

Don't Give 'Em The Byrd

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Sunday, October 07 2007 7:00 PM -

The Indians are set to go with Paul Byrd in a very important Game Four tonight in Yankee Stadium, but our Tony Lastoria says that may not be a good thing. In fact, it could be a disaster as Byrd is not a good matchup against this Yankee lineup in Yankee Stadium. Lastoria explains why the Indians may be better off with starting staff ace C.C. Sabathia on short rest, or even taking a gamble on starting the young Aaron Laffey.



Indians Manager Eric Wedge has already named Indians right-handed starter Paul Byrd as the starter for Game Four tonight. In fact, this was already announced back when the series started, as Byrd was lined up to pitch this game all along.

On the surface, going with Byrd seems like a no-brainer. He won 15 games for the Indians this year, is a crafty veteran pitcher, and consistently throws