



All of the reports coming out of Spring Training tell a tale of an excited team, fired up by an offseason that included the acquisitions of Nick Swisher, Mark Reynolds, Michael Bourn, and Terry Francona. Playing the roles of Debbie Downer, Wet Blanket, Facepalm, Whiskey-Tango-Foxtrot, and Swift Kick in the Genitals are the starting pitchers. The assumption is that the starting rotation will be what prevents the Indians from having the ability to contend for a playoff spot. On paper, it's certainly not an impressive list, especially with two of the five spots currently unaccounted for, and the three spots that are accounted for are leaving us with the same sense of security that a small child left alone in a room with a rabid Rottweiler would have.

But, is it really that bad? Many in the baseball community believe that the Indians rotation is something that would come out of the backside of the aforementioned Rottweiler. That group includes media members, stat geeks, and, well, pretty much everybody who has an opinion on baseball. The biggest issue with the starting rotation is the top of it. As #1 and #2 starters, Justin Masterson and Ubaldo Jimenez fall under the category of mediocre-to-awful. As a #3 starter, Masterson would be viewed as an asset, and probably slightly above average. Jimenez's reputation in the baseball community may be beyond repair at this point.

There's no way around the fact that the Indians do not stack up with the other American League teams at the top of their rotation. They don't necessarily need a Justin Verlander or Felix Hernandez, but, they need somebody to rely on, who can at least play the role of an ace periodically. That pitcher, currently, does not exist.

With the offseason upgrades to the lineup, the Indians' rotation will have to be good (for their standards), but not great, for the team to have a chance at sneaking into the playoffs, especially

with the benefit of the second wild card. Everybody points to the 2012 season, where the rotation was **historically** bad, as what to expect again in 2013. Personally, I don't see that as the case.

This group will be better in 2013. Will it improve enough to make September interesting? That's a question that they'll have to answer. They should be operating with a greater margin for error after pitching for the second-worst offense in terms of run scoring in the American League last season. The Indians entered the fifth inning trailing on the scoreboard in 86 of their 162 games. They were 13-73 in those games. They were 44-10 when they had a lead entering the fifth inning. When the Indians got a good start, they won more often than not. The problem was that they didn't get many good starts.

It's not easy to pitch knowing that if you give up four runs, your team will lose. The Indians were 19-83 last season when they allowed four or more runs. Adding extra pressure by never pitching with a lead or knowing that one mistake will cost your team the game is extremely difficult and a lot to ask of a starting staff. Add in that the Indians had the third-youngest pitching staff in baseball and, by the end of the season, the starters' ages were 27, 28, 24, 24, and 26. Add in that Indians pitchers had a terrible defense behind them, one that allowed 79 unearned runs and countless other runs by a lack of range or other miscues that weren't counted as errors.

I've painted a nice picture, haven't I? How could I possibly be optimistic about this group? I'll admit that it's not easy. I don't think I can put enough lipstick on this pig to make it pretty, but there's a chance that the Indians rotation *could* at least be around league average, which could give them a shot at October. There are some positive trends to focus on. The guys that won't pitch for the Indians this season didn't give them anything of value last season and the guys who will see an increased role should be an upgrade over those pitchers.

The overall numbers for the starters in 2012 were ugly: 48-76, 5.25 ERA, 1.51 WHIP, and a 4.73 FIP. What the difference between ERA and FIP, fielder independent pitching, tells us is that the Indians defense was bad and the pitchers suffered because of it. Well, it also tells us that the pitchers weren't very good in their own right, but that the fielders didn't help either. To reiterate what goes in to the calculation of FIP, it is a metric that creates an alternative to ERA using outcomes that the pitcher has exclusive control over – home runs, walks, hit by pitches, and strikeouts. A 4.73 FIP is not good, nor is a 5.25 ERA.

Now, let's re-calculate those numbers without Josh Tomlin, Derek Lowe, Jeanmar Gomez, David Huff, Roberto Hernandez, and Chris Seddon, six guys who will not make any starts for the Indians this summer. Huff is the only one with an outside shot, but I'd put it at less than five percent that he makes a start. Lowe, Gomez, Hernandez, and Seddon are on other teams and Tomlin is out for the season rehabbing from Tommy John surgery.



That leaves Justin Masterson, Ubaldo Jimenez, Zach McAllister, and Corey Kluber: 28-45, 4.94 ERA, 1.49 WHIP, 4.47 FIP. Not good, but better. If you'll recall my latest article, Thursday's look at the [Indians possibly being 2013's Baltimore or Oakland](#), a 4.47 FIP would have ranked higher than Baltimore's 4.50 FIP. It's important to understand what these numbers mean and what they could mean for the Indians.

In terms of sample size, Masterson and Jimenez accounted for over 40 percent of the starts overall and nearly 66 percent of the starts in the second set of numbers. Masterson certainly had a tough year, with a spike in walks and a major spike in home runs allowed. Jimenez built off of his 2011 performance and sucked again in 2012.

My optimism for the rotation comes from Zach McAllister and Corey Kluber. I won't know for sure if I'm right or not until much later in Spring Training, but my gut instinct is that both McAllister and Kluber make the Opening Day rotation. The fourth and fifth spots are an open competition between McAllister, Kluber, Trevor Bauer, Carlos Carrasco, Scott Kazmir, and Daisuke Matsuzaka. I'm assuming that Bauer heads to Columbus to work on his command problems and ensure the Indians another year of contractual control by bringing him up sometime in late June. Carrasco is supposedly pitching without limitation, 18 months removed from Tommy John surgery, but he will have some rust and the Indians will probably want to ease him back into pitching every five days in Columbus's low-stress environment. Kazmir and Matsuzaka have to prove something to me and the Indians, with both having rebuilt arms and

no Major League success for quite some time.

There are a lot of reasons to like McAllister and Kluber. McAllister's 7.9 K/9 was the highest of any Indians rookie since CC Sabathia in 2001. Kluber, in a smaller sample size, posted a 7.71 K/9. League average tends to be around 7.1 K/9. Along with missing bats, McAllister and Kluber both issued a below average number of walks. McAllister issued 2.73 walks per nine innings and Kluber checked in at 2.57. The league average for BB/9 tends to be around 3.3 walks per nine innings. From a command standpoint, both of these guys showed a good knowledge of the strike zone last season, something that's usually difficult for young pitchers. McAllister threw 60.8 percent of his first pitches for strikes and Kluber lead the team in swinging strike percentage at 10.7. McAllister was second at 8.3 percent

The biggest problem for both guys was the long ball. McAllister allowed 19 in just over 125 innings and Kluber allowed 9 in 63 innings.

There are a lot of positive trends to be excited about and both guys were getting their first extended time in the Majors. McAllister was really good early and trailed off late in the year, posting ERAs above 5.00 in both August and September/October, along with a spike in walks. It's likely that McAllister just got tired, throwing a career high of 188.2 innings between Columbus and Cleveland. All in all, it was a hell of a season for the 24-year-old, who made big strides and got some important experience.

To me, McAllister and Kluber are as important to this rotation as getting Masterson and Jimenez right. Again, I don't know if Kluber will make the rotation. McAllister has "an inside track" on a rotation spot according to MLB.com Indians beat writer Jordan Bastian. If Kluber doesn't make the rotation, it's because somebody out-performed him in Spring Training, which can't be a bad thing, and he would be a good depth option in case of an injury or ineffectiveness.

