comments until next season, when they'd surely reload and clip us by 20 games. Kiss those thoughts goodbye. I'll just have to fall back on Super Bowl jokes and accent mocking.



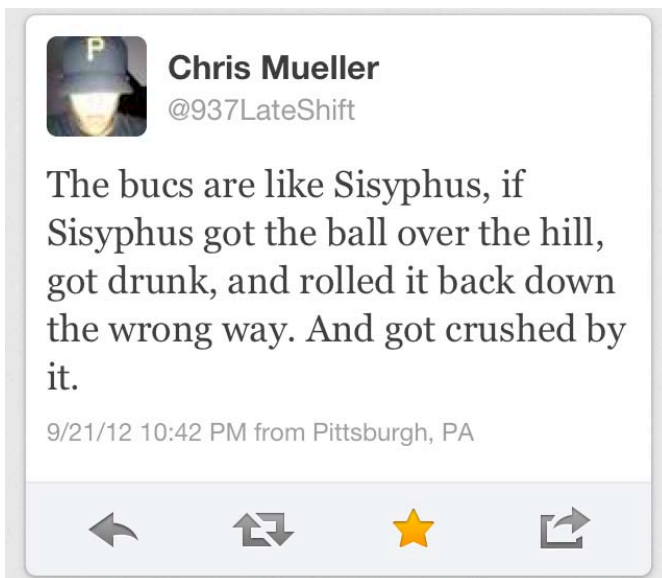
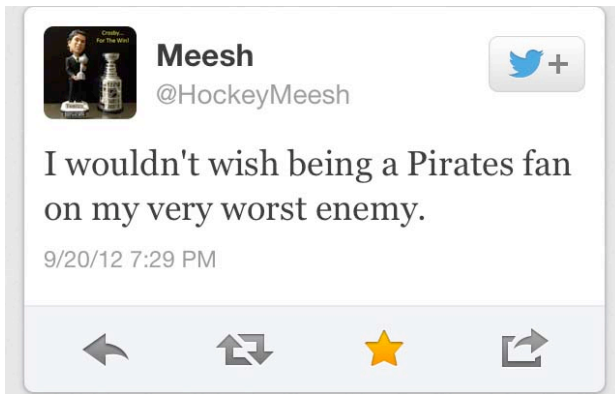
Smallest and most depressing progress ever! All right!



When a team is perceived to be overachieving, its manager inevitably gets thrown into the “Manager of the Year” debate.¹⁴ Hurdle clearly fit that mold for the first four months. Since the collapse began, though, his extremely questionable in-game management has drawn criticism from all corners. You can’t do things like bring Daniel McCutchen into an extra-inning tie game on the road (leaving Joel Hanrahan in the bullpen, to boot) and expect to come out with (a) a win, and (b) your strategic reputation intact. There’s also the idea that he’s now presided over two consecutive cave ins, and that maybe he can’t keep a team focused for an entire season.¹⁵ You know, push them to “finish.” I personally think the latter idea is BS, but I can’t defend many of tactical moves he makes.

¹⁴ Which is a stupid award, because you’re only going to win it if you manage a team of good players that makes or gets close to making the playoffs, and most managers employ equally bad strategy throughout the year. There should be one “MOY” award for all of MLB, and it should go to Joe Maddon every single year.

