

The Indians Make It Official: The Offseason Was A Success

Written by {ga=noahpoinar}

Tuesday, May 21 2013 6:00 PM - Last Updated Tuesday, May 21 2013 6:49 PM



If we've learned anything over the years, it's that ... (1) You can't just throw money at the open market and assume things will play out the way Bills James and his boys say it should in their ZiPS projections. (2) It's not always a good idea to award mammoth contracts to guys who are in their 30s or about to hit their 30's. (3) For a variety of reasons that only hindsight can help explain, players who sign long-term lucrative deals with another team other than their own, have historically underachieved more often than not.

It happens all the time. A teams goes out and spends money, takes on salary, drastically improves, makes a statement to the rest of the league, their fans, and even to themselves ... and then they go on to majestically underachieve. When this happens, all hell usually breaks loose. Was I frightened of this happening to the Indians? Yes. Yes, I was. This phenomena isn't new, and just because the Indians had spent the last decade laying low in free agency didn't mean they weren't prone to this. It's recently been named *The Jeffrey Loria Effect*, in honor of the owner and architect behind the 2012 Miami Marlins. Someone who managed to completely resurrect a devastating Marlins franchise in just one offseason's worth of work, only to tear it all apart months later.

The Indians, in their own way, took a similar approach to that joke of a Marlins team. Both franchises were terrible and fans were hard to come by. The ownership, both having stumbled

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into a copious amount of extra offseason cash, dived into the free agent market and spent an uncharacteristic amount of money on proven free agents. They mixed in some key trade acquisitions, went out and handpicked the ideal of all ideal managers, and had suddenly turned their terrible 70- win team into a legitimate “on paper” playoff contender.

Entering the season, on paper, Tribe fans were looking at one of the best line-ups the team had put together since ... well, we weren't sure. Everything was “on paper,” including the shaky starting pitching, which was the primary concern of every Indians fan. These were scary times. It was year one of the roster overhaul. We knew less about the Indians than any other team in baseball. No one had the slightest clue how the team would come together. How long it might take the new guys to adjust. Who would turn out to be the token underachiever. How the existing players from last year's team would mesh. What version of Justin Masterson we were going to get. How the ridiculous amount of projected strikeouts would play out.

For as much as the roster had improved, there was still a countless amount of uncertainty, so I came into the season with extreme caution. I wasn't worried about the pitching. I was worried about this team falling flat on their face, etching their way into the history books as one of the all time biggest disappointments in Indians baseball. I was worried they'd be saddled with two aging, and underperforming contracts of Nick Swisher and Mike Bourn. Worried that they would end up like the Marlins. Or worse yet, like the Dodgers, Blue Jays, and Angels.

These three juggernauts were the illustrious winners of this years “*Ass Holes Who ‘Bought’ Their Ticket to October*” award. And right on cue, they all currently find themselves in last place of their respective divisions. (note: the Astros are technically last in the AL West, but we're not counting them.)

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Ultimately, this little known fact makes what the Indians have accomplished so far this season, that much more rewarding. The fact that this team -- *our* team -- didn't crap out in their aggressive attempt to drastically improve the team (mostly) through free-agency. It's one thing to avoid complete disaster for the purpose of being able to say, "Hey, look, we avoided complete disaster." It's another thing to have everything break perfectly. So far, that's what has happened.

The Indians are 26-17 and sit atop the A.L. Central. Yes, it's still incredibly early; and yes, it's stunningly close to the record they had at the same time last year. But we tend to forget that, historically, teams who have gone through significant offseason roster renovations -- especially to this degree -- have consistently come out of the gate slow ultra slow. In fact, the Indians were no exception.

They began the season 5-10, and there were a fair share of concerned fans, myself included. But to think this team would be sitting nine games above .500 at the end of May the way they are? We never could have seen this coming. Teams as brand new as the Indians are supposed to start off slow and spend the entirety of their summer trying to crawl their way back into the race. And if they are talented enough, they usually do. Consider the Tigers, who came into the season last year with the new addition of Prince Fielder. Do you remember how long it finally took them to gel and establish themselves as the team to beat in the division? A long ass time. A long, long ass time. There's a reason the Indians were in first place for a large chunk of the early spring. The 2010 Red Sox are another prime example. Their offensive overhaul is what ultimately enabled the Indians to get off to such an incredible start that year. Hell, the three teams this year that I already harped on are the prime examples of them all. How does Josh Hamilton come in and screw up an offense that already featured the like of Albert Pujols, Mike Trout, and Mark Trumbo? I don't know. But I do know that as history has shown, any time you insert a significant bat into the middle part of your lineup, it's going to make things screwy at first. It always happens that way. And to think, the Indians added about five bats, two of them smack-dab in the middle of their lineup.

