



In the midst of the 14-3 curbstomping of the Chicago White Sox, Tribe fans were treated to one of the game's most underrated moments. Josh Tomlin made his Major League return after missing 13 months at that level as a result of Tommy John surgery and the subsequent rehab. It was a mere footnote in the game, as the Indians held a 14-2 lead when Tomlin took the mound, but for a guy that worked so hard to get the Major Leagues and had to endure the boredom, frustration, and pain that come along with rehabbing from major surgery, it was a great moment for Tomlin and one that Indians fans should remember.

Tomlin's not the first pitcher to have Tommy John and return from it, nor will he be the last. That didn't make it any less special to see him back on the mound. He is a rarity among right handed pitchers in Major League Baseball, listed at 6'1" 190 pounds with a fastball that tops out around 92 and a career strikeout rate of just 4.92 strikeouts per nine innings.

I have long been a fan of Tomlin, mostly because it takes a big set of stones to pitch the way Tomlin pitches. I admire his ability to challenge any hitter in any count despite stuff that most scouts would call average. He attacks the strike zone, as evidenced by his career walk rate of 1.7 walks per nine innings, and evidenced by his ugly home run rate of 1.36 per nine innings. There's something to be said about a guy who pitches with no fear when he doesn't have an upper-90s fastball to back it up.

In the age of social media, it was Tomlin's rehab that endeared him to many fans, well, except members of PETA. Tomlin is a pretty quiet guy with the media, but Twitter gave the seemingly shy Texan the opportunity to communicate with fans in a setting that was exactly his speed. He posted plenty of [pictures](#) of his [dogs](#), a lot of dead ducks, and talked about his [taste in music](#). As you can see in the last link, Copenhagen made a cameo appearance or two. At times, he

was simply a fan, tweeting “atta boys” at and about his teammates.

A lot of guys exhibit tremendous perseverance in baseball and never make it to the pinnacle. They will bounce around the minor leagues for years and years waiting for a shot that never comes. Others defy the odds. Others, like Josh Tomlin, make it on heart, intelligence, and possibly a little bit of luck.

In 2005, Baseball America broke down the top 95 prospects in the state of Texas. Listed at #95 was RHP/SS Josh Tomlin, a sophomore at Angelina Junior College in Lufkin, TX. Tomlin went undrafted as a high school pitcher and infielder out of Whitehouse High School in Whitehouse, TX and opted to go to the junior college route because, as Tomlin said in a [2011 interview](#) with MLB.com’s Jordan Bastian, “My parents couldn’t afford college. I couldn’t afford college. I’ve got to go somewhere where I can get a scholarship.”

For the son of hair stylist and a power plant worker, the old baseball adage, “If you’re good enough, they’ll find you”, rang true. Tomlin was taken in the 11th round by the San Diego Padres in the 2005 MLB Entry Draft. That great moment, however, left Tomlin with another decision. Texas Tech University was calling and they wanted Tomlin to pitch. Tomlin opted to go back to school rather than sign with the Padres.

The Indians took Tomlin in the 19th round of the 2006 draft. Tomlin was dealing with tendinitis in his elbow at the time, but the Indians took a gamble, and Tomlin understood that, signing with the Indians for a bonus of \$30,000 rather than returning to Texas Tech for another year to try and improve his draft stock.

Tomlin made 15 starts for Mahoning Valley in 2006 after signing and went 8-2 with a 2.09 ERA and a very impressive 0.92 WHIP. In 2007 and 2008, the Indians experimented with using Tomlin in a relief role, something he did in 43 of his 73 appearances over that span. He never complained, getting a few starts mixed in with pitching in relief. Despite success at every level, Tomlin was never once named to Baseball America’s Top 10 Indians prospects list prior to the start of any of his minor league seasons.

All the hard work paid off for Tomlin on July 27, 2010 when his name was written on the lineup card to pitch against the New York Yankees. The Yankees lineup that day? Derek Jeter, Nick

Swisher, Mark Teixeira, Alex Rodriguez, Robinson Cano, Curtis Granderson, Juan Miranda, Francisco Cervelli, Brett Gardner. Oh, yeah, and he was pitching against former Cy Young winner CC Sabathia. The Yankees entered the game with a 63-35 record. Tomlin threw seven innings and allowed just one run on three hits. His first Major League win came against a potential Hall of Famer by outdueling Sabathia, a surefire Hall of Famer in Derek Jeter, and possibly a third Hall of Famer if the voters somehow overlook all of Alex Rodriguez's transgressions.