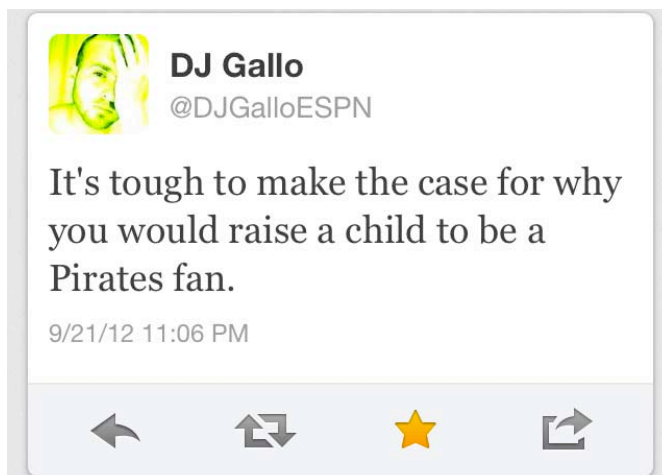
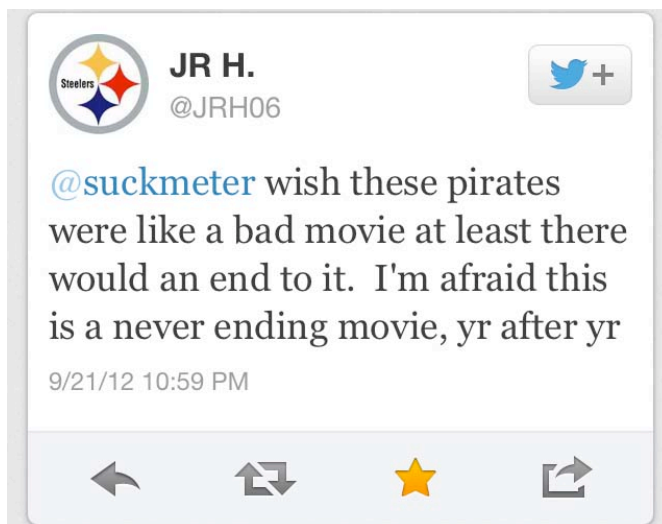
¹⁵ Right, because all his 2007 Colorado Rockies team did was win 14 of their final 15 games, take the one-game playoff from the Padres to seize the wild card, and then sweep the first two rounds of the postseason.



The Sisyphus analogy, embellished. Also a sly anti-alcohol abuse PSA.



The “crap, there’s not even anything to look forward to next year, either” moment.

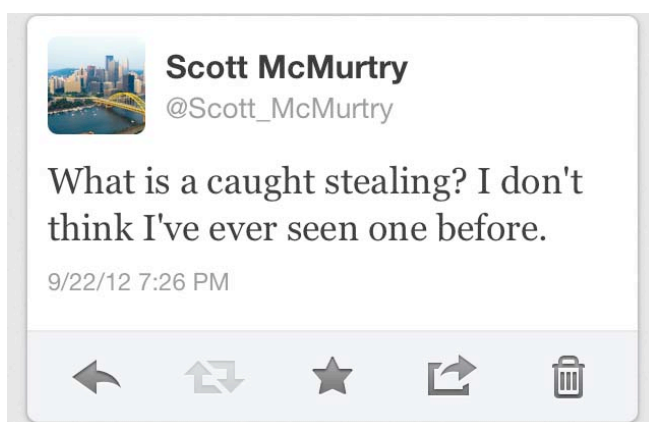


I know just a few things about how I will raise my children: they will bat left-handed, they will learn a second language, and they will not major in history, for God's sake. Oh, and they'll be nice people, I suppose. Being a Pirates fan—definitely optional. Possibly even discouraged.

We stand at 74-76 after getting taken to the woodshed by the Astros last night. 7-1. It was as bad as it sounds. Outside of a Garrett Jones homer, we couldn't do anything against Houston's seven pitchers. (Except strike out 12 times and walk twice.) Jeff Locke gave up three runs in five before giving way to J-Mac, who in his first appearance since being demoted to relief work failed to record a single out. He faced four hitters: Justin Maxwell (home run), Jed Lowrie (hit by pitch), Brett Wallace (triple), and Brian Bogusevic (walk). His second half could not get any worse. The same could be said for the team as a whole.

Marte leads off—we're in Houston tonight, if it matters to you—with a single to left. Walker lays down a perfectly placed bunt right on the third base line and reaches for another single. Looks like we're poised for a big first, with Cutch coming up. He grounds into a 5-4-3 double play, of course, because everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Jones goes down swinging at a 3-2 slider from Dallas Keuchel.¹⁶ A good start wasted. Imagine that.

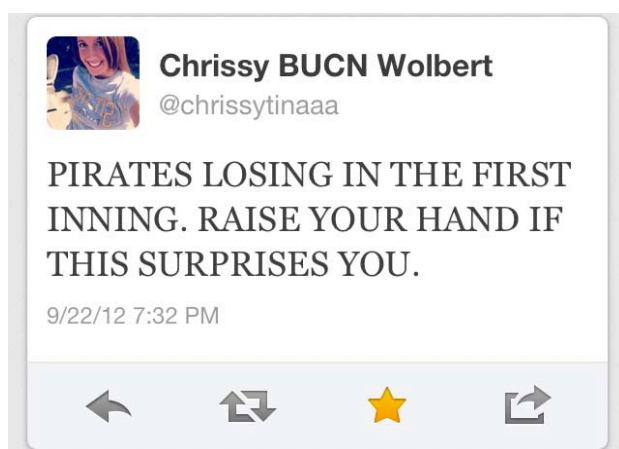
Jose Altuve swings at Kevin Correia's first pitch and produces a dinker to third that goes for an infield single. Steal attempt coming in 3...2...1...WHOA, THERE?