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How have things worked out? Better than any of us could have ever expected.

The Offense

Through 43 games, the Indians have the most productive offense in all of baseball. We haven't been able to say that in a long, long time. And this isn't my opinion, [it's a fact](#).

The Tribe's offense leads the league in wOBA, wRAA, and total WAR. What the hell is that, you ask? Those are the game's most accurate measures of total offensive production. Naturally, they are all saber metric stats.

wOBA stands for On-Base Average. (Forget about the "w" -- it's not worth the risk of confusion)

On-Base Average is a combination of all the different aspects of offense clumped into one number: batting average, on base percentage, slugging percentage, OPS, sacrifices, and hit by pitch. The Indians are as follows ...

Batting Average: 5th

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On-Base Percentage: 4th

Extra-Base Hits: 1st

Slugging Percentage: 1st

OPS: 1st

But it's easier just to say the Indians are first in On-Base Average (wOBA). And that's what wOBA is, a mechanism to make your life a little easier.

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wRAA stands for Runs Above Average. It is a direct product of On-Base Average (wOBA), and is nearly identical -- the only difference is that it factors in the number of plate appearances, where On-Base Average does not. That's it. That's the only difference. So it makes sense that the Indians, who lead the league in On-Base Average, also lead the league in Runs Above Average (wRAA).

The only reason I'm mentioning all of this is because Runs Above Average (wRAA) is the sabermetric stat that captures the finality of a team (or players) total offensive production, and that's what we're looking for. Why it's not called wTOP for Total Offensive Production, is beyond me.

WAR is something you may already know about. It's not as complicated as people think. WAR is made up of three components: Defense, base running, and total offensive production (wRAA). It's the ultimate stat in the game of baseball, taking into account literally every tiny aspect of the game. The Indians offense has a total WAR score of 10.0, the best in all of baseball. In the AL, Boston and Tampa Bay are second with a WAR score of 8.2. The rest of the AL Central breaks down like this:

Cleveland: 10.0

Detroit: 7.5

Kansas City: 5.0

Minnesota: 2.3

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Chicago: 0.8

The Pitching

Despite their 15-4 record in the month of May, the Indians offense was actually slightly better in April than it's been in May. It's the pitching that has helped spurn this hot play of late, knocking their 4.27 April ERA down to a respectable 3.26 in May.

Their pitching has been [more clutch than any team in baseball](#). Yep, there is a "clutch" stat in baseball. Basically, it is formulated around the premise that, for example, protecting a one run lead in the 8th or 9th inning is a more pressured situation than protecting a one run lead in the 1st or 2nd inning; or that pitching with runners on base is a more pressured situation than if the bases are empty.

The Indians lead all of baseball with a clutch rating of 3.29 and are 11-3 in games decided by a run and 5-0 in extra innings. All in all, it really speaks to how good the bullpen has been. Conversely, the Tigers pitching is dead last in baseball with a clutch rating of -2.48 and a record of 4-6 in games decided by a run. Yes, there bullpen is pretty bad.

Among other things though, the Tribe's pitching also leads the American League in wild pitches (24), shutouts (7), and run support (.45). Really, the Indians pitching is as average and

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unremarkable as they come. It's something we're all but likely just going to have to accept.

Player Notes

Drew Stubbs

Stubbs has seen [more pitches in the strike-zone](#) than any player in baseball not named Marco Scutaro. Sadly, despite this, he has one of the highest strikeout rates in all of baseball (30.1%). Here's how his numbers break down against righties versus lefties.

Righties: (90 Plate Appearances)

Batting Average: .216

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Strikeouts: 31

Walks: 2

Lefties: (61 Plate appearances)

Batting Average: .308

Strikeouts: 15

Walks: 9

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They really need to create a stat that fully captures the atrocious deviation of a hitters lefty vs righty production.

