



Waiting for Friday night's first pitch, I got to thinking about Monday's Home Opener. Naturally, rain is in the forecast, because God forbid we have a 75 degree sunny day for the Opener. Cue the "At least it's not snow!" comments. That's what we've become in Cleveland. To me, rain is just a more irritating form of precipitation than snow. Sure, snow is cold and 60 and rain could be better than 33 and snow. Rain just seems more annoying to me. And it's not like we're going to need any more annoyances on Opening Day.

The ballpark should have a good energy with the new look Indians and a sellout crowd. Of course, a sizable percentage of those tickets have been scooped up by pain in the ass Yankees fans. I hate the Tigers, but at least I feel a small sense of kinship with their fans. Midwest town, always laughed at, and a perennial comrade in the top 10 "Worst Places to Live", "Saddest City in the US" type countdowns. Plus, I've been there a few times and have had no issues. Mostly because I avoided every street with the word "Mile" in it once the sun went down.

I'll admit that I've never been to New York. I have no desire to go there. I'm not fond of cabs, people, musicals, or big cities in general. Consequently, most of the assholes donning pinstripes at our ballpark on Monday probably have not been to New York City either. It's rare to find a Yankees fan with a good reason for being a Yankees fan. Some of them were born into it, possibly as second generation New Yorkers. Some of them are actually from NYC. Most of them are just front-running assholes who get off on being disliked by other people. Or they're from Buffalo, which was the home of the Indians' Triple-A team, the Bisons, from 1983-84, again in 1987, and then from 1995-2008. Note, the Bisons were NEVER the Yankees' Triple-A affiliate. I'm all for state pride, but I tend to cut it off when you're over 350 miles from the other side of the state.

Usually, I'm giddy with excitement about the Home Opener, regardless of the projections for the team. The second the opponent was announced, my excitement went up in flames. Don't get me wrong, it's always great to beat the Evil Empire at home, and with any luck, it'll be another [19-1](#)

Bronx Bombing. It's a watered down version of the American League's most expensive payroll, complete with Indians castoffs like Travis Hafner and Ben Francisco. Maybe the absence of Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez will keep some of the Yankee "faithful" at home.

As usual, Major League Baseball and their schedule makers screwed the Indians. The vastly improved Indians may draw reasonably well on their own this season, but when the schedule was announced and Shelley Duncan was hitting in the middle of the order and Russ Canzler was getting substantial playing time, it looked unfair. The April home schedule consisted of the only time the Yankees and Red Sox come to town. I don't like either fan base, but I'm fully aware of how they drive attendance. The Tigers, Reds, and Pirates are usually represented fairly well when they come to town, but the Yankees and Red Sox are always big draws. The Indians, who have had pathetic attendance figures pretty much every year since 2002, play the Yankees and Red Sox at home in April and during the week.

Bitching about the April schedule aside, the schedule makers may have done us a favor if we're in the hunt in September. Eight of the Tribe's final 10 games are against Houston and Minnesota, the two teams projected to be the worst in the American League. It's certainly pretentious to get that far ahead of myself with 148 games between now and then, but it's worth keeping in mind.

One of the most telling things about the opening series for the Indians was the level of enthusiasm. They have their home run celebration in the dugout. Nick Swisher looked like a little leaguer whose team had just won the championship when Michael Brantley scored the go-ahead run on Wednesday in the eighth. There are a lot of smiles from guys on the team. It's a refreshing change from last season when everybody looked tight and the team played like robots.

Can they keep playing like that for 162 games? That will go a long way in determining their final record this season. This is a talented team with holes. Keeping morale high for the lengthy grind of the MLB season and having a group of guys that want to go to the ballpark is very valuable. The will to win has to be strong, especially in the dog days of summer or at the end of a nine-game, three-city road trip. Even teams that have serious deficiencies can beat a better opponent if they are more focused at the plate, on the mound, and in the field. The Indians lost that focus in the field on Thursday and it cost them.

