

2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Starting Rotation

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Monday, February 19 2007 7:00 PM -

Pitchers and catchers have already reported, and the position players will arrive in camp later this week. TheClevelandFan.com kicks off its annual Indians preview with a deep look into the Indians starting rotation for 2007. The Tribe returns all five starters from one of baseball's top rotations a season ago. Tony kicks off his detailed Spring Training Preview with a look at the teams starting pitching.



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2006 Flashback: By the Numbers

(Major league ranks in parentheses)

The Indians return all five of their starters from a staff that last year was ranked 3rd in the AL (7th) with a 4.31 ERA, were 2nd (2nd) with 1000.2 innings pitched, and 3rd (3rd) in least amount of walks given up with 263. On the flipside, Indians starters only racked up 600 strikeouts which ranked 12th in the AL (24th) and they also allowed opposing hitters to hit .285 off of them which ranked 12th (27th).

By contrast, in 2005 the Indians had the 5th (10th) ranked starting rotation in the AL with a 3.96 ERA, 4th (7th) most IP with 1006.2, were 4th (5th)

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) in least amount of walks given up with 277, had the 2nd

(7th

) most strikeouts with 692, and 2nd

(6th

) lowest batting average against of .257.

The 2007 Starting Rotation

As the Indians go into 2007, the starting rotation will continue to be the rock of the team that it has been since 2005. There has been very little changeover in the starting rotation the last two years, and the Indians have had great success at keeping their starters healthy. In a possible 324 starts the past two seasons, 310 of those starts have been made by the regular five-man rotation. And, of the other 14 starts, a little over half were starts made by players like Fausto Carmona, Brian Slocum and Jeremy Guthrie last year when rosters expanded in September. In all, only about 4-5 starts in total the last two years were lost by a regular starter to injury.

While a rash of injuries to the starting rotation is hard for any team to overcome, the Indians will be able to sustain an injury or two due to the depth of their starting rotation. In addition to the regular starting staff, the Indians will have a very capable 6th starter option in Fausto Carmona (RHP) in Buffalo who could legitimately be a starter for the Indians right now. Also, starters Brian Slocum (RHP), Adam Miller (RHP), JD Martin (RHP), and Jeff Harris (RHP) will be in the minors and could be useful if the need arises for a spot starter or possibly a long-term option because of an injury.

Here is the Indians starting rotation in the speculated order they will start the season, with a detailed profile of each below:

#1 Starter: C.C. Sabathia LHP #2 Starter: Jake Westbrook RHP #3 Starter: Cliff Lee
LHP #4 Starter: Paul
Byrd RHP #
5 Starter: Jeremy Sowers LHP

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#1 Starter: C.C. Sabathia

2006 Key Stats: 12-11 with a 3.22 ERA, 1.17 WHIP and .247 BAA *Advanced stats:* 8.04 K/9, 3.91 K/BB, .293 OBP, .654 OPS, 3.30

[DIPS](#)

, 1.25

[RA+](#)

Although he is only 26 years old, there is no question about it, Sabathia is the ace of the Indians pitching staff. Sabathia has always put up consistent numbers, as for his career he has compiled an impressive 81-56 record and 3.95 ERA, but in 2006 he appeared to take his game to an elite level.

Sabathia has always had a problem with his weight and conditioning, and it has been something the fans have continually knocked him about over the years, but it may be time to let it go and for the fans to start living with it. Sabathia has been bothered by minor injuries the last two seasons, but even still, in his six major league seasons he has made 30 or more starts in five of them, and the one he did not (last year) he had 28 starts. Also, Sabathia's pre-All Star and post-All Star performances the last two years seem to imply he gets stronger as the season wears on, thereby debunking the conditioning angle yet again. In 2005, Sabathia posted a 4.50 ERA before the All-Star break and a 3.54 ERA after it, and last season he posted a 3.51 ERA before the All-Star break and a 2.97 ERA after it.

