



Mickey Callaway may have been the MVP of the 2013 season and he didn't throw an inning, take an at bat, or pinch run. It was his handiwork with the pitching staff that led to one of the most dramatic turnarounds in baseball last season and helped propel the Indians to a 92-win season and a playoff berth. The most obvious example of Callaway's magic touch was Ubaldo Jimenez, but he was far from the only one. What Callaway was able to do with a rotation that entered the season as a major question mark was a remarkable job.

The Indians finished the 2012 season with the 28th-ranked pitching staff by wins above replacement player according to Fangraphs. The group was worth just 6.3 wins, or 18.6 fewer than the league-leading Detroit Tigers. The Indians' staff ranked 29th in ERA, posted the 24th in FIP, the 29th in K/9, and had the fifth-highest BB/9. For just the starters, who were worth a pathetic 3.3 WAR, they ranked 28th in ERA, 27th in FIP, 29th in K/9, and had the third-highest BB/9. They also ranked 27th in innings pitched, placing a heavy burden on the bullpen.

The 2013 season was decidedly different for the Indians' staff. The group was worth 15 WAR, still 14.3 behind the league-leading Detroit Tigers, but a significant improvement of nearly nine wins from the previous season. Tribe hurlers posted the 15th-best ERA, ninth-best FIP, second-best K/9, and had the second-highest BB/9. For just the starters, they combined for 13.4 of the team's 15 wins above replacement player. That was a 10-win upgrade from 2012. They ranked 14th in ERA, eighth in FIP, second in K/9, and had the fifth-highest BB/9.

The dramatic turnaround included Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir. Kazmir already signed with the Athletic and it seems highly unlikely that Jimenez will be back. Luckily, Callaway also helped Justin Masterson, Corey Kluber, and Zach McAllister improve on their 2012 performance.

Here's a side-by-side look at the 2012 and 2013 seasons for each pitcher:

Masterson:

ERA: 4.93/3.52

FIP: 4.16/3.40

K/9: 6.94/8.94

BB/9: 3.84/.357

WAR: 1.9/3.3

Kluber:

ERA: 5.14/3.92

FIP: 4.29/3.36

K/9: 7.71/8.28

BB/9: 2.57/2.09

WAR: 0.5/2.6

McAllister:

ERA: 4.24/3.75

FIP: 4.24/4.03

K/9: 7.9/6.77

BB/9: 2.73/3.28

WAR: 1.1/1.5

Nobody really talks about the improvements Masterson made in 2013 because of all of the attention that Ubaldo Jimenez got. Also, Masterson had a great season in 2011 that raised the level of expectation for him. He became an anchor for the staff in 2013, limited his troubles against left-handed hitters, and developed into a strong top of the rotation pitcher.

Few things are more valuable from starting pitchers than ground balls and strikeouts. In 2013, [Masterson became one of just seven starters](#) since 2000 to record a ground ball rate of more than 50 percent and strike out nine or more batters per nine innings. The others: Felix Hernandez, Francisco Liriano, Jon Lester, Stephen Strasburg, AJ Burnett (twice), and Matt Clement. Factor in that the Indians had the sixth-worst infield defense in baseball (using the defensive runs saved metric) and Masterson could have been even better.

Using the wonderful PITCHf/x data at BrooksBaseball.net, we can see some of the adjustments that Masterson made in 2013. From [2008-12](#), Masterson threw his slider 17.44 percent of the time to left-handed batters. In 2013, Masterson threw the slider 24.46 percent of the time to lefties. Increased use of the slider against lefties helped Masterson to strike out two more lefties per nine innings than in his previous season. Overall, Masterson threw more sliders this season than ever before and it led to more strikeouts.

For Kluber, it was simply a matter of getting comfortable pitching at the Major League level. In Kluber's 12-start stint in the big leagues in 2012, he allowed 14 first inning runs. In 24 starts in 2013, he allowed four first inning runs. With growing sample sizes in 2013, Kluber reduced his number of walks and increased his strikeout total. Both things will definitely increase a pitcher's value.

The adjustment for Kluber entering the 2013 season will be the middle innings. Kluber allowed 36 combined runs in the fourth, fifth and sixth innings this year, with an opposing slash line of .313/.350/.456/.806. That comes with the learning curve of growing up as a pitcher. Kluber will have to refine his pitches to deepen his arsenal and mix his pitches better to keep hitters off-balance the second or third time through the lineup.

McAllister is the wild card in this group. He has the frame to be a durable innings-eater, but his arsenal of pitches lacks depth and he tends to struggle in the middle innings as well. The first thing you notice about McAllister's 2013 is that both his strikeout total and his walk total went in an unfavorable direction. McAllister pounded the strike zone in 2012, throwing over 50 percent of his tosses for strikes. In 2013, that number fell below 44 percent. McAllister did suffer various injuries and also experimented with a split-fingered fastball throughout the season. His chase rate and velocity were also down. One has to wonder how healthy McAllister was for most of the season.

There's reason to believe that McAllister can be a viable, and potentially above average, fifth starter. Russell A. [Carleton](#) has been doing great work at Baseball Prospectus about the need for fifth starters as insurance against an injury to one of a team's better starting pitchers (subscription required for most articles). Fifth starters, by and large, are decidedly below average starting pitchers. The average American League starter ERA in 2013 was 4.15 with a 4.08 FIP. The average length of a start was just shy of six innings per start. McAllister, for his career, has a 4.12 ERA, a 4.08 FIP, and is averaging just shy of 5.2 innings per start. Having a league average starter as a fifth starter, assuming the other starters are as good or better than that, is a nice luxury to have.

If Zach McAllister is the wild card, that makes Danny Salazar the “X Factor”. Salazar came on the scene last season and wound up getting the ball in the team’s one-game playoff series against the Tampa Bay Rays. Salazar throws a plus fastball, a plus split-change, and flashes of brilliance with his slider. He’s a very promising young arm. However, to consider him the savior of this rotation is asking a lot.

Salazar threw just 52 innings in the regular season and 452.2 innings over seven seasons in the minor leagues. At just six feet tall and 190 pounds, Salazar’s durability has always been a question, especially with Tommy John surgery in his past. Salazar averaged 17.26 pitches per Major League inning in 2013. He’ll have to learn when to pitch to contact and when to go for the punchout. Hitters fouled off 45 percent of Salazar’s fastballs last season. They also swung and missed at nearly 28 percent of them. Foul balls and deep counts prevent a pitcher from going deep into a game.

Callaway has his work cut out for him again this season. Pitchers find success from doing new things, but it’s a constant struggle to keep hitters off-balance and adjust to what they’re going to do. The rotation remains a question mark, but it may not be in as bad of shape as some fans and pundits think. Health is the key to any pitching staff and if Tribe pitchers stay healthy, there’s no reason they can’t rank in the middle of the pack among the 30 teams in run prevention.