

Making The Pitch

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
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While the Indians record since the All-Star break is lukewarm at best, their starting pitching has continued to be very good, and that is the basis of Paul Cousineau's latest column for us here at The Cleveland Fan. Paul goes inside the numbers, examining the quartet of Carmona, Sabathia, Westbrook, and Byrd ... and argues that this team doesn't need a lot of offense to make some serious noise down the stretch.



The Indians have been struggling, and are embroiled in a fierce division race with the Tigers. But, fear not, for the foreseeable future is rosy for our beloved Featherheads and it has nothing to do with the continued struggles of the offense.

The Indians are currently running on a 4-man rotation and will continue to do so until August 25th, when either Cliff Lee or Aaron Laffey will be called up to make a start (interestingly AstroCab and...wait for it...Barfield are listed as the players "on the bubble" when the 5th starter is needed). The four pitchers, then, that the Indians will throw every game until that point (and really for most of the remainder of the season) are the reason that the Tribe figures to stay in this neck-and-neck race, regardless of what happens with the offense.

Consider the four current Tribe starters' numbers since the All-Star Game:

Carmona

1.73 ERA, 1.02 WHIP, 38 K, 16 BB, 7.4 IP per start

Sabathia

3.21 ERA, 1.28 WHIP, 43 K, 9 BB, 6.8 IP per start

Westbrook

3.72 ERA, 1.28 WHIP, 21 K, 17 BB, 6.6 IP per start

Byrd

4.89 ERA, 1.46 WHIP, 12 K, 11 BB, 5.8 IP per start

Every pitcher, save Byrd, is sitting on an ERA under 3.75 and a WHIP under 1.30. Take away Byrd's last start against the Yankees (which, I understand, is like saying that Earnest Byner had a great 1987 AFC Championship Game, except for...), and his ERA improves to 3.27, while his WHIP drops to 1.30 and his average start bumps to 6.6 IP.

The consistency and depth of the rotation have kept the Indians in games that they had no right being even in a position to compete. Additionally, the length of the starts has taken the still-very-apparent problems in middle relief out of the equation as starts that go into the 6th or 7th innings allow the Indians to trot out the Scarecrow, Senior Slo-Mo, and JoeBo (knocking firmly on anything that resembles wood) combination to pitch the last few innings of a game.

What this team, and rotation, have been built to do is keep the Tribe in games, regardless of the performance of the offense. If the offense was thriving and the pitching was spotty, the team would be constantly trying to bash their way out of the pitching staff's mistakes, forced to win games 10-8 or 9-6. With the rotation performing like it has, though, the offense just needs to produce a few runs to get this team in the win column.

If (yes, I know, it could certainly be IF) the offense is able to attain some semblance of consistency and knock out 4 to 5 runs a game, the pitching is in place to go on a nice sustained run. At this point, with Carmona (who, you get the feeling could throw a no-hitter every time he takes the bump), C.C., and Jake dealing, the Indians have a chance to legitimately win 3 of every 4 games, with a solid Byrd outing simply acting as icing on the cake.

For years, Tribe fans complained that, while bashing opponents' heads in was nice to the tune of a 13-11 game, strong and deep starting pitching was the key to making a steady playoff push without hoping that the likes of Dave Burba or Jason Bere could hold it together for 5 innings.

Well, here it is, a team built on the bedrock of a starting rotation with shoulders broad enough to put the team on its back to win games 4-2 or 3-0, if necessary.

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Obviously, a nice old 9-1 game would keep the blood pressure down and keep the TUMS in the medicine cabinet. But, irrelevant of the offense and its ability, or inability, to produce runs, the starters should give this team a chance to win on a nightly basis.

Heading down the stretch on a playoff push, that's really all you can ask for.