¹⁶ How did the Rangers pass up the opportunity to draft a guy named Dallas? The fact that he pitches for a Texas team at all is cool, but ahhh, so close!

The Fort gunned down Altuve! Although much of the credit should go to Barmes, because getting a tag on Altuve is like poking a fly with a toothpick. Maybe we won't set that record for lowest percentage of opposing base stealers thrown out after all. It's about all that's left to play for at this point.

One pitch later, Scott Moore blasts a double to left. Brett Wallace follows. Correia throws a 1-1 slider/cutter/changeup/who-knows-they're-all-the-same-really in the dirt and Moore scampers to third without a throw. The caught stealing: ancient history. Wallace takes another ball before smacking a grounder up the middle for a base hit.

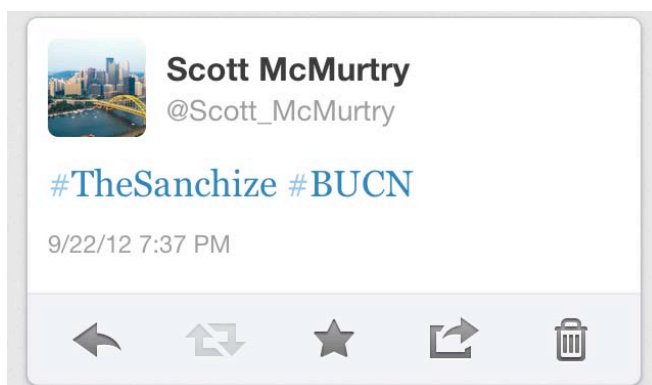


Let's alternate between starting Hanrahan and Grilli every other day just so we're not always behind after one. I've seen crazier strategies. Like trying to bunt Rod Barajas to third with nobody out.

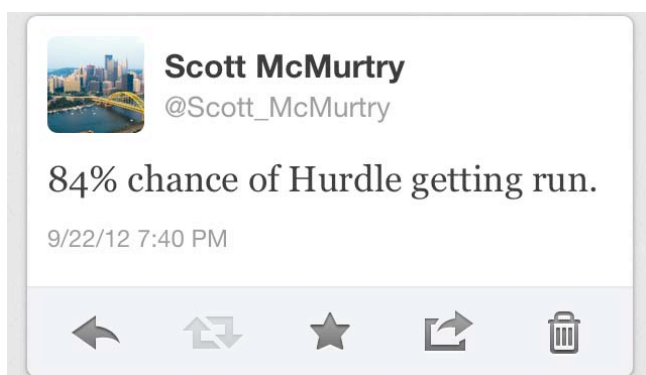
Correia rebounds by striking out (gasp) Justin Maxwell and Fernando Martinez. He's reached his strikeout quota for the night already, so anything else is just gravy. Before the Pirates hit in the third, the broadcast's "This Date in Pirates History" spot informs us that exactly 21 years ago, the Bucs clinched the NL East for the second straight season. I can't think of anything I'd rather not hear than the words "Pirates" and "playoffs" in the same sentence. Stirring clip.

As fast as humanly possible, I turn my attention to Keuchel, the Astros' starter. He looks a lot like Jon Lester, delivery-wise, just shorter and with less impressive stuff. I've seen both of

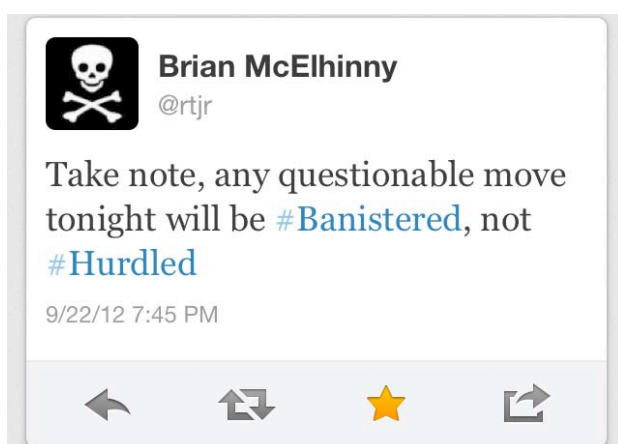
his previous two starts against the Pirates, and we lit him up on both occasions. Most teams, even the worn down Bucs, should be able to smash a guy with an 89 MPH fastball who walks more hitters than he strikes out. With his underwhelming repertoire, Keuchel has to be nearly perfect to get through a night unscathed. He throws Gaby Sanchez an extremely imperfect 0-1 curveball, and Sanchez swats a good 60 or 70 feet over the left field wall to tie the ballgame.