There are two big things that I took from Eric Wedge and Manny Acta that I still firmly believe. Wedge emphasized winning series. Assuming the season consisted of three-game series, winning two out of three would be 108 wins. Obviously there are two-game and four-game series and winning two out of three every time is damn near impossible, but series wins add up. It's what every team should always shoot for. Win series and avoid getting swept.

Acta used to emphasize the point that you're going to win 60, lose 60, and it's the other 42 that determine your season. It's true.

Not every win or loss is created equally. Look at Friday night's 4-0 loss to the Rays. The Indians had a runner in scoring position in the first, two in the third, and one in the fourth. None of them scored. Zach McAllister, who looked strong over the first three innings, allowed two runs in the fourth. Sam Fuld hit a six-hopper up the middle for a base hit and scored on Ben Zobrist's double into the right field corner. Evan Longoria hit a good pitch to center for a hit. Another run scored later in the inning on a ground out.

McAllister allowed two unearned runs later in the game on a Mike Aviles error, a single, and another double that happened to stay fair. The Indians had chances early in the game and didn't capitalize. The Rays didn't hit very many balls hard in the game, but they were well placed. In fact, the hardest hit ball may have been the one that Aviles booted. It looks like the Indians got dominated. It was just one of those nights.

Back to McAllister. A poster on the Indians message board here at [TheClevelandFan](#) mentioned that McAllister should be a reliever because of how badly he struggles the second and third time through the lineup. The career numbers (including Friday's start) certainly back up his observation:

First time through: .204/.260/.301

Second time through: .339/.369/.472

Third time through: .289/.343/.612

McAllister also struggles when his defense lets him down. With the two unearned runs he allowed on Friday, that gives him 25 unearned runs in 27 career starts (though seven came in one start). That's part of the maturation process. We've heard the cliché time and time again about how pitchers have to pick up their defense. It's evident that is a problem for McAllister. The statistics do say that McAllister struggles with runners on base and especially with runners in scoring position. That's part of the learning curve. That's part of learning how to pitch.

A lot of young pitchers have Achilles' heels and that one just happens to be McAllister's. He has swing-and-miss stuff, with 127 strikeouts in 149 career innings. But, he's also heavily reliant on his fastball. Of pitchers who threw a minimum of 100 innings last season, McAllister had the ninth-highest percentage of fastballs thrown at 70.3 percent. To my untrained eye, McAllister threw four-seamers, two-seamers, and cutters in his start on Friday. It was the slider that he couldn't spot, either throwing it in the dirt or leaving it over the middle of the plate. He had a good curveball and only mixed in one or two changeups.

It's easy to put each start under a microscope with the amount of data that we have available. The reason I do it with McAllister is because I think he has potential and I also think he's one of the keys to the season. After watching Brett Myers get beaten around the yard by the Jays, McAllister's importance went up a few notches.

McAllister's never going to be an ace. But, there's reason to believe he can be a quality #3, above average #4 starter. The stuff needs more refinement and he needs to learn what will work for him. Perhaps he needs to start pitching backwards, using the breaking stuff to set up the fastball. The fastball has been an out pitch for him and it will become even more effective if he can throw breaking balls for strikes. Hitters seek out mistakes and fastballs. McAllister throws too many of both right now, in large part because he's too predictable.

Speaking of pitchers, how about Ubaldo Jimenez's start on Wednesday? His average velocity, according to Pitch F/X data was right around the same as it was in 2012. The adjustment that Jimenez made was to become a pitcher more than a thrower. He mixed the two-seamer, four-seamer, slider, changeup, and splitter all night long, working in and out, up and down, and really kept the Blue Jays hitters off balance. They couldn't sit on anything and didn't hit very many balls hard off of Jimenez.

If Mickey Callaway can work some magic here and get Jimenez into a mindset where he has to have a plan to attack hitters that includes mixing his pitches instead of trying to throw the ball past them, he could be a really serviceable starter this season.

It's just the first week of the season. There are a lot of games to go and a lot of things to happen. But, if the Indians are able to start this first road trip by going 3-3, it would be a successful road trip and a pretty good start to the season.