Being a catcher is one of the most physically and mentally demanding positions in all of sports. Catchers are involved on every pitch while their team is in the field and have a lot of pregame work to do as well. They're right there with the pitchers while they study hitters and their tendencies, helping to formulate the plan for how to pitch to every hitter, and serving as on-field pitching coaches. It's up to the catcher to help his pitch through the tough times, whether it's calling for a breaking ball to slow down the hurler's mechanics or making a visit to the mound to point out something that is wrong or boost the pitcher's confidence.

Unfortunately, Carlos Santana is the Indians catcher. His bat is an asset at that position, a position historically dominated by bad hitters with occasional power. But nearly everything else about Santana is the polar opposite of an asset. He is lazy behind the plate, doesn't seem to have a great head on his shoulders, and has trouble controlling the running game.

One could argue that the incident in Boston during the 2010 season where Ryan Kalish slid late and nearly snapped Santana's knee in several pieces could be to blame for what appears to be apathy behind the plate. But, let's be honest, that should only affect Santana during plays at the plate. It should have no bearing on receiving pitches, blocking balls in the dirt, or throwing out runners.

In Santana's 275 games behind the plate, he has been responsible for 22 passed balls, including 10 to lead the league in 2012, has been responsible for some of the 112 wild pitches, and some of the 172 stolen bases against. This season, Santana has thrown out just four of the 28 runners who have taken off with him behind the plate.

Beginning next season, the Indians will be paying Santana $29.75M over the next four years to be a catcher. His production behind the plate is well above league average and trails only Buster Posey, Mike Napoli, Carlos Ruiz and Joe Mauer in weighted on-base average (wOBA) at .355. The average wOBA for catchers since 2010, when Santana entered the league, is .310. The average wOBA for first basemen since 2010 is .336. While Santana is still better than average in that category if he were to play first base full-time, the Indians prefer to deal with Santana's shortcomings behind the plate rather than negate some of their positional advantage by moving him to first base.

As we all know, pitching is the name of the game. It doesn't matter how many runs you score if you can't stop the other team from scoring. Most of the onus is on the pitcher to locate his pitches, but the catcher and pitcher have to work symbiotically to call the game. There has to be a common understanding to change speeds, eye level, and the pitcher has to trust the catcher to save him from wild pitches that advance runners.

Catchers have another responsibility to their pitchers as well. It's called framing. Jeff Sullivan of Fangraphs has been fascinated by pitch framing for the last few months now. I'm a big fan of his work and it was his February 27 article on Justin Masterson that really got me interested in the subject as well.

I subscribe to sabermetric theory, but I do watch every game as well. I can see that Carlos Santana is a bad defensive catcher. The reason I like sabermetrics and advanced stats is because they provide insight into how much damage somebody like Santana is causing by being lazy and apathetic behind the plate. Obviously I can see it and I can see that the Indians are certainly not benefitting from it.

From Sullivan's article:

*Relative to the league average, over his career, Justin Masterson has pitched to the tightest strike zone out of the sample* (author's note: sample was pitchers with at least 1,000 called pitches since 2008, minimum 200 IP) *. Because 1,000 called pitches is an unfamiliar denominator, know that Masterson has averaged about 1,815 called pitches per 200 innings. So this is a pretty extreme result we're looking at, and it's the sort of thing that makes you want to regress it going forward. It makes you want to blame someone other than Masterson — someone like, say, Masterson's catchers. One wonders if this is a framing thing, since, in theory, a strike zone is a strike zone. Why should Masterson get*

*screwed so badly?*

The result Sullivan is referring to is that Masterson lost 52 called strikes per every 1,000 called pitches. In the following chart, pasted right from Fangraphs, Sullivan adds more evidence of Masterson's small strike zone:

| Year | zTkB% | Lg zTkB% | oTkS% | Lg oTkS% |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2008 | 26% | 20% | 8% | |

| |
|---|
| 8% |

| |
|---|
| 2009 |

| |
|---|
| 24% |

| |
|---|
| 18% |

| |
|---|
| 6% |

| |
|---|
| 8% |

| |
|---|
| 2010 |

| |
|---|
| 21% |

| |
|---|
| 16% |

| |
|---|
| 5% |

| |
|---|
| 8% |

| 2011 |
| --- |
| 22% |
| 16% |
| 5% |
| 7% |
| 2012 |
| 19% |
| 15% |
| 5% |
| 7% |

zTkB% = Percentage of pitches in strike zone called balls

Lg zTkB% = League average percentage of pitches in strike zone taken for balls

oTkS% = Percentage of pitches outside strike zone called strikes

Lg oTkS% = League average percentage of pitches outside strike zone called strikes

According to the article, Santana cost Masterson 53 called strikes per 1,000 pitches and started 46 games from 2008-2012. Let's say Masterson threw 100 pitches per start with Santana behind the plate. In a four-year span, Santana cost Masterson around 244 called strikes, if the data were to project out evenly. That's a rough estimate on my part and Masterson made seven relief appearances in that span.

It may be a little bit unfair to judge Santana based on catching Masterson. His pitches move a lot and he has a rather unconventional arm slot. But, Matthew Carruth ranked Santana as the fifth-worst catcher at framing pitches in 2012.

You may be wondering what all of this means. If we use the 244-pitch estimate from above, that means that Santana would cost Masterson approximately 60 pitches per season, or somewhere between 1.5-2 pitches per start. That seems highly inconsequential. These numbers are based on PITCHf/x data, the strike zone that should be called. It's reasonable to believe that Santana could get a wider strike zone called for Masterson if he were better at receiving pitches.

