



The universally-accepted time to evaluate Major League Baseball teams is now upon the Indians. Friday's game against the Mariners will be Game #40 and the Indians will be over .500 at the 40-game mark for the third straight season. They were 26-14 in 2011 and 23-17 in 2012 right around the quarter pole. After the 40-game mark, the Indians went 54-68 in 2011 and 45-77 in 2012. This year's team will not do that.

The Indians have won 14 out of 18 after an 8-13 start and sit in second place at 22-17. They've done that while dealing with trips to disabled list for leadoff hitter Michael Bourn, setup man Vinnie Pestano, veteran starter Brett Myers, and reclamation project Scott Kazmir. Nick Swisher missed games with a sore shoulder. Jason Kipnis not only slumped in April, but also missed a few days with a bad elbow. Asdrubal Cabrera hasn't hit above .240 since Opening Day. Lonnie Chisenhall was sent back to Triple-A Columbus to fix his swing and give him some confidence after posting a .604 OPS in 26 games.

While dealing with their share of bad, the Indians have seen their share of good. (Author's note: The following stats, courtesy of Fangraphs, are entering Thursday's action.) The Indians lead the American League in wins above replacement player for position players and trail only the Giants overall. They lead all of baseball in wOBA, weighted on-base average, a sabermetric stat that uses run values tailored to how the batter reached base. The Indians lead in this category, in part, because they are tied atop the league rankings in home runs, rank fifth in doubles, and sixth in walks.

The starting rotation, clearly the team's weakest spot, has not nearly been as bad as expected. The Indians have the ninth-worst starter ERA at 4.44 and the sixth-worst FIP at 4.55, but Justin Masterson and Zach McAllister have led the charge. Masterson already has two complete game shutouts and has a renewed confidence with the support of Manager Terry Francona. His walk

rate has dropped to a much more manageable level and increased use of his slider has helped to neutralize left handed batters. McAllister, who I suggested back in March could be [this season's breakout player](#), has seen a small drop in strikeout rate, but has limited his home runs allowed. He added a new pitch this season, a split-fingered fastball/forkball, to give him another pitch with good downward movement and a change of pace from the fastball.

Scott Kazmir has been impressive in his comeback attempt. After working hard throughout last season and this winter to get back to the Major Leagues, Kazmir is striking out nearly 10 batters per nine innings and has shown great velocity, topping out at 96 in his start against Oakland on May 9. Corey Kluber has shown signs of promise, as has top prospect Trevor Bauer. Ubaldo Jimenez continues to be a work in progress, but his last three starts have been as good as he has pitched while wearing an Indians uniform.

The bullpen has done its part. The Indians are 10-3 in games decided by one run. The six key guys in the bullpen, Joe Smith, Chris Perez, Vinnie Pestano, Rich Hill, Cody Allen, and Bryan Shaw, all have ERAs below 3.00. The bullpen boasts the sixth-best strikeout percentage in baseball at 25 percent.

All in all, for the adversity the Indians have faced and the injuries that they have dealt with, they have done a tremendous job to be in the position that they are in. The team used eight different starting pitchers over the first half of April. They have rarely had their projected Opening Day starting lineup because of trips to the disabled list and nagging ailments.

Unfortunately, the road ahead looks difficult. The Indians just got done playing 14 games in 13 days and their reward is a truly brutal schedule. The following is the Indians' schedule over the next 34 days:

May 17-20 v. Seattle

May 21-22 v. Detroit

May 23-26 @ Boston

May 27-28 @ Cincinnati

May 29-30 v. Cincinnati

May 31-June 2 v. Tampa Bay

June 3-5 @ New York Yankees

June 6 Off Day

June 7-9 @ Detroit

June 10-12 @ Texas

June 13 Off Day

June 14-16 v. Washington

June 17-19 v. KC

Entering play on Thursday night, those teams had a combined record of 200-154. The only team below .500 is Seattle at 19-21. During that stretch, the Indians will play 17 at home and 15

on the road. The Nationals, Rangers, Reds, and Tigers rank second through fifth, respectively, in ERA. The Red Sox and Yankees rank 10th and 11th in starter ERA, respectively. The Indians are going to face some excellent starting pitching and some talented lineups over that stretch.

It will be a litmus test for the Indians. We'll find out how good the starting rotation actually is and we'll learn a lot about the offense. The offense has been inconsistent, scoring three runs or less in 19 of their 39 games. On the complete other end of the spectrum, the Indians have scored six runs or more 15 times. The Indians are 12-2 with a lead after two innings and 3-12 when trailing after two innings. The importance of quality starting pitching is very evident in the Indians this season. With a lead entering the sixth, the Indians are 17-1. Trailing entering the sixth, the Indians are 3-16. Facing that many good starters over the next 32 games will put a lot of pressure on the starting rotation.

The question on everybody's mind is, "Are these guys for real?" Detractors, naysayers, and pessimists will say, "We've seen this movie before and it didn't end well." As mentioned above, the Indians were contenders at the 40-game mark in each of the last two seasons and failed miserably.

This year's team is completely different. The lineup is legit. They're never out of a game no matter how bad of a start they got. The depth on this team is really impressive, with guys like Mike Aviles, Yan Gomes, and Ryan Raburn able to actually help the ballclub when they spell one of the regulars. That is the main difference between this year's club and the clubs of the last two seasons.

It's important to keep in mind that the Indians schedule will get a lot easier over their final 91 games because they got a bulk of the difficulty out of the way. The Indians will be done with Boston, New York, and Tampa. Their remaining interleague games are against the Braves, the Mets, and the Marlins. September has the chance to be really favorable to the Indians. They'll be done with Detroit on September 1 and will play the Mets and Houston at home. They also host Baltimore, Kansas City, and Chicago and play Kansas City, Chicago, and Minnesota on the road.

The goal is to navigate this 32-game stretch. If the Indians can manage to go 18-14 over that span, they will be 40-31 after 71 games with a friendly schedule.

It doesn't appear that this Indians team is going to go away and the Tigers don't have what it takes to run away and hide in the division. They have also played the second-easiest schedule in the American League so far according to Baseball-Reference's strength of schedule metric. Only Texas, who has played 34 of their 40 games against teams below .500, has played an easier schedule. The Tigers have played 25 of their 38 games against teams below .500, including seven against the pathetic Houston Astros.

It should be an exciting summer at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.