This was no Crawford Boxes cheap shot—Sanchez pummeled that one. Pedro hits a ball pretty well to deep center, but it doesn't quite carry far enough in Minute Maid Park's cavernous outfield and Maxwell is able to pull it in for out number one. The Fort rolls one to the right of Wallace. Keuchel dashes over to cover first, and Wallace's throw is slightly behind him. He's forced to do a 360° and attempts to slap a tag on McKenry since he was pulled away from the bag. First base umpire Tim Timmons makes a safe call, but DeFrancesco bolts out of the Astros' dugout and quickly persuades Timmons to consult with the rest of the umpiring crew. You don't have to be a palm reader to see where this is going. After a brief discussion, the call gets reversed. Hurdle charges the umpires in disgust. The embattled manager, whose team is in the midst of a historic late-season swoon, has no patience for a reversal on a judgment call.



It only takes about 20 seconds of discussion before Timmons ejects Hurdle. It was inevitable. “There has got to be so much pent-up frustration and anger in Clint Hurdle,” Greg Brown states matter-of-factly. He’s presiding over a second collapse in as many seasons, and many are beginning to question his fitness to remain the Pirates’ manager. The replay indicates that McKenry was *possibly* out, but that doesn’t make a bit of difference. Clint Hurdle didn’t get himself ejected from this game because of one call. There was month and a half of dissatisfaction behind those venomous words and gesticulations.



Check. The camera pans to the new acting manager to indicate he’s now the one charged with captaining the sinking ship. Barmes grounds out weakly to end the inning. Correia continues the out-of-the-blue strikeout sorcery in the second, fanning Lowrie for his third straight K. He’s struck out three or fewer in 17 of his 26 starts this season, and he just struck out that many

consecutively. Crazy. He allows a cheap single to Dominguez before coming back with another strikeout of Jason Castro. What is this madness?



He concludes the inning by scoring a soft groundout from Keuchel. 1-1 after two frames.

ROOT returns from commercial by showing some footage of Burnett working with J-Mac in the outfield before tonight's game. They play catch and go through some mechanical drills, with A.J. playing the role of Jedi Master to the struggling young Padawan, McDonald. ROOT asks Burnett about the impromptu side session, and he reiterates his belief that "[J-Mac]'s got way too good of stuff to keep going how he's going." It's ironic, because the same tag—being a guy whose stuff never matched his results—has dogged Burnett throughout his career. The piece is yet another reminder of why everyone in Pittsburgh has grown to adore A.J. Burnett. Count J-Mac among the Burnett-lovers—he was working out in the #34-themed t-shirt Pirates pitchers often sport during batting practice.

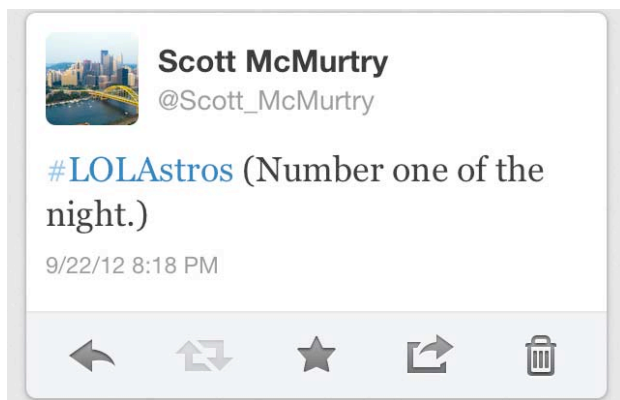
Not much action in the third on either side, save for another Correia strikeout. Also, the broadcast booth makes note of color man John Wehner's .800 career average in "the former Enron Field." Two things:

- 1) I'd be willing to bet sizable amounts of money that Wehner's ".800 average" came on a grand total of five at-bats in this ballpark.

- 2) How peeved do you think the Astros' owners get when people refer to Minute Maid as "the former Enron Field." Hey, remember when you guys were associated with the most corrupt corporation in American history? Good times.