This isn't Masterson, but here's Santana receiving two pitches from Vinnie Pestano on Wednesday night, courtesy of this Sullivan piece from Fangraphs :

This one is just irritating. It's clearly a strike because it's right over the middle of the plate, but Santana lazily stabs down at the ball. Catchers like Jose Molina and Brian McCann almost always get borderline calls because their bodies are quiet, with very little superfluous movement. They catch the pitch, more often than not, with the glove square towards the pitcher and give a confident appearance that the pitch was a good one. It sometimes fools the umpire into thinking a pitch was better than it was. Javier Lopez got to catch great pitching staffs with Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine, and John Smoltz, but it helped that he took his craft seriously and gave the umpires a reason to call a borderline pitch a strike.

Santana takes this pitch for granted. If that ball hits off his glove and he doesn't catch it, does the umpire still call it a strike? We don't know, because he caught it, in spite of some bad glovework. Santana's body stays in one spot and only the arm moves.

For comparison purposes, watch this .gif from the Indians/Rays game earlier in the season. Watch how Jose Lobaton receives this pitch:

The glove moves in a similar fashion to Santana's, without as much downward movement. This pitch, unlike Pestano's, is a ball. Sullivan's screenshot proves that. The difference here, and the reason that it's called a strike, is because of Lobaton's body. Watch his body move as his glove moves. The instant he catches it, he's in a perfect position to pull the glove back in over the corner. Lobaton is regarded as a good, not great, pitch framer. His technique behind the plate on this particular pitch is why he'll get borderline calls. Santana, who is generally too lazy to move his body, will not.

This one is a cutter. There's a little bit of late movement, but nothing crazy. Santana stabs down at the ball instead of sliding the trunk of his body and his glove towards the ball. The pitch is a ball, there's no question about that, but Santana's arm movements make it look like it's well out of the zone. If he shifts his body to the right, to a position where he can make a better catch, he can sell the pitch a little bit better.

Anytime the catcher stabs at a ball, he will not get the call. The closer the catcher gets to squaring up and catching the ball with as little arm movement as possible, the better the chances of getting a borderline pitch. I think what bothers me the most about this pitch is that Santana called for the cutter. He knows the cutter's movement. Yet he appears to be poorly prepared when the pitch tails away late. It did exactly what it was supposed to do.

It may be nitpicky to denigrate Santana for this pitch, since it really wasn't that close, but it's one of the accessible clips of a pitch with Santana behind the plate and it illustrates some of his many bad habits.

A more obvious answer to what this all means is that strikes that are called balls can never in any way, shape, or form help the pitcher. Every pitch called a ball improves the hitter's chances. Don't believe me? Here are the splits, by count, from the American League last season:

After 1-0: .271/.379/.452/.830

After 0-1: .226/.266/.351/.617

After 2-0: .291/.503/.505/1.008

After 1-1: .238/.304/.378/.682

After 0-2: .171/.201/.263/.464

After 3-0: .297/.734/.527/1.261

After 2-1: .255/.387/.427/.814

After 1-2: .177/.225/.273/.498

After 2-2: .190/.284/.304/.589

Full count: .216/.450/.362/.812

Look at those differences. Strikes are good, balls are bad. Imagine that. The problem with the Masterson data above, and any other data that we would pluck from pitchers with Santana behind the plate, is that we don't know the context. If the pitcher throws something that should be called a strike and it isn't, it makes a lot more difference in a 1-1 count than it would in a 0-2 count. It may not matter at all. The count could go from 0-1 to 1-1 and the hitter may ground out on the next pitch. On the flip side, the count could go from 2-1 to 3-1 instead of 2-2 and the hitter now has a major edge. The next pitch could lead to a two-out walk and the next guy could hit a two-run homer. Instead of probably being out of the inning, two runs have now scored.

What's interesting to note, now that I've berated Santana's catching ability, is that Indians pitchers have seen their zTkB% decrease and their oTkS% increase this season. According to the numbers from StatCorner.com, Masterson's zTkB% has decreased by four percent, while his oTkS% has increased by 0.7 percent. Zach McAllister's zTkB% has decreased by seven percent, while his oTkS% has increased by 2.4 percent. Ubaldo Jimenez's zTkB% has decreased by four percent, while his oTkS% has increased by 1.9 percent. Corey Kluber's zTkB% has decreased by two percent, while his oTkS% has increased by 4.8 percent, a 102 percent increase from 2012's number. I've put a line out to Sullivan to see what his thoughts are on the matter and to see exactly how significant these improvements are. It does seem more than coincidental that the entire Indians rotation has benefitted this season.

Catchers have the ability to make good pitchers look great and bad pitchers look average. On a team where the pitching staff needs all the help it can get, Santana is in a position to do that but fails to do so. He struggles at first base too and must have been a pretty poor third baseman to make the move behind the plate, so the Indians are stuck with either a designated hitter or a poor defensive catcher.

Even last week, Tom Hamilton, who is increasingly cynical (and hilarious) about umpires, said on a broadcast about a close pitch, “Carlos Santana doesn’t get his pitchers many calls”. Strike zones do move around, both throughout the game and from game-to-game. A good catcher can help his pitcher get a couple of calls here and there by being perceptive about that game’s strike zone and having good receiving skills.

There are things that Carlos Santana does very well. Unfortunately, none of them seem to come when he’s crouched behind the plate.