Sabathia also continues to improve in a lot of his peripheral stats. Sabathia had set career lows for walks (62), WHIP (1.26), on-base% (.311), OPS (.682), and K/BB (2.60) in 2005, but he bested this in 2006 with new lows for walks (44), WHIP (1.17), on-base% (.293), OPS (.654), and K/BB (3.91). Also, even though he only made 28 starts, he set a career high in strikeouts with 172, and his strikeout rate (K/9) jumped from 7.37 in 2005 to 8.04 last year. Since posting an 8.53 K/9 his rookie year in 2001, his K/9 has steadily climbed back up to that level since he dipped to 6.39 K/9 in 2002. Combined with the upward trend in his strikeout rate, his walks have also decreased considerably. This is a big reason why his K/BB has increased from 1.93 in 2004, to 2.60 in 2005, to 3.91 in 2006.

Compared to other starting pitchers in the AL, Sabathia's 3.23 ERA puts him significantly above the 4.53 league average ERA for starters. Additionally, considering "average" for RA+ is

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1.00, Sabathia's RA+ was 1.25 which is above average. Sabathia also was consistent night in and night out, as he only allowed more than three runs seven times in his 28 starts. In four of those seven games he gave up four runs, and in the remaining three he gave up five or more runs they all occurred in June.

In the last two seasons, Sabathia has taken huge strides to become a legit #1 pitcher and considered probably one of the top 10-15 starters in baseball. Last year, in the American League he finished 3rd in ERA (3.23), 4th in WHIP (1.17), 6th in K/9 (8.04), 1st in complete games (6), 1st in shutouts (2), and 5th in

in strikeout to walk ratio (3.91). Sabathia may be the second best left-hander in the AL next to Johan Santana, and if the Indians have visions of the post-season they need him to stay healthy, consistent, and continue to build on his dominating numbers.

#2 Starter: Jake Westbrook

2006 Key Stats: 15-10 with a 4.17 ERA, 1.43 WHIP and .296 BAA *Advanced stats:* 4.64 K/9, 1.98 K/BB, .341 OBP, .742 OPS, 3.93 DIPS, 1.08 RA+

Since Westbrook's breakout performance in 2004, he has proven to be a reliable starting pitcher for the Indians by staying healthy, eating innings, and being pretty good. Over the last three seasons (2004-2006), Westbrook has made 96 starts, pitched at least 210 innings every year, put up between 55-61 walks each year, had between 109-119 strikeouts each year, racked up 14-15 wins each year and compiled a 44-34 record and 4.01 ERA during that period. He is the very definition of consistent.

Last year, Westbrook was even consistent in his righty (.300 BAA, .743 OPS) and lefty (.290 BAA, .742 OPS) splits and his pre-All-Star (4.19 ERA) and post All-Star (4.15 ERA) splits where there really was no change. Westbrook was also consistent across the board with his situational pitching last season, but the one area he did manage to get hammered hard was with RISP and two outs (.330 BAA, .837 OPS). Getting out of jams has always been one of Westbrook's biggest weaknesses, and is something that if improved upon could move him up another level closer to elite status.

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Westbrook put up a career low in walks (55) and has always been good keeping runners off the bases with free passes; however, he did give up a career high in hits (247) which bested his previous career high he set in 2005 (218) by almost 30 hits. Of no surprise, his WHIP went from 1.30 in 2005 to 1.43 in 2006. Some of this is due to Westbrook himself, but part of the blame falls in the lap of the Indians Swiss Cheese infield defense last season. Westbrook's groundball/flyball ratio was 3.01, which was 4th in the majors. For pitchers - especially a sinkerball pitcher - the rate of hits allowed on balls that are put into play is almost entirely dependent on luck and the skills of the defensive players behind him. So, if you have a struggling defense it is almost always going to have a negative effect on the pitching staff.

Westbrook is just good middle-of-the-rotation starter that many teams would love to have, and being a free agent at season's end, if he stays healthy and remains consistent he is in for a big payday. Since free agency looms for him and he may be too expensive for the Indians to keep (think \$11-13M per year), it is possible that at some point during the season Westbrook could be traded to fill an immediate need on the club. In the meantime, the Indians would be more than happy with another 200 inning, 15 win, and 4.00 ERA season from him.