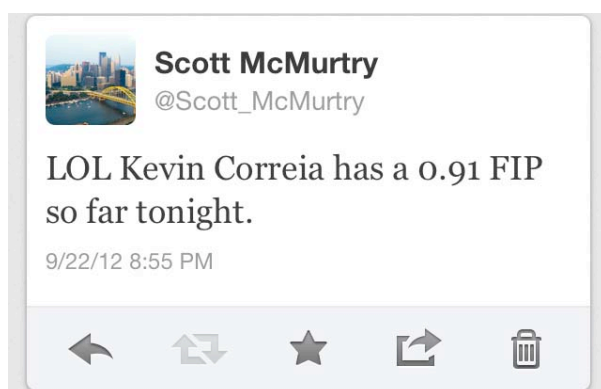
One of the few Pirates-related things that matters to anyone anymore is whether or not Cutch gets the batting title. Personally, I don't care, because batting average really doesn't matter that much, but it'd be a nice exploit to have on the résumé. He's got a three-point (.338-.335) edge on Buster Posey going into his fourth inning AB. A flyout to shallow left nudges him ever so slightly down towards Posey. If the second half pattern holds—McCutchen has hit .255 in the last 39 games, while Posey's batted .350 over the same stretch—the batting crown will slip away. The playoffs, .500, a better record than the Phillies, and a Cutch MVP have all fallen out of reach. McCutchen winning the batting title is the last tangible accomplishment that can be managed this season. Chances are looking shaky at best.

Jones works an eight-pitch walk, a rare occurrence for him this year. Sanchez rolls over Keuchel's 1-1 pitch and Lowrie flips to Altuve to get Jones at second for out number two. Pedro proceeds to "single" past Altuve on a ball that was incredibly not ruled an error.



Pirates-Astros in September—baseball has seen better matchups. Un-FORT-unately, McKenry can't make Houston pay for the mistake and hits into the second 6-4 fielder's choice of the inning.

Correia continues his business-like dominance of the Astros, picking up his sixth strikeout of the night in a nine pitch, 1-2-3 fourth. His mound opponent matches him with a clean top of the fifth. Just what I expected to see tonight: a who-will-blink-first duel between Kevin Correia and Dallas Keuchel. Correia allows a single and a walk, but escapes thanks to—what else—a big strikeout of Moore on a 3-2 pitch. Seven strikeouts and one walk for KC.



Sabermetric humor, coming soon to a basement near you. Despite the high leverage conclusion to the bottom of the inning, the most notable aspect of the fifth was the dialogue in the booth. The Brown and Wehner Fifth Inning Show, in chronological order:

(a) They raised the idea of “bulldozing” Minute-Maid’s bizarre centerfield hill, a measure I could support.¹⁷

(b) A “How about those Baltimore Orioles!” aside, which, yeah, great. A team with a long run of futility improbably in playoff contention, isn’t that something?

(c) A foray into the AL MVP race, which was mercifully cut short by a Marte groundout because THERE SHOULD BE NO DEBATE ONCESOEVER.

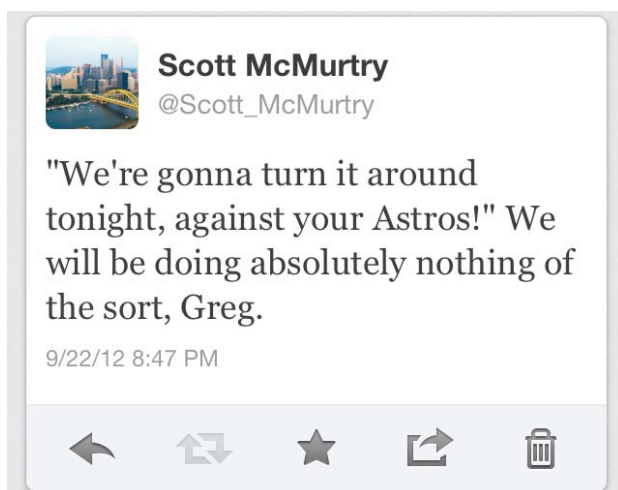
¹⁷ It’s only a matter of time before someone sprints up that hill and blows out a knee/fractures a clavicle/sustains a concussion from colliding headfirst with the flagpole that is in play and we all say, “Why the hell is there a hill in centerfield at a major league stadium? This is ridiculous!”



I don't care if Miguel Cabrera ends up winning the Octuple Crown. Mike Trout is the best baseball player in the world and it's not close.

