



Get ready for a roller coaster ride summer, Tribe fans. We saw a lot of good, some bad, and some ugly from the Indians in their opening series of 2013. It's always good to win a series on the road and the Indians were playing with "house money" on Thursday, having locked up the series victory. They played like it, too. But, they head to Tampa/St. Pete at 2-1 and tied atop the AL Central Division with the Chicago White Sox and the Minnesota Twins.

I thought this opening series was huge for the Indians. The first month of the season is pretty tough. The Indians play four of the five AL East teams, the White Sox six times, and 16 of 27 games are on the road. Winning a series against a team that got a lot of preseason buzz is a nice confidence builder. To top it off, for two guys who need confidence, Justin Masterson and Ubaldo Jimenez, it was an especially productive series. Masterson outpitched R.A Dickey and Jimenez went pitch-for-pitch with Brandon Morrow, who had some of the nastiest stuff I have ever seen. And I don't just mean from him. I mean ever. The top two starters in the Indians rotation combined to pitch 12 innings allowing two earned runs, six hits, six walks, and struck out 11.

A few people were skeptical of Michael Brantley being slotted fifth in the Tribe's lineup. He silenced those critics quickly, reaching base in eight of his 13 plate appearances. Putting a contact hitter in the middle of guys with power could turn out to be a brilliant move by Terry Francona. Brantley scored three runs and drove in one.

With the exception of Cody Allen, the Indians bullpen was good in the series. Chris Perez made a belt high mistake to Jose Bautista for a blown save, but he never gave in and got the Indians to extra innings. The bullpen pitched 11 innings in the series, allowed three earned runs, struck out nine, and walked six. Arguably, the two most important pitchers in the bullpen, Joe Smith and Vinnie Pestano, pitched four clean innings with three holds and a save.

Two defensive gems defined the first game for the Indians. Asdrubal Cabrera's unbelievable backhand pick that started the third inning double play with the bases loaded might be the best play of the season when it's all said and done. The degree of difficulty on that play was off the charts. After that double play, Masterson set down 10 in a row, including three strikeouts, after allowing eight batters to reach over the first 2.1 innings of the game.

The second was Drew Stubbs's catch leading off the bottom of the eighth. Jose Reyes lofted a fly ball to right field that Stubbs made a sliding catch just inside the foul line on. Stubbs's momentum carried him into the outfield wall on the slide, but it was a huge first out in a 4-1 game with the heart of the Jays' order coming. It's a ball that Shin-Soo Choo never gets to and is an easy stand-up double for Reyes.

Earlier in that game, Stubbs also caught off Emilio Bonifacio's double in the alley that forced Colby Rasmus to stop at third. Masterson retired Reyes for the final out, leaving runners at second and third. Stubbs was only 3-for-14 at the plate, but he has already saved the Indians some runs defensively.

Ubaldo Jimenez was a big question mark entering the season and he still is. He may have made some people feel better about him with his start on Wednesday, but, those people shouldn't get too comfortable. For one thing, as Kyle Boddy of Driveline Baseball [explained for The Hardball Times](#), Jimenez is not likely to regain his velocity with these mechanics and is putting more strain on his elbow. Injured pitchers are not effective. This will be something to watch during the season.

That being said, I have to give Jimenez credit for Wednesday's outing. Not only did he have no margin for error with the way Brandon Morrow was throwing the ball, he looked to be in control of the game. He threw 64 strikes out of his 103 pitches, got 11 swings and misses, and had more ground ball outs than fly ball outs. He looked like a pitcher instead a thrower, constantly changing speeds and changing the hitter's eye level.

I think it took a lot for Jimenez to understand his new shortcomings as a pitcher. At 96 with movement, he could just throw it and challenge hitters to hit it. Now, he has to pitch in a more calculated manner, using his deep arsenal of pitches to keep guys off balance. In Jimenez's 31 starts last season, he had 11 or more swings and misses just four times. It's a good sign and

hopefully he can continue to work through his issues and be effective.

The final bit of good for the Indians last week is something I have talked about in the past and really appreciate. On six separate occasions, the Indians forced a Blue Jays starter to throw 20 or more pitches in an inning. It would have been seven, but Mark Buehrle was pulled during the sixth inning on Thursday. There are a lot of benefits to blowing up a starter's pitch count. In total over the first three games, the Indians saw 3.71 pitches per plate appearance.

