



In 2010, the Indians were trade deadline sellers. They sent the often underappreciated Jake Westbrook to the Cardinals in a three-team trade that included Ryan Ludwick and received a Double-A right hander from the Padres named Corey Kluber. Around that same time, they traded Austin Kearns to the Yankees for a player to be named later. That player to be named later became Zach McAllister on August 20. At the time, the ceiling for both was to pitch in the back end of the rotation. That was the best case scenario.

Right now, both Kluber and McAllister are on pace to surpass that and become fixtures in the middle of the Indians rotation. With McAllister on the disabled list due to a finger injury, likely from the split-fingered fastball/forkball pitch that he began throwing earlier this season, the focus has been entirely on Kluber. The Indians needed Kluber to step up when Brett Myers went on the disabled list and Carlos Carrasco's stupidity led to another suspension. The front office may have believed in Kluber all along, but his performance is definitely opening up some eyes.

Kluber had always been an intriguing prospect to the statistically-inclined baseball enthusiasts. At the time he was acquired, Kluber had struck out 136 hitters in 122.2 innings at Double-A San Antonio. He had issued just 40 walks for a sparkling 3.4 K/BB ratio. Guys with swing-and-miss stuff that don't issue many walks are always enticing prospects. Except for top prospects, guys in the minors with high strikeout totals generally carry high walk rates with them. They're "effectively wild" or throw really hard. Kluber has always shown good control. Command was the

issue.

There is a difference between control and command. Control is the ability to throw strikes. Command is the ability to throw quality strikes. Just because a pitcher has good control doesn't mean that he's going to have success. It's not enough to get the ball in the strike zone. It has to be on the corners, worked up and down, and pitchers have to be able to command all of their pitches.

When he was acquired, Chris Antonetti said of Kluber, "He has an above average fastball with a plus breaking ball. He has the ability to miss bats. He gives us another upper-level Major League starter that can hopefully be part of our rotation down the road." Reading between the lines, that basically means, "We need him to develop a third pitch." Starters have a very hard time at the Major League level with two good pitches.

Kluber appears to throw a straight four-seam fastball, a two-seam sinker, a cutter, a slider, and the occasional changeup and curve ball. There's not a big velocity discrepancy between those pitches, at least not as much as some starters have, but there is one really important element of Kluber's arsenal – similar trajectory. It's been a big reason why he has had so much success this season. The two-seamer and changeup move similarly, but at different speeds. The slider and the cutter look the same on the way to the plate until the slider dives and the cutter cuts. The straight fastball looks like the cutter and slider but it never moves and gets on the hitter quickly.

The cutter was the big pitch for Kluber. It's been a work in progress this season and he has definitely left some out over the middle of the plate. But, it has been an integral part of Kluber's success in 2013. In 2012, lefties destroyed Kluber with a .301/.366/.493/.860 slash line. In 2013, Kluber has been better against lefties than righties, with a slash line against of .246/.299/.398/.698. His K% against lefties is brilliant at 27.3 percent. Last season, it was 21.6 percent. With the cutter/slider mix on the inner half to lefties, he prevents them from getting their arms extended and driving the ball. It leads to a lot of weak contact. When both pitches are on, you will notice a large number of ground balls, just like during Tuesday night's start against Texas.

One of the things I like about sabermetrics is that there are a lot of stats that are predictive of future performance. Last season, while it looked like Kluber was terrible because he posted a 5.14 ERA, his FIP was 4.29 and his xFIP was 3.99. His SIERA was 3.87. FIP, which I have

discussed before, is fielder-independent pitching. That means it is an ERA calculation based on what a pitcher can control – walks, strikeouts, home runs, and hit by pitches. Kluber gave up nine home runs in 63 innings of work, but struck out three times more batters than he walked. xFIP is FIP, but with a league average home run per fly ball rate. It is one of the most predictive sabermetric statistics for future performance. SIERA is probably the best predictor of future performance. SIERA stands for skill-interactive ERA. It evaluates batted ball types – fly ball, ground ball, and line drive – along with strikeouts and walks.

Here's where SIERA's value lies. Think about the three types of batted balls. Ground balls do less damage than fly balls. Fly balls are, generally, less damaging than line drives, unless, of course, they go over the wall. Ground balls are obviously much better than fly balls. Kluber induced an above average ground ball rate, struck out an above average number of batters, and was below the league average amount of walks. The line drive rate was a little bit high, so Kluber's SIERA of 3.87 fell into the "average" category. Studies have shown that there is a strong correlation year-to-year in batted ball types, which means that they stay consistent over a pitcher's career for the most part.

Considering most teams trot out fourth and fifth starters that are decidedly below average, this means that Corey Kluber had value entering the 2013 season in the back of the rotation.

Basically, Kluber's improvement and progression were to be expected. He was blasted in Detroit and struggled early in the Yankees game after having his previous start shortened by rain. The game was decided at 6-0, but Kluber was outstanding the rest of the way in that Yankees game. He induced 13 swings and misses. But take away those two starts and Kluber has a 2.81 ERA in his seven other starts. He was throwing the ball extremely well in that rain-shortened outing against Tampa over the first two innings and it would have been interesting to see what his final line would have looked like.

This isn't to project Kluber to be a pitcher with a 3.25 ERA the rest of the way or be the savior of the rotation. His biggest problem had been consistency, like most pitchers. Ten of the 16 home runs Kluber has allowed in his career have come with people on base and four of those 10 have been of the three-run variety. Whether it's a problem pitching from the stretch or just a momentary lack of focus, home runs and big innings have been Kluber's downfall. That should improve with age and experience.

We're watching the development of somebody who could be a pretty good pitcher for a long

time.