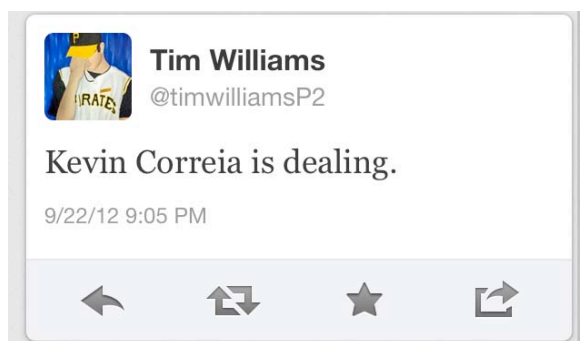
(Post-writing update: Cabrera won in what was essentially an electoral landslide. We still have much work to do.)

(d) Finally, they were joined by Astros broadcaster Milo Hamilton. At first, I had no idea what was going on, but Brown quickly explained that Hamilton was the voice of the Pirates for the 1979 championship season, and that he was retiring at the end of this year. Hamilton said goodbye to the Pittsburgh audience and kindly offered his sympathies over the Pirates' collapse, revealing that he'd been pulling for them to make the playoffs this year. It was a cool moment and Hamilton seemed like a nice old man. Brown offered a cheerful reply to Hamilton's Pirate eulogy, but...



...it's just not gonna happen. Kevin Correia can only pretend to be Curt Schilling for so long and the bats are colder than Tanzania is hot. We'll find a way to lose, just wait.

The announcing stands out because the game is so stale. Twitter is significantly less active than usual. There's college football on at the same time. Before the collapse, people might've sacrificed watching Florida State-Clemson or Kansas State-Oklahoma to watch the Pirates play on a Saturday night. Not anymore. When the camera follows Neil Walker's 1-2 foul ball, it reveals Rhode Island-sized patches of empty seats in Houston. It's a sad sight, really: two miserable teams playing a game that no one cares about. Walker ends up striking out, McCutchen flies to deep left center, and Jones bookends the inning with another K. Keuchel's laid down seven Bucs in a row. Correia, locked in this bizarre game of "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better," strikes out two more Astros in the bottom of the sixth, bringing his total to nine.



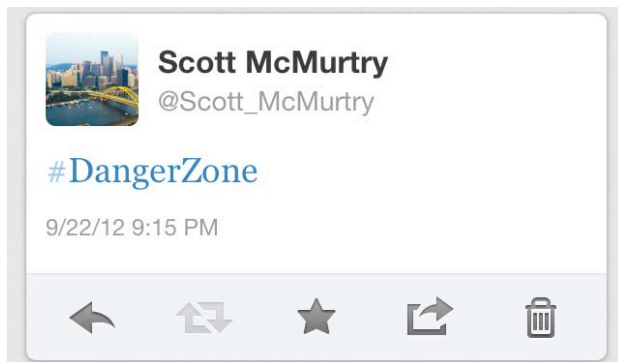
Jeff Kellogg's large strike zone and the skill level of the opposing hitters are undoubtedly aiding Correia's efforts, but this could very well be the best he's ever thrown the ball as a Pirate. Still, Ray Searage is on the bullpen phone, prepared for a traditional mid-to-late innings Correia meltdown. Even when things seem to be going perfectly, you always have to brace yourself for the worst. The Pirates know this better than most.

Another clean inning in the seventh makes ten consecutive outs for Keuchel.



Holy crap.

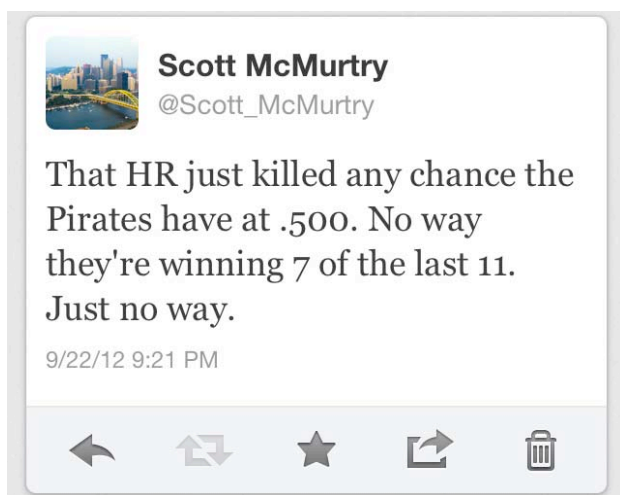
Following “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” Jed Lowrie takes an aggressive cut at Correia’s first pitch and produces a solid single to right center. This might be the beginning of the end. Of the game, the series, and the season. Barmes boots a sure-fire double play ball, moving us into Kenny Loggins territory.