As for some of the bad, it's a rough start to the season for Asdrubal Cabrera, Jason Kipnis, and Lonnie Chisenhall. While each of them had bright spots, Cabrera's two-run home run and Chisenhall's two-run opposite field double, they struggled overall. Those three combined to go 6-for-41 with 12 strikeouts. Five of their six hits did go for extra bases, but Cabrera also got picked off and neither Kipnis nor Chisenhall drew a walk. All three did make good defensive plays at various points, but it's imperative that the Indians get those three going.

It looks like Cody Allen will be sent back to Columbus once the Indians start getting guys back off the disabled list. His spot in the bullpen hierarchy was clear on Wednesday when Francona used Bryan Shaw first out of the pen and Matt Albers was the first option in extra innings. Allen reaffirmed that choice with his poor outing on Thursday. It took Allen 31 pitches to get through eight batters. He walked two, threw a wild pitch, and had a fielding blunder covering first base that cost him an unearned run.

More than the fact that Allen missed a good throw by Mark Reynolds, he was late covering the base. To me, that signals a guy who let the game speed up too much on him and he didn't have the wherewithal to relax and settle things down. Allen has a power arm, good stuff, and tremendous potential. His meteoric rise through the Indians farm system last season was very impressive. But, he also joined the Indians as the ship was sinking and the wheelhouse was engulfed in flames. He was pitching in low leverage situations and on a team with little pressure. Sure, nerves could have played a factor in his first appearance of the season. But, Francona has to have confidence in him or there's no point in him being on the ballclub to pitch once every six or seven days. He's better off pitching in high leverage spots in Columbus and continuing to develop.

The Indians played sloppy on Thursday. Like I said at the top, they were playing with house money. The goal in every road series is to win or split the series. The Indians accomplished that with Wednesday's extra inning win. They made a couple of poor defensive plays and those

were what ultimately did them in. Brett Myers was brutal, but the offense got the game back to 6-6 before the second JP Arencibia home run. Michael Bourn allowed Emilio Bonifacio to take an extra base and he scored on Allen's fielding error. A double clutch from Kipnis on a double play relay allowed Jose Reyes to score an insurance run. Cabrera muffed a routine ground ball in the seventh, which was followed by a double play, but those things still cannot happen.

The ugly was really ugly. Brett Myers might as well submit a job application to be a cook in Little Italy after serving up several delicious meatballs to Blue Jays hitters. Myers is an above average ground ball pitcher, at 47.6 percent for his career. League average is 44 percent. Everything was up in the zone on Thursday. He induced seven ground ball outs, but 10 outs were in the air and he allowed four home runs.

It was Myers's first start since September 28, 2011 and it looked like it. From the start, Myers looked out of sync. He just didn't pitch well. Even though he got battered around, and every mistake he made left the ballpark, he threw just 65 pitches through five innings. He was brought in to be a veteran innings-eater in the middle of the rotation. Had he gotten through the sixth inning, on a night when Joe Smith, Vinnie Pestano, and Chris Perez were essentially unavailable, that would have been huge for Francona. Unfortunately, he promptly gave up the Arencibia blast.

Fans seem to have unrealistic expectations of Myers. I said all along that league average numbers, an ERA around 4.25, would be a good season for Myers, especially if he threw over 180 innings. That gives the Indians a chance to win. The bare minimum definition of a "quality start", one of the most misleading stats in baseball, is six innings pitched and three or fewer earned runs allowed. Well, six innings pitched and three earned runs allowed is a 4.50 ERA.

If he continues to be that bad, then he is a huge problem. For now, it was just a bad start. I was happy to see that Myers was thoroughly upset and disgusted at his performance. He was talking to himself a lot on the mound and looked borderline inconsolable in the dugout. Regardless of your opinion of Myers the person, it's good to see a competitor who doesn't accept failure. That gives me faith that he'll be better next time out.

Overall, it was a good opening series for the Indians. They set the tone for the season, got two quality pitching performances, and found out that eight runs scored with shoddy defense and bad pitching won't win every ballgame. That's a lesson that had to be learned and now's a good time to learn it.

On to Tampa.