

Can the Indians Sustain Success in the Second Half?

Written by {ga=ninocolla}

Saturday, July 20 2013 11:30 AM - Last Updated Friday, July 19 2013 11:16 PM



At the All-Star break last year, the Cleveland Indians sat at 44-41, three games back of the division lead. They had seemingly stayed afloat with many like to call smoke and mirrors, carrying a negative run differential and benefiting from a surprisingly sluggish Detroit Tigers squad.

That should have been no surprise though. They did it in 2011 too, five games up, a more credible run differential with a positive four, and an impressive 27-19 home record.

We now look at this team in 2013, in a rather familiar position. A Cleveland team that is a few games up record wise, very much in the playoff hunt, and looking like a team with some promise after all.

That promise has come crashing down the past few seasons, more spectacularly in 2012 with abhorrent losing streak that effectively cost Manny Acta his job and spurred a revised plan of attack in the offseason.

We've been over that plan. That plan seems to be working.

Of course the question is now simple. Can the plan continue to work? Can this team avoid the same fate they succumbed to the previous two years? Do they have the staying power in 2013 that they didn't have in 2011 and 2012?

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Considering I have plenty of statistical and analytic data to help us evaluate those questions, why waste any more time in answering the big question. Are these Indians for real? While I hope so and want to believe so, I'm leaning toward thinking that they really are.

As I mentioned, there was some obvious flaws apparent on the surface of the past two versions of our Cleveland Indians. I did not have to dig far to find them. That didn't stop me from digging far to figure out what I needed to figure out about this team, but humor me for a second.

I believe it is perfectly reasonable for a team that plays above .500 (in other words, above average) baseball to have a run differential that is positive. Sure you have some teams that don't score a lot of runs and win on pitching, but how often do they not have more runs scored than runs allowed? By seasons end, all your .500 teams, all your playoff teams, they have that number well in their favor.

That works out pretty well this year, especially in the American League where every team that is above .500, has a positive run differential, perhaps you could call it the "Astros Effect".

Last season, only one playoff team finished with a run differential that was less than 56 runs, and that was Baltimore, who sat at negative 36 runs, but above .500 prior to the break. Clearly, an anomaly like this year's Nationals squad who have a negative run differential, but a positive record. The Nationals team ERA is 3.58 (fifth in baseball) but the only offenses that rank worse than theirs in terms of runs scored are Pittsburgh, Houston, Chicago (White Sox), and Miami. A reasonable justification as to why that is like that.

What you can't justify is a team like Tampa Bay sitting at four games over .500 and a plus-four run differential. That trend turned in 2012, the Rays didn't make the playoffs, but they won 90 games and had a run differential of 120 (higher than all but one playoff team). The Orioles went from a negative run differential to a positive one, so they too gained ground but not as much at Tampa, they just seemingly got lucky and won some close games, credit their bullpen.

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The point is this. You don't want to rely on luck though. You don't want to rely on not being a productive team that can't win games with authority. It means you aren't beating who you are supposed to beat.

The good news is that the American League (and the National League for that matter) seems to be doing that. There is a really significant gap between the teams that are having good seasons and the teams that aren't. Sure you have that awkward Washington situation and below .500 team with a barely (+1) positive run differential in Colorado. But across the board, other than a -2 from the Yankees, the above .500 teams are winning like they should.

That bodes well for the Cleveland Indians. It bodes well for several more reasons, one being the schedule. The Indians are not only beating who they are supposed to beat, they are playing well against the good teams, winning enough games against them to add into the total of games they should be winning.

Four of those teams above .500 are all in the American League East. All those teams have 51 or more wins. All those teams are probably going to start playing each other a lot more, so something will obviously give somewhere. That leaves us with four standouts, two from the Central and two from the West. Detroit and Cleveland, Oakland and Texas. Sure the East could send three teams to the playoffs (almost did last year) if the cards fall right.

But they are going to be playing each other a lot more. The Indians early season schedule was full of AL East tilts, so much so that they have just three games left against the Orioles the rest of the way. Not to toot the Indians remaining schedule, but they have 19 games left against teams with a combined winning percentage of .566. Compared to 48 games left against teams with a .421 combined winning percentage. They have 29 divisional games left against Minnesota, Chicago, and Kansas City.

Teams that are a far cry from the AL East juggernauts they've been facing early in the year. Teams they should match up against and win more often than not. Teams they've done exactly that against this year so far in the small amount of times they've played.

The thing is, that's where they are going. And while the schedule they completed is a testament to them and the record they have despite facing tougher opponents, it does not really tell us