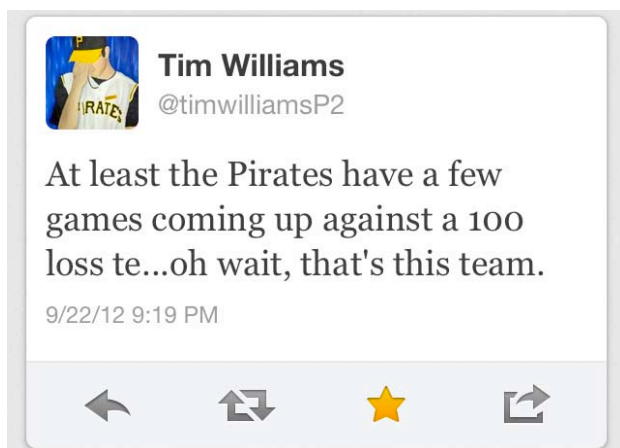
Jason Castro, the eighth hitter, steps to the plate. DeFrancesco orders his light-hitting catcher to bunt, like any traditionalist manager would in a tie game with men on first and second and no outs. It’s really not a bad play, given the circumstances—late innings, poor hitter, value of one run greater than normal, etc.. Castro squares around on each of the first three pitches. The first he watches low for a ball. He’s jammed by the second pitch and can only push it foul. Correia’s third offering is low again and Castro leaves it. With his hitter ahead in the count, DeFrancesco takes the bunt off. Correia floats an 85 MPH changeup over the middle of the plate

and Castro pummels it. The ball soars high and deep into right field. Jones gives chase, leaping at the wall in a vain attempt to keep it in the park. He can't contain it, and loses his glove in the process. Three-run homer, Castro. Greg Brown responds with perhaps his most appropriate call ever.

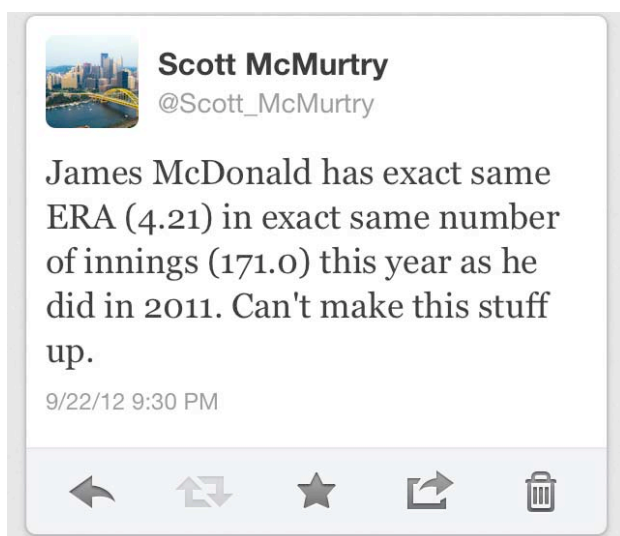
"It's gone....that's it."



A three-run shot off the bat of an eighth hitting Astros catcher following three bunt attempts and a squandered double play opportunity *and* on which the Pirates outfielder loses his glove over the wall (hold on, let me catch my breath) is the perfect nail in the coffin. If the Pirates had won tonight—and there is no way on Mike Trout's green earth they will come back to do so—they would have been 75-76, with another game against the Astros. There was some slight hope that they could've won tomorrow and then pried three of six from two teams (the Reds and Braves) who had nothing to do except line up their respective postseason pitching schedules. Forget about that.



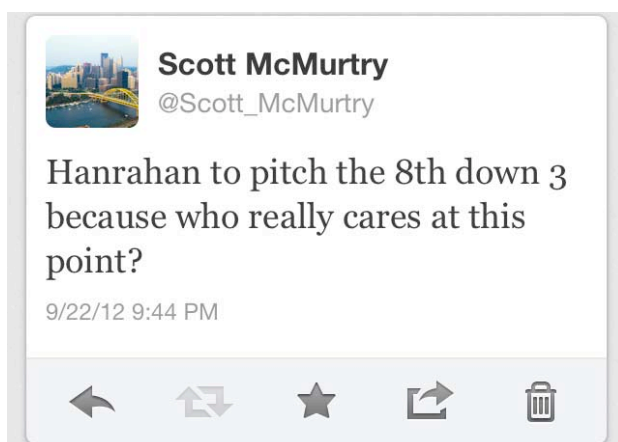
Correia's out, his sparkling night tarnished. Tony Watson relieves him and navigates around a walk and a botched pickoff attempt to escape the inning without any more runs scoring. I've ceased paying attention to the game. My focus is now on acquiring a full understanding of the collapse. Time to look up some telling stats!



