



The Cleveland Indians do not have a superstar. There are no Cy Young candidates. There are no MVP candidates. If you're into traditional stats, the team will finish the year without a guy that hit 25 home runs, without a .300 hitter, without a 90 RBI guy, without a pitcher with 15 wins, without a starter with an ERA under 3.00, without a closer with 35 saves, and without a pitcher with 200 strikeouts.

If you're into advanced stats, the Indians will have three position players with over three wins above replacement player, which is classified as a "good player". Players between 2-3 WAR are considered "solid starters", by Fangraphs's definition of WAR. One "All-Star" in Jason Kipnis. Zero superstars, which is 5-6 WAR, and clearly no MVP-caliber players, which is 6+ WAR. The Indians have pitcher above three WAR, Justin Masterson. The Indians do have five starters with a fielder independent pitching (FIP) mark that falls between "great" at 3.25 and "above average" at 3.75.

What we're seeing from the Cleveland Indians in 2013 is truly a team effort. Ten players have hit 10 or more home runs with two others currently sitting on a total of nine. Ten players have driven in more than 40 runs. Eight players have scored 40 or more runs. The Indians entered Friday's game ranked 14th in batting average, but seventh in on-base percentage, and 10th in slugging percentage.

Now, as some cruel twist of fate, the Indians look like they'll have to go by committee in one of the most important roles on the team. With Chris Perez's struggles, the Indians may have to go with the dreaded closer-by-committee approach. Due to Vinnie Pestano's ineffective 2013 season, the Indians are left with almost nobody with closing experience outside of Perez. While some people will debate the importance of a closer mentality, there's a reason that closers have

a long leash. Even the most elite setup men in baseball can struggle in the highest of high leverage spots in the ninth inning.

There's a reason why failed closers with one team wind up getting the closer role on another team. It would seem that there's a prerequisite mindset that a reliever must possess in order to have success in that role. Most closers give off a rather dickish persona, which shouldn't come as a surprise. The game is in your hands as a closer. There is no in-between. Either you get the job done or you don't and you better have the mental fortitude to either overcome adversity or pitch without fear.

Without Perez, the Indians lack that guy. Joe Smith, Bryan Shaw, and Cody Allen would appear to be the candidates to get the most save opportunities. Smith is a pitch-to-contact guy, something most managers try to avoid in the ninth. Shaw entered the season with terrible platoon splits against lefties, but he does miss bats and has been the team's most consistent reliever in September. Allen obviously misses bats, but he has just a couple months of high leverage experience this season and has far surpassed his previous high in appearances. His command has been shaky this month as fatigue has to be setting in.

Maybe more than just Perez's ineffectiveness, the Indians will now be forced to take guys out of roles that they've had success in and hope that they can continue it in a more stressful situation. Sure, we can say that they are all professional baseball players and should be able to handle it, but there's still an unknown dynamic at play. Many baseball minds, especially the sabermetrically-inclined believe that closers are overrated and overvalued. It may be true, but regardless of your feelings on bullpen hierarchy and closers, it's not a problem that you want to be discussing on September 27.

When you look at everything that has happened to the Indians this season, from the inconsistencies of the offense to the patchwork bullpen to the incredible turnarounds of Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir, it's amazing that the team is even in the position that they're in. That's a testament to the guys in the clubhouse and the way that the team was built. In this market, the Indians will not be courting superstar free agents and have to hope that whoever they draft becomes a rapidly rising superstar before the team loses contractual control of him. Chris Antonetti did a tremendous job improving the bench and Terry Francona has used them effectively. The platoon split of Mike Aviles and Lonnie Chisenhall at third base has been serviceable. Ryan Raburn and Yan Gomes have punished left handed pitching and held their own against right handers. Carlos Santana has been relegated to a designated hitter role thanks to Gomes's defensive prowess, an unforeseen development back in April. Because of what the bench players have done, the team has been able to withstand down years from

Asdrubal Cabrera, Nick Swisher, and Michael Bourn.

Outsiders will never understand how incredible, and unexpected, this season's run has been for the Indians. Time and time again, the team has looked dead and buried during a losing streak only to rise up and fuel more optimism. They haven't jumped over every stumbling block, but have never done less than awkwardly tumble over to the other side.

This latest one with Perez may be the biggest one of all. Not because Perez is beloved in the clubhouse or anything, but because the Indians are in this race for the simple fact that they do not lose games they have a late lead in. The Indians are 67-11 with a lead entering the sixth inning. Their record improves to 65-6 with a lead entering the seventh. They are 70-6 with a lead entering the eighth and 74-2 with a lead entering the ninth. When you start to move guys around, your middle relief depth is what suffers. Smith, Allen, and Shaw may all still do fine in the seventh, eighth, and ninth, but who is the bridge to get there? Indians starters have averaged 5.1 innings per start in the month of September. Francona has shown a quick hook for those guys and we saw plenty of quick hooks in last year's postseason. Do the Indians have enough relief depth to withstand an ineffective closer?

We won't have to wait long to find out.