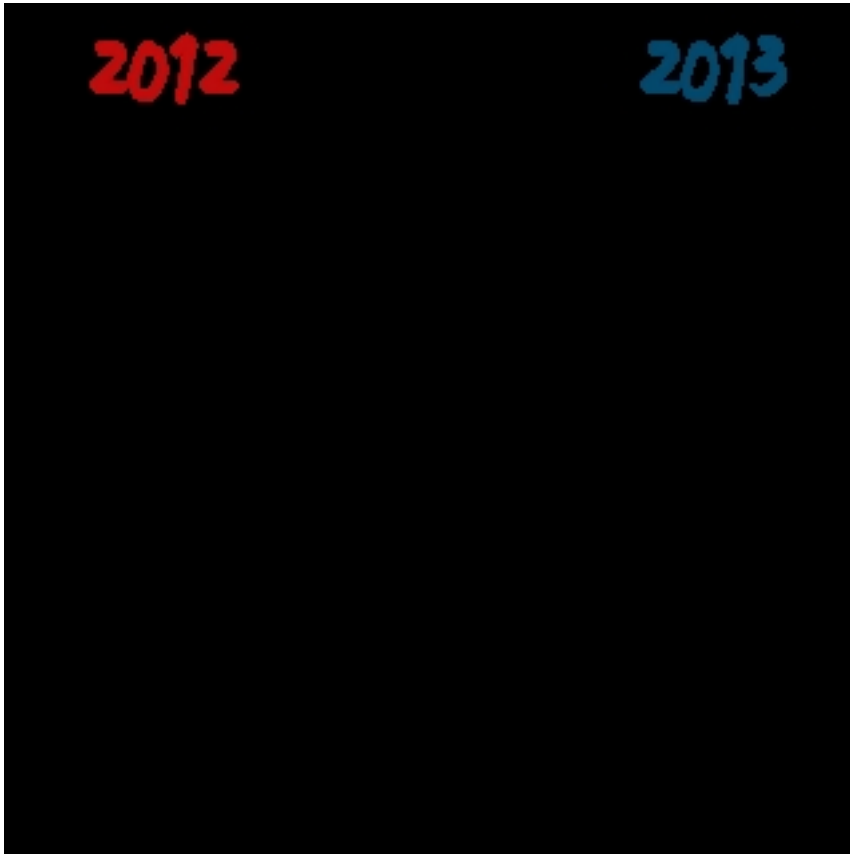
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why. How did the Indians get in the position they are in, and can they hold serve or even improve on it?

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Take a look at this chart to the right. This is a comparison of where the team was at the All-Star break last year and where they are at this year. As you can see, some MLB rankings can vary based off the year, and you need to keep in mind the team has played more games this year before the break.

But it is rather eye-opening. We knew they were going to sacrifice walks for strikeouts. But it has resulted in relatively no change in the on-base percentage or average, but only increased the power numbers with more home runs, a higher slugging percentage and a higher OPS. Does it matter that they went from striking out less than all but one team to striking out more

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than all but five teams? No, because the offense is more productive.

Look at their pitching. It barely improved rankings wise, but just the .20 decrease in ERA has resulted in better pitching. It may not be drastic, but it is night and day the way the team is pitching this year compared to last. Just look at the strikeouts. They're getting more swings and misses and that is going to help you and save some runs. I have to further this point later, but look at something else real quick to help tie that point in.

Remember how June has been the big breaking point for this team the past two seasons? Well, not this year. It is even more evident in the monthly breakdown that the pitching has been the reason that this team has looked as strong as it has and has avoided that "June Swoon".

The offensive numbers are relatively the same, with only 10 more runs scored in June than last year, similar averages and OPSes. But the ERA went from 4.87 in 2012 to 4.14 in 2013. That's substantial because the pitching did not give in like it did last year. If you remember, the starts that Jeanmar Gomez and Derek Lowe got off to were really big reasons that the team fell off the map. Once those two took dives, the team did as a whole.

That brings me back to the rotation as a whole. You have had the same five starters start 81 of the 95 games, which is really what you need in a successful rotation. Consistency. Corey Kluber and Zach McAllister have combined for 26 starts with 139 strikeouts and ERAs of 3.88 and 3.45. This compared to the 26 starts by Josh Tomlin and Jeanmar Gomez, who struck out just 83 hitters and had ERAs of 5.45 and 5.18. That's a huge amount of runs not scoring thanks to two starters.

Scott Kazmir has made two less starts than Derek Lowe and actually has a higher ERA. But he has 56 more strikeouts and after the break, Lowe went 0-4 with just 17.1 innings pitched and a 11.94 ERA. Obviously, the big key moving forward is Kazmir not regressing to that, which he most likely will not because he is not as old as Lowe was. Lowe was working some veteran magic and the league finally caught up to him. If anything, Kazmir's 3.71 in three July starts lead you to believe he's only going to get better. He's also sharp at home with a 5-0 record a a 3.92 ERA.

The pitching as a whole has 12 shutouts, which is the most in the American League. It's also

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double of what they had for the entire 2012 season. And only Boston had fewer shutouts in 2012. That is a lot of zeros the staff has put up as a whole (over 100) and it shows you just how better the pitching has become.

But can it continue? We talked about Kazmir possibly getting better, but the Indians need four other guys.

The shining star has been Justin Masterson. He's improved and bounced back in a big way from a disappointing 2012. Not only was he bad in the first half, he got even worse in the second half with a 6-7 record a a 5.60 ERA. This year, he's .68 points better in his ERA, he's tossed more innings, has more strikeouts, putting in more stronger efforts in his first All-Star season.

The reason? He's been so much better against the right handed hitters. Masterson has and always will struggle to some degree with lefties. They hit .296 off of him last year, he gave up 13 home runs and walked 56. And he faces a lot of them. This year he's got that average down to .257 in more than 300 at-bats (he had 456 at-bats last year in a whole season against lefties. But the right handers? He went from .232 with 32 walks in 332 at-bats to shutting right-handers down completely. A .177 average a a .257 on-base percentage in 186 at-bats. The big improvements in both areas have helped, but by dominating righties, he created a little more leeway with lefties.

He's also been more sharp the third time through the lineup. Masterson would run into trouble the third time through last year, hitters reaching base at almost a .400 clip, hitting .313 with six home runs and 29 walks. In 2013 he has the average down to .247 with just 14 walks. He's just eight strikeouts away from matching last year's third time through total in a little less than 100 at-bats. It's the reason he has been able to finish off three shutouts this year.

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