It's hard to tell when, exactly, Tomlin's ulnar collateral ligament troubles flared up, resulting in Tommy John surgery in September 2012. Tomlin began his career by going 6-4 with a 4.56 ERA over the rest of 2010. His first half of 2011 was outstanding. Tomlin went 10-4 with a 3.83 ERA and even got some All-Star Game buzz. He posted better than a 4.6/1 strikeout-to-walk rate and a 1.02 WHIP.

Just going by the results, it would seem that Tomlin's elbow may have taken a turn for the worse in June of 2011. Tomlin was 6-2 with a 2.74 ERA over his first 10 starts. The rest of the season, Tomlin was 6-5 with a 5.24 ERA. Interestingly, Tomlin didn't show the usual signs of injury, which are a drop in velocity and a drop in control. He walked 11 batters in 99.2 innings from June through the end of the season. Something didn't seem right, however, as Tomlin's command sagged. He made just eight starts after the All-Star Break as he spent September shut down.

Nothing went right for Tomlin in 2012. He missed time due to a wrist injury sustained while trying to grip a wet ball during a May doubleheader against the White Sox that saw the nightcap played in a veritable downpour. In his 21 starts, opponents slugged .518 against him, with 18 homers allowed in just 102.1 innings. Tomlin's control sagged and his walks went up as his strikeouts went down. In Tomlin's final two starts of the season, August 5 and August 12, Tomlin threw just 35.9 percent and 30.8 percent of his pitches in the strike zone. For a guy who had exhibited tremendous control throughout his career, that was a sign that he had reached his breaking point with the elbow.

His return was an emotional sight on Thursday night. You could hear the emotion in Fox Sports SportsTime Ohio play-by-play broadcaster Matt Underwood's voice when Tomlin came in. Dozens of people mentioned [@jtomlin43](#) in tweets or tweeted at him to congratulate him for his return. It's unknown what the reaction was of Josh Tomlin Superfan Danielle McPeek, oldest daughter of TCF writer Brian McPeek, but it's a reasonable assumption that she was just a tiny bit excited.

Tomlin looked good on Thursday night. He sat around 91 with the fastball, topping out at 93, showed a very good cutter, and mixed in an occasional curve ball. He threw 30 pitches, 23 for strikes, during a pretty moderate rain shower. It was about as low of a low leverage situation as it gets with a 14-2 lead, but control is usually the last thing to return following major surgery. Tomlin didn't walk a batter, continuing a trend he started during his minor league rehab when he threw 27.1 innings without issuing a walk. He had a 21/0 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

Tommy John surgery is a humbling experience for most, but to see it happen to a guy like Tomlin, who doesn't take anything for granted, was a disappointing thing. But with the past behind him, the focus now shifts to the future. I, personally, want to see Tomlin win the fifth spot in the rotation out of Spring Training. With no true idea when Tomlin's UCL trouble started, and with the revelation on Thursday night's broadcast that Tomlin had attempted to pitch through the injury for over a year, we don't know what Tomlin is capable of or what to expect. It's unlikely that a healthy Tomlin performs like the unhealthy Tomlin of 2012. Is he the pitcher from the first couple of months of 2011?

From a team perspective, Tomlin would be a cheap option as the fifth starter. He's arbitration-eligible for the first time following this season and he won't see much of a salary raise after spending the last 12 calendar months rehabbing from Tommy John. The Indians should try to turn Carlos Carrasco into a reliever a la Luke Hochevar of the Kansas City Royals, another failed starter finding tremendous success at the back end of the bullpen. The Indians are likely to lose Joe Smith, Matt Albers, and Rich Hill to free agency, so there are spots that Carrasco could fill. Trevor Bauer is still an enigma, so the Indians shouldn't rely on him in a fifth starter role. Using a guy like Tomlin at the back end of the rotation would allow the Indians to fix their position player and bullpen holes in free agency rather than spend money on a depth starter.

Regardless of what happens from this moment forward, it was great to see Tomlin back on the mound for the Indians. He's very easy to root for. Although the success rate of Tommy John is higher than it has ever been, there are no guarantees that a pitcher will make it back after such a major surgery. Luckily for Tomlin, he looked sharp and can now focus on becoming an important contributor instead of just trying to get back between the lines of the game he loves.