



There's an acronym in baseball called TINSTAAPP. It stands for "There is no such thing as a pitching prospect". It's a nine-letter acronym to describe the volatility of pitching prospects due to injury, ineffectiveness, control issues, or any number of things that can go wrong with a promising young arm. Along the same lines, somebody needs to come up with an acronym for the volatility of bullpens.

The one expectation we had of this season was that we would win close games because of our bullpen. Incredibly, with injuries to Chris Perez and Vinnie Pestano, the Indians are 18-8 in games decided by one run. Ironically, with that 18-8 record, the Indians are tied with Baltimore for the most blown saves in baseball with 17 and are tied for the third-fewest holds with 29.

The bullpen was terrific in April, posting a 3-0 record with four saves and a 2.82 ERA, a 1.15 WHIP, a .203 batting average against, and struck out over 25 percent of the batters faced. In May, the bullpen was horrible overall. Tribe relievers combined to go 5-4 with five saves and seven blown saves. Collectively, they posted a 5.75 ERA, a 1.53 WHIP, a .262 batting average against, and struck out 24.8 percent of opposing hitters. In June, things got back on track, with the pen posting a 6-2 record, going 7/11 in save opportunities, with a 3.10 ERA, a 1.24 WHIP, a .221 average against, and a drop in strikeout rate down to 19 percent. So far in July, the pen has been atrocious. With a 2-3 record, a 2/6 mark in save opps, and a 6.41 ERA, it's clear to see that the bullpen has been a contributing factor to the team's 2-5 record in July.

Vinnie Pestano has been bumped out of his eighth inning role, supplanted by Joe Smith, who has given up seven runs of his own in his last 11 appearances. More importantly, Smith has allowed 14 baserunners over those 11 innings and has struck out only four batters. Regression was coming for Smith, and I fear that more is on the way. Eleven games ago, when Smith took the mound against Washington, he entered the game with a 1.48 ERA. It has climbed to 2.67.

One of the biggest reasons I expected regression from Smith is that his left on base rate was entirely too high for the amount of contact he induces and his first-pitch strike percentage was entirely too low for a guy with average stuff who lives by his deceptive arm angle. Smith's LOB% is 86.4 percent, over 10 percent higher than his career average. He is allowing the highest home run rate of his career at 1.07 HR/9. What concerns me the most, however, is the first-pitch strike percentage. Smith needs to pitch ahead in the count, his stuff doesn't really have swing-and-miss potential and he's a two-pitch pitcher. After averaging 57.6 percent first-pitch strikes during his first four seasons with the Indians, that number has dropped to 53.7 percent.

It may not seem like a big deal, but when you consider that hitters are batting .195/.236/.262/.498 after an 0-1 count and .249/.393/.388/.781 after a 1-0 count, that's a significant difference, especially in the on-base percentage. To date, Smith has gotten away with it, but it's hard to imagine hitters that have seen him two, three, or even four times this season continuing to struggle with him in hitters' counts.

The downfall of Vinnie Pestano has been both shocking and disappointing. Pestano had a velocity drop that was attributed to both an arm injury and a mechanics change. Pestano was at his best in 2011 and averaged 92.7 miles per hour with his fastball. This season, he's averaging 91.3 miles per hour. His PITCHf/x stats do tell us that he's throwing fewer pitches in the zone this season, but only slightly. But, with the lower velocity, his chase rate is down four percent and his contact rate is up nearly 10 percent. Pestano used to be able to paint the outside corner repeatedly with fastball strikes. This season, there have been outings where he has had to rely solely on his slider to get outs.

Bryan Shaw is the most maddening of Indians relievers, not because of his skill set, but because of how manager Terry Francona has used him. Shaw came to the Indians as a guy with bad platoon splits. In 2012 with the Arizona Diamondbacks, Shaw was solid against right handers, holding them to a slash line of .211/.290/.339/.630. Against left handers, however, hitters feasted on Shaw, posting a .333/.403/.459/.863 slash. Inexplicably, Shaw has faced only five more right handed hitters than left handed hitters this season. Right handers, again, are struggling, with a .228/.311/.266/.577 slash. Lefties, again, are feasting, with a .280/.360/.440/.800 slash. Francona continues to let Shaw face lefties and it seems to cost him almost every time.

Not only that, but Shaw enjoyed his first couple trips around the American League because it always takes hitters a couple times seeing a pitcher to adjust. In April, Shaw pitched 10.1 innings and allowed one earned run with a 13/3 K/BB ratio. Since the calendar turned to May,

Shaw has allowed 19 runs in 30 innings for a 5.70 ERA and has a 23/15 K/BB ratio.

The lack of a competent left handed reliever has been evident all season long. The relief triumvirate of Indians' southpaws, Rich Hill, Nick Hagadone, and Scott Barnes, has allowed 39 runs in 58 innings of work. That's a 6.05 ERA. Twelve of the 59 runners they have inherited have scored. They have combined for 34 walks and eight wild pitches.

Not only are the Indians in the market for a starting pitcher, the team needs to be willing to give up assets to strengthen the bullpen. A left handed reliever would be a godsend, but a righty with decent splits against lefties would also be a nice addition. Jesse Crain and Matt Thornton of the White Sox would have to top the list, but they are probably atop everybody's list. The Indians and White Sox don't normally trade with each other, so the Indians may have to dig deep to find what they need.

If anything, this season has taught us a couple of valuable lessons about bullpens. Injuries are inevitable and bullpens are volatile. It takes three working parts, the offense, the rotation, and the bullpen to keep teams in a playoff hunt and the Indians are already struggling to get those three things working together in harmony. The bullpen was supposed to be the solid one and it has been anything but. With no help from below and no definite answer from within, a trade for a bullpen arm may prove to be an unavoidable transaction.