

The Race To Buffalo

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Monday, June 04 2007 7:00 PM -

With Jake Westbrook one more rehab start away from a return to the Cleveland rotation, someone is going to have to be sent down to Buffalo. Conventional wisdom says that it will be the struggling Jeremy Sowers, but Paul Cousineau warns us not to forget that Cliff Lee still has two options, and has also been waffling. Paul chronicles Cliffie's struggles, and also examines a couple potential trades in his latest column for us.



While Jake Westbrook certainly didn't impress in his first rehab start (1 1/3 IP, 4 ER 7 H, 1 BB), he is probably going to be making one more start before returning to Cleveland. At that time, the Indians will be forced to create a spot for Jake in the rotation, a spot generally assumed to be presently filled by Jeremy Sowers. However poorly Sowers has pitched (and it has been brutal at times), Cliff Lee is making it a two-horse race to be sent to Buffalo.

Lee still retains two options, so he can be sent to Buffalo just as easily as Sowers and he certainly hasn't been pitching like he belongs in an MLB rotation. Unfortunately for Tribe fans, the two of them look like two boxers unsure who's supposed to be throwing the fight, both doing their damndest to hit the canvas first.

Consider the numbers in their last 3 starts:

Sowers

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16 2/3 IP, 5.40 ERA, 1.32 WHIP

Lee

13 2/3, 13.66 ERA, 2.16 WHIP

Sowers hasn't evoked those comparisons to a young Tom Glavine recently, but Lee has performed significantly worse. Sowers at least has moments of being in control (5 quality starts in 11 games started) and has been victimized by poor relief pitching after him (CaBBrera), while Lee (2 quality starts in 7 games started) continually walks the tightrope and taxes the Tribe bullpen because of his short starts.

Lee is suddenly unable or unwilling to throw his curveball, throwing only fastballs and change-ups, not a good idea unless a pitcher has about a 20MPH-25MPH difference between the two. He bears no resemblance to the pitcher of 2005, when he won 18 games albeit with a good deal of luck and run support.

The problem is that Lee is trending in the wrong direction in some pretty important stats:

2005 - .698 OPS against, 2.75 K/BB, 2.32 BB/9, 6.37 K/9, 8.64 H/9, 1.22 WHIP

2006 - .776 OPS against, 2.22 K/BB, 2.60 BB/9, 5.79 K/9, 10.05 H/9, 1.41 WHIP

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2007 - .904 OPS against, 1.64 K/BB, 3.18 BB/9, 5.22 K/9, 11.12 H/9, 1.59 WHIP

If one or two of those stats showed a regression, it could be overlooked. But the regression is across the board and substantial enough to wonder where Cliff Lee fits on this contending team.

Each will probably get one more start, but it will be interesting to see which direction the Indians decide to go and if, by chance, Lee becomes trade bait to shore up a beleaguered bullpen.

The Indians will have to part with a valuable piece to shore up their bullpen at some point this season. We all know that a package of Brian Slocum and Ben Francisco aren't bringing Akinori Otsuka to fix a bullpen that has sprung a few leaks, so the question needs to be thrown out there – is Cliff Lee that piece?

Not to just throw something against the wall (OK, maybe just to throw something against the wall), but would San Diego be willing to part with a piece (or pieces) of their magnificent bullpen (Scott Linebrink or Heath Bell perhaps) to see if Lee's fly ball tendencies play out well in the expanses of the Petco outfield?

Or maybe the Dodgers (with Jonathon Broxton or Joe Biemel) to get Mark Hendrickson or Brett Tomko out of their rotation and see if Chavez Ravine is kind to Five and (F)Lee?

Lee has a track record of winning (ugly, yes...but still winning), with a fairly

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reasonable contract (\$2.75M in 2007, \$3.75M in 2008, \$5.75M in 2009, club option for \$8M in 2010) that runs for quite a while. So, he is an attractive commodity to other teams in that he's under a club's control for an extended period of time for a reasonable amount of money. But, are the Indians confident in their current stable of pitchers and their arms just below the surface (Atom Miller, Chas Lofgren, etc.) to trade Lee to shore up the back end of their bullpen?

It can certainly be argued (and has been, by me) that solid starting pitching is a commodity too valuable to trade, particularly for a team in contention. But, if Lee no longer falls under that "solid" category, and is on a downward spiral that will result in him either eventually being moved to the bullpen or falling out of favor in the organization altogether, isn't it time to at least explore those options, when a 28-year-old pitcher with 51 career wins has some trade value?

At the beginning of the season there was a prevailing assumption that the Indians would trade Paul Byrd to make room for Atom Miller in the rotation and fill what would become the most obvious need as the season progressed.

Well, Byrd has outperformed most people's expectations and Fausto is playing the Miller role in the scenario. Don't be too surprised if that arm that we all assumed at the beginning of the season to be Paul Byrd to shore up the most obvious need, clearly the bullpen, becomes Cliff Lee.