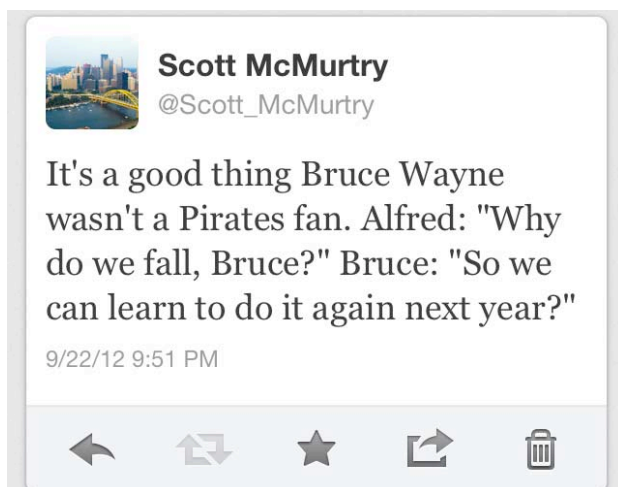
Translation: "We have gotten absolutely, precisely, exactly nowhere." Astonishing.

(I got one reply on that tweet, and it said, "At least he's consistent." I laughed.)

Barnes reaches on a strikeout because, well, why not? Presley hits into a double play. Chances of winning drop from a remote 10% to a desolate 3%. After a Marte groundout, the Pirates' closer takes the mound. Yes, we are still losing 4-1.



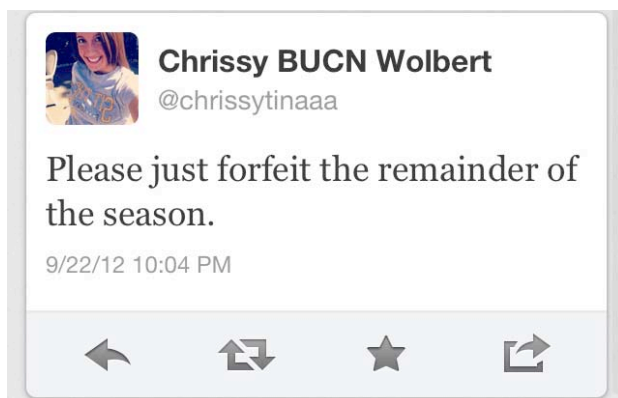
Not me! Too busy accepting the dagger to the heart of ~~four months~~ twenty years' worth of hopes and dreams. With two outs, Tyler Greene singles and steals second. McKenry's weak throw bounces in front of the bag, scoots by both Barmes and Walker, and Greene advances to third. Three Pittsburgh errors in the game. It's become Episode CLI: Return of the Sarcasm.



The Bucs go quickly in the ninth. Walker lines out hard to center, reemphasizing that nothing can go right. McCutchen bounces to short, sealing an 0-for-4 and sinking his average to .336. Jones gets pretty good wood on a 1-2 pitch but his flyball doesn't have the distance. Justin Maxwell settles under it for the final out.



I've become well versed in the art of gallows humor in recent weeks.



A managerial ejection. No hits after the fourth inning. Three errors. Two GIDPs. Five total baserunners. And, as Wehner points out in the postgame segment, "it's not like you [were] facing Sandy Koufax." The EKG has flatlined. The ball is almost back at Sisyphus' feet. The season, effectively, is over.



That's about the only solace now.

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(<http://www.baseballprospectus.com/sortable/index.php?cid=975409>)

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Honors and Awards

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- Phi Kappa Phi, 2012 Inductee
- National Society of Collegiate Scholars, 2011 Inductee

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- Morale Committee Member, Penn State Dance Marathon (2011-2013)
- Penn State ComRadio State College Spikes Broadcasting Program (2013)
- Upper St. Clair American Legion Baseball Assistant Coach (2010-2012)

Professional Experience

- FedEx Ground Human Resources Intern, Summer 2011

Publications and Papers

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