#3 Starter: Cliff Lee

2006 Key Stats: 14-11 with a 4.40 ERA, 1.41 WHIP and .278 BAA *Advanced stats:* 5.79 K/9, 2.22 K/BB, .330 OBP, .775 OPS, 4.61 DIPS, 0.95 RA+

Like Westbrook, Lee has proven to be an effective middle-of the rotation starter the last three years compiling a 46-24 record to go along with a 4.50 ERA. Lee has pitched 200 or more innings in each of the last two seasons, and never missed a start in his three full seasons in the majors (98 starts).

Like Westbrook, Lee's WHIP jumped from 1.22 in 2005 to 1.41 in 2006, and his BAA jumped from .251 in 2005 to .278 in 2006. Again, some of this is attributable to the much maligned infield defense behind him, but some of his other numbers slipped in a negative direction which is alarming. Notably, from 2005 to 2006 Lee's SLG (.403 to .446) and OPS (.697 to .775) show a significant drop in performance. It should be noted, however, that his 2005 season was such a good season (18-5, 3.79 ERA, .251 BAA, .697 OPS) that there was bound to be a drop-off in production. The jump in performance he made from 2004 (14-8, 5.43 ERA, .268 BAA, .818

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OPS) to 2005 was just as severe as the drop from 2005 to 2006, so we may just have seen a leveling out in his performance last year.

Surprisingly, as a left-handed pitcher Lee doesn't appear to have much of an advantage on lefties as he probably should. Over the last three years, lefties have hit .264 with a .740 OPS off of him, while righties have hit .266 with a .768 OPS. Another concern is his drop in strikeouts the past few seasons. In his first year as a starter in 2004, his K/9 was a very good 8.10, but in 2005 it dipped to 6.37 and last year to 5.79.

Lee has often shown himself to be a six-inning pitcher. Fellow writer [Steve Buffum](#) has often compared [him to a banana](#), which is great description of the type of pitcher Lee really is. Putting Buff's comparison to the test with Lee's three-year numbers from 2004-2006: 1

st

inning .293 BAA, .813 OPS; 1

st

-3

rd

inning .249 BAA, .732 OPS; 4

th

-6

th

inning .279 BAA, .785 OPS; 7

th

-9

th

inning .293 BAA, .830 OPS. This may be a typical distribution for most pitchers, but what may separate Lee is how he typically starts bad in the 1

st

inning, does very well in the 2

nd

-4

th

innings, then starts to lose it in the 5

th

or 6

th

inning. Also, Lee ranked 8

th

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in the AL among starters with 3.81 pitches per plate appearance, and 4th

in the AL with 16.8 pitches per inning. With Lee racking up a high pitch count so quickly, it is no surprise by the 5th

or 6th

inning he starts to struggle.

Lee got off to a rough start last year going 8-6 with a 4.76 ERA and .284 BAA before the All-Star break, but like a lot of the Indians pitchers he performed much better after the break going 6-5 with a 3.96 ERA and .269 BAA. Hopefully Lee can build on that and carry it into 2007. Lee is signed long-term and should be a fixture in the middle of the Indians rotation for several more years.

#4 Starter: Paul Byrd

2006 Key Stats: 10-9 with a 4.88 ERA, 1.51 WHIP and .308 BAA *Advanced stats:* 4.43 K/9, 2.32 K/BB, .343 OBP, .823 OPS, 4.65 DIPS, 0.81 RA+

The Indians signed Paul Byrd last year to help offset the eventual loss of Kevin Millwood to free agency. Byrd did provide a veteran presence to the rotation, and did manage to start 31 games which marked the first time in his career he has made 30 or more starts in consecutive seasons (heck the first time he has ever made 20 or more starts in consecutive seasons).

But, Byrd is clearly the Indians worst returning starting pitcher, and in addition to his injury history his performance from last year in several key areas are cause for concern. Yes, the defense probably affected Byrd the most out of any pitcher as his 2005 numbers in Los Angeles made big jumps when compared to his 2006 numbers in Cleveland. His BAA (.272 to .308....308!!!!), SLG (.430 to .480) and OPS (.728 to .823.....823!!!) all increased significantly, but a lot of that may have been his own undoing.

