



It really doesn't take a whole lot to figure out why the Indians are in a playoff race deep into September. Big money free agents Nick Swisher, who has gotten going of late, and Michael Bourn are having more of a supplemental effect on this season's playoff chase. The bulk of the credit goes to the starting pitchers and pitching coach Mickey Callaway. The dramatic turnaround for the Indians, both in the team's record and in the starting pitchers' performance, is one of the least discussed, yet most impressive notes of the 2013 season.

The 2012 Indians rotation was historically bad. The rotation ranked 28th in ERA (5.25), 27th in fielder-independent pitching (FIP) (4.73), 29th in strikeout percentage (K%) (15.3%), walked the third-most batters (BB%) (8.7%), and allowed the ninth-most home runs per nine innings (HR/9) (1.19). Those were incredibly bad numbers, but the reasons were clearly evident. The Indians' starters didn't miss enough bats, allowed too many home runs – likely from pitching behind in the count so much – and walked too many batters.

Of the 162 starts last season for Indians pitchers, 99 of them were started by pitchers who have started for the 2013 Cleveland Indians. Justin Masterson (34), Ubaldo Jimenez (31), Zach McAllister (22), and Corey Kluber (12) combined to go 28-45 with a 4.95 ERA. Collectively, they racked up 466 strikeouts and 239 walks in 571.1 innings pitched. That's a strikeout-to-walk ratio of below 2/1, which is considered poor.

This season, Masterson, Jimenez, McAllister, and Kluber are a combined 43-33 with a 3.61 ERA. Collectively, they have 571 strikeouts against just 224 walks in 609 innings. That's a strikeout-to-walk ratio of 2.5/1, which is considered above average. Same four guys, but much different results.

Overall, as a starting rotation, the 2013 Indians have improved in almost every important pitching category. They are 15th in ERA (3.98), ninth in FIP (3.83), second in K%, and 14th in HR/9 (0.98). The interesting thing about this year's starting rotation is that they have walked a near-identical percentage of hitters, but it has not been the killer that it was last season.

The gap in ERA and FIP in 2012 was an indication that the Indians had some problems defensively. The Indians had the second-worst UZR, ultimate zone rating, and the third-lowest total of defensive runs saved. This year's Indians have improved slightly in UZR, now only the sixth-lowest mark in baseball, and rank 23rd in defensive runs saved. What these numbers tell us is that the defense has been better, but not substantially to the point where it explains the massive improvement of the starting rotation.

Scott Kazmir and Danny Salazar have clearly been positive additions to the starting rotation. Replacing Derek Lowe, Josh Tomlin, and Jeanmar Gomez's innings from 2012 with Kazmir and Salazar has been a sizable upgrade, but the dramatic turnaround for the four holdovers from last season's rotation has been the biggest reason why the Indians are in the playoff race.

Of those four pitchers, only Zach McAllister has seen a drop in his strikeout rate. Likewise, only Zach McAllister has seen a spike in his walk rate. More strikeouts and fewer walks are clearly a good thing. The fewer balls put in play, the fewer hits a pitcher allows. Less walks means fewer baserunners. Throughout Manny Acta's tenure, we heard him talk about the importance of throwing strike one and attacking the zone. It didn't seem to resonate in the way that it has this season.

Without question, a lot of the credit goes to Mickey Callaway. Remember how media members and broadcasters would harp on Justin Masterson throwing almost exclusively fastballs? This season, Masterson has thrown over seven percent more sliders this season, according to PITCHf/x data. Masterson, by Fangraphs's pitch value statistics, has the league's second most-valuable slider, trailing only Yu Darvish, and one spot ahead of Jose Fernandez. For pitch type values, a score of zero is average. Masterson's slider is at 18.6. Without getting too advanced, pitch type values, in this case, wSL, is a metric of how many runs a pitcher is above average with a given pitch. Last season, Masterson's wSL was 0.6.

Last season, Ubaldo Jimenez's second-worst pitch by pitch type value was the curve ball. He threw the curve almost 10 percent of the time last season. This season, Jimenez has focused more on the slider than on the curve ball, throwing eight percent more sliders this season.

Jimenez's slider value has increased from 0.4 to 5.6. Jimenez has thrown more sliders and changeups this season and that has greatly improved his fastball.

In terms of other changes, Zach McAllister is using his two-seam fastball more than last season, which has helped to limit his home run total. Corey Kluber's increased use of a cut fastball has made him substantially more effective against left-handed hitters.

The pitching coach has a lot of responsibilities. Not only does he have to make sure that his guys are mechanically sound, but he also works with the catchers and the pitchers to set up the gameplans. For Callaway, he looked at the strengths and weaknesses of his pitchers from the previous season and made the necessary adjustments. The Indians' rotation was tied for 28th in swinging strike percentage last season at 7.5 percent. This season, the Indians rank eighth at 9.1 percent.

A stat that gets overlooked by most people is a stat labeled "Z-Contact%", or zone-contact percentage. It's the percentage rate at which opposing hitters make contact with a pitch in the strike zone. Last season, the Indians had the second-highest Z-Contact% in baseball, as hitters made contact with 90 percent of the pitches thrown in the strike zone. This season, the Indians have the fourth-lowest percentage at 86.4 percent.

Indians pitchers can "throw it past" opposition hitters and that means a lot. Pitchers have to be able to get swinging strikes in the zone when behind in the count or to put hitters away. It's a sign that Indians' starters are mixing their pitches better, keeping hitters off-balance, and throwing more quality strikes. These percentages may seem rather small, but we're talking about a sample size of over 14,000 pitches for the starters so far this season. A change of 3.6 percent, the improvement from 2012 to 2013, is over 400 pitches. That's 400 more swings and misses than the rotation got last season with two weeks left in the season, just on pitches in the strike zone alone. That's 400 more instances where it's a swing and a miss instead of a ball hit in play. That's significant.

Think of the trickle-down effect it creates. There are fewer baserunners. There's less pressure on the defense. There are fewer chances for the defense to make errors, misplay balls, or simply not get to a ball in play. The number of runs saved by swings and misses cannot be determined by the data publicly available, but you can bet that the Indians' analytics department knows exactly how much that benefits the team.

People don't really seem to appreciate how big this turnaround has been for the Indians this season. It has taken a lot of transition to get to this point, and the front office and the coaching staff should be applauded for their efforts. Between Masterson, Kluber, McAllister, and Jimenez, Callaway and those four individuals have taken what looked like a serious question mark and turned it into the chief reason why the Indians are in a position to make the playoffs for the first time since 2007.

That deserves to be applauded, not met with skepticism. It deserves to be celebrated, not downplayed. It takes one hell of an effort from a lot of people to have a team contending after five-and-a-half months of baseball. With any luck, the ride is just beginning, but if we have to get off the ride sooner than we wanted to, at least we have the starting rotation to thank for giving us the opportunity to climb on board.