



For all of the great things that General Manager Chris Antonetti did this offseason, the key to the 2013 season may be a move that was made in 2010. Originally labeled as “PTBNL”, player to be named later, Zach McAllister was acquired on August 20, 2010 to complete a trade deadline deal that sent Austin Kearns to the New York Yankees. It wasn’t a blockbuster trade, nor did it make waves. Frankly, at the time, it barely sent a ripple through the water.

Kearns went on to bat .235 for the Bronx Bombers in 36 games and came back to the Indians to start the 2011 season. To show for the Kearns deal, the Indians had a lottery ticket in a 22-year-old kid who was in the midst of the worst minor league season of his career for Triple-A Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. McAllister was rated the fifth-best prospect in the Yankees organization entering the 2010 season, though he certainly wasn’t showing it, with a 5.09 ERA and 11.2 hits allowed per nine innings. He was, however, labeled the Yankees prospect with the best control.

McAllister fared no better in three starts with the Columbus Clippers in 2010, allowing 13 runs and 27 baserunners in 17 innings. When the dust settled and McAllister was able to acclimate himself to his new organization, he thrived in Columbus. By the way, Huntington Park, the home of the Columbus Clippers, was [recently named the best park for hitters](#) in the International League by a pretty wide margin. In 2011, McAllister went 12-3 with a 3.32 ERA and a 4.13 strikeout-to-walk rate. McAllister started the 2012 season in Columbus, but didn’t stay there long. An injury to Josh Tomlin on May 7 brought McAllister back to the big leagues, where he would make four starts. He went back to Columbus for a month and then came back up for good on June 28.

For the majority of the season, McAllister was the Tribe’s best starter. Over his first 10 starts, McAllister was 4-2 with a 3.18 ERA. Through 15 starts, McAllister was 5-4 with a 3.50 ERA, easily the best on the ballclub. He ended the season 6-8 with a 4.24 ERA.

Dig a little deeper and there are a lot of positives and negatives about McAllister's first full season in the bigs. His 7.9 strikeouts per nine innings rate was the best of any Indians rookie starting pitcher since some guy named CC Sabathia in 2001. Like he had all throughout his minor league career, McAllister missed bats and limited walks, posting a 2.93 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

McAllister appeared to tire late in the season, posting a rate of 2.03 home runs per nine innings in September and his walk rate increased in both August and September. The 188 innings McAllister worked were a career high. Include the fact that the majority of them were high-stress Major League innings for the first time and his fatigue is understandable.

One of the more incredible stats from McAllister's 2012 campaign is that he allowed 19(!!) unearned runs in 122 innings of work. Granted, seven of them came in one start against the Minnesota Twins, when the Indians committed a two-out error and several other fielding miscues in the second inning of McAllister's August 6 start. McAllister is not exempt from blame for the unearned runs, because a pitcher has to pick up his defense, but the defense put McAllister in some very bad spots all year long.

All things considered, Zach McAllister is a breakout candidate in 2013. Bear with me here as a lot of numbers are coming your way. We've already established how the defense really hurt McAllister last season. McAllister is about as neutral as it gets in terms of GB/FB ratio. Last season, 40.5 percent of balls in play were ground balls and 40.3 percent were fly balls. Only seven percent of them were infield pop ups, which is a very low number, with league average around 10 percent, though the number of infield pop ups induced by his fastball was above 16 percent. The vastly-improved outfield defense will help McAllister immensely, perhaps more than any other pitcher in the Opening Day rotation.

There were 128 starters that threw at least 100 innings last season. Zach McAllister had the 25th-best line drive rate at 19.2 percent. A low line drive rate coupled with more fly balls turned into outs will limit the number of extra base hits McAllister will allow. Nearly 30 percent of the non-home run hits that McAllister allowed were doubles. An outfield of Michael Brantley, Michael Bourn, and Drew Stubbs is going to catch some of those doubles and turn others into singles by cutting them off in the gap or down the line.

In terms of situational pitching, there were two glaring weaknesses for McAllister that he should be able to improve on with experience. With runners in scoring position, opposing batters had a

slash line of .284/.333/.457/.790. McAllister had a lot of difficulty ending innings, as opposing batters had an .809 on-base plus slugging against him with two outs. With maturity and experience, those are two areas that McAllister should show progress in.

How about this for a severe split? McAllister threw 60.8 percent first-pitch strikes last season. When he started with a 0-1 count, McAllister had a 10.64 K/9 and a 1.17 BB/9. Hitters posted a .237/.264/.365/.628 slash line. When he started with a 1-0 count, McAllister had a 5.52 K/9 and a 5.72 BB/9. Hitters posted a .276/.371/.508/.879 slash line. Again, another thing that should improve with experience.

When young pitchers fall behind early in the count, they either try too good of a pitch to get back in the at bat and it gets hit hard or they try to make the perfect pitch and fall further behind in the count. It's part of the process of learning on the job, something McAllister experienced last season and should be better prepared for this season.

It's clear that McAllister has the ability to miss bats and put hitters away. With two strikes on a batter, McAllister had a 6.1 K/BB ratio and batters hit just .202. The issue in that situation was that 10 of the 54 two-strike hits McAllister allowed left the ballpark.

This is a guy that clearly has talent and just needs to continue learning how to pitch. That comes with experience. His assortment of breaking pitches needs more refinement. He'll have to develop some more maturity on the mound to handle defensive lapses and bounce back from allowing home runs, but he has a lot of promise.

McAllister will enter the season as the fourth starter, a spot in the rotation where most pitchers are at or below league average. Assuming McAllister's strikeout and walk rates remain constant, shaving a few home runs off of his season total coupled with a greatly improved outfield defense could turn McAllister into an above average starter.

It remains to be seen if McAllister is closer to the pitcher who had a 3.50 ERA through his first 15 starts or the guy who gave up 12 home runs in his final 12 starts and gave up 46 runs.

Ultimately, the Indians 2013 season rests on the starting pitching. Justin Masterson is what he is and could improve this season. Ubaldo Jimenez is an enigma. Brett Myers is making a league change as a starting pitcher and will probably have his struggles. Scott Kazmir is still an unknown. The Indians rotation needs consistency. Zach McAllister could be the guy that provides it. He has the tools for it and just needs to continue to learn how to be a Major League pitcher.