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Situationally, Byrd didn't exactly get himself out of any jams all year as with runners on base batters hit .303/.827, with RISP they hit .308/.814, with the bases loaded they hit .455/1.371, and with RISP and two outs they hit .308/.812. In addition, lefties absolutely mudded Byrd last year by putting up Little League numbers (.369 BAA, .972 OPS), although Byrd was able to hold righties in check (.256 BAA, .694 OPS), which was actually good. But getting bludgeoned to death by opposing hitters on the year at a .308/.823 clip, being creamed by lefties and folding in key situation makes it one of the great Houdini acts of all-time that he ended the year with only a 4.88 ERA.

Also, unlike most of the other starters, Byrd faded big-time in the second half of the season. At the All-Star break he was 6-6 with a 4.31 ERA and .273 BAA, and after the break was 4-3 with a 5.64 ERA and .350 BAA (!!!!). After the break he pitched every bit as bad as Jason Johnson did before the break. Johnson was sent packing by the team in June after 14 very bad starts where he went 3-8 with a 5.96 ERA and .341 BAA, but Byrd made exactly 14 starts in the second half and was just as bad. With Byrd set to make \$7M this season, there is almost no way he'll be given the Jason Johnson treatment and be flat out released, so the Indians better hope he performs more like he did in the first half of last year so the team benefits or it at least makes him attractive in a trade.

If the Indians could, they probably would unload Byrd who is most definitely the weakest link in the Indians starting rotation and just go with Fausto Carmona as the #5 starter (although slot him 4th like Byrd inbetween Lee/Sowers). As a 5th starter, Byrd's 2006 numbers on the surface (4.88 ERA, 10 wins) look decent, but it is those deeper numbers uncovered above which are very alarming and could be early warning signs of a complete meltdown waiting to happen. Was his performance the second half of last season a tremor before the actual quake?

#5 Starter: Jeremy Sowers

2006 Key Stats: 7-4 with a 3.57 ERA, 1.19 WHIP and .252 BAA *Advanced stats:* 3.57 K/9, 1.75 K/BB, .298 OBP, .689 OPS, 4.65 DIPS, 1.31 RA+

Going into the 2006 season, the Indians chose to sign veteran free agent pitcher Jason Johnson in lieu of letting top pitching prospects Jeremy Sowers and Fausto Carmona battle it out for the #5 starter spot in Spring Training. Their thinking was that going into a contending year they felt more comfortable starting the year with a pitcher with a track record like Johnson -

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around 200 IP, 30 starts, and high 4's ERA a season - rather than deal with the volatility a young, unproven pitcher would bring. Boy, did the Indians ever miss the mark on that one.

Johnson crashed and burned big-time (numbers posted above), while Sowers simply dominated Triple-A at Buffalo going 9-1 with a 1.39 ERA and .224 BAA during the same timeframe. When Johnson was discarded and Sowers got the call, he never really skipped a beat and was arguably the Indians 2nd best pitcher from July on.

Sowers did show a propensity to give up the long ball and was jittery early on as in his first three starts he gave up 4 HRs and was 1-2 with a 7.47 ERA and .277 BAA, but as he settled in he proved to be much tougher as in his final 11 starts he was 6-2 with a 2.73 ERA and .246 BAA. Situation-wise, he was tough on righties (.259 BAA, .696 OPS), but was even tougher on lefties (.225 BAA, .665 OPS). His one problem area - which is understandable and something that hopefully comes in time - was with runners in scoring position. With RISP opposing hitters hit .290/.744, and with RISP with two out they hit .343/.896.

Sowers, a reputed brainiac, is really probably the Indians #4 starter and Byrd #5, but for match-up purposes they likely will have Byrd pitch in-between Lee and Sowers. Coming into the league, he was often tabbed as a young Tom Glavine or John Tudor, and he lived up to that billing in his rookie campaign. A lot of players struggle in their sophomore campaigns, like Peralta last year, but the Indians really feel he will continue to build on his 2006 season. Sowers is a core piece of the team, and is guaranteed to be a mainstay in the Indians rotation for at least another six years.

Buffalo Bound

Fausto Carmona, Brian Slocum, Adam Miller, Jeff Harris, and Jason Stanford

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Up Next: The Bullpen.

Coming Soon: The position players, and in-depth previews of the Indians minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.