It's worth mentioning that Shin-Soo Choo leads all of baseball with 20.3 runs created above average while Stubbs has created -0.9 runs above average. I'm not saying the Indians shouldn't have made the Choo deal, I just wanted to make light of how insanely good the Indians offense 'could' have been if they hadn't.

Michael Brantley

He can't hit the fastball or the slider, but he can pretty much hit everything else. He has one of the best contact rates in all of baseball, swinging and missing only 4.0% of the time. I wouldn't dare take Kipnis out the two-hole with the way he's hitting right now. But if it ever has to come to it, Brantley would be terrific in that spot behind Bourn. With no one on base, Brantley has struck out 16 times in 86 at-bats. With men on base, he's struck out just 5 times in 67 at-bats. He's also team best .333 hitter with runners on base compared to Kipnis .232. (and 18K's).

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Jason Kipnis

In April, Kipnis finished right on the Mendoza line (.200) with one homer and 4 runs batted in. In the month of May alone, he has 6 home runs and 20 runs batted in, and he now has his season average all the way up to a respectable .261

He also has the best eye in all of baseball, only offering at 19% of pitches outside the strike zone, according to FanGraphs. So I guess that's cool. But what isn't cool is his team leading number of strikeouts (15) with runners in scoring position. Mark Reynolds (11) and Drew Stubbs (12) can't even compete with that.

Carlos Santana

The only player on the Indians who can hit any pitch -- and [according to the numbers at FanGraphs](#) -- the most productive fastball hitter in the American league this season. Not too long ago, he was the most productive

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hitter in all of baseball, but that was short-stayed; he's really been struggling of late, hitting .195 in the month of May compared to .389 in April. He's basically having the April that Jason Kipnis had. And vice versa.

His problem right now is that he literally can't hit the ball in the air; meaning, he's hitting an absurd amount of ground balls. In April his Ground ball to fly ball ratio was 1.09. It's a team leading 1.62 in May. Simply put, you don't want your fattest, slowest player hitting as many ground balls as Santana has been hitting.

Justin Masterson

According to the numbers at FanGraphs, Masterson has had more success with his slider than any pitcher in baseball, and that seems about right.

Ubaldo Jimenez

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I'm going to get you excited about the "Ubaldo Jimenez Experience" going forward, but first it's time for the popular segment known as "Player A versus Player B," which will be used as a tool to further highlight how incredibly absurd the "Ubaldo Jimenez Experience" is.

I'll spill the beans now: Player A is Ubaldo Jimenez at home (16.2 IP) and Player B is Ubaldo Jimenez on the road (24.0 IP).

(Home) Average: .303

(Away) Average: .160

(Home) Runs: 18

(Away) Runs: 6

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(Home) Hits: 20

(Away) Hits: 13

(Home) Walks: 13

(Away) Walks: 6

(Home) K's: 22

(Away) K's: 22

(Home) WHIP: 1.98

(Away) WHIP: 0.79

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(Home) BABIP: .381

(Away) BABIP: .179

(Home) GB%: 43.5%

(Away) GB%: 54.2%

Ok, now let's overanalyze Ubaldo's recent stretch. In the month of May (3 starts), he has the [third lowest xFIP](#) among all qualified pitchers. I'm not going to get into the intricacies of the xFIP stat, but just know that xFIP -- essentially ERA's hotter, older cousin -- is every stat nerds favorite metric because it can supposedly predict how successful (or unsuccessful) a pitcher is going to be going forward. In April, Ubaldo had an xFIP of 4.27; in May it's 2.23. You typically don't see that big of a drop. In addition to that ... in the month of May, he owns the highest K/9 rate (13.5) of any pitcher in baseball. Yep, even the great Yu Dahh-vish.

Are we really going to read into this? Normally I'd say no, it's an incredibly small sample size. But in the two years he's been in Cleveland, he's never come close to putting together this type of stretch. I'm also starting to buy into the scanty theory that Terry Francona and Mickey Callaway are more responsible for the success Jimenez has had -- and any success Jimenez will have -- more so than Ubaldo himself is.

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Michael Bourn

For all intents and purposes, Bourn is this team's best player. But the Indians best player has only played in 20 of the 43 games, so at this point it's hard to gather any meaningful stats to justify my case. Here is one: in 20 games he has 10 infield hits. That's incredible. Last year Carlos Santana led the team with 13 infield hits. Yea, the guy whose weight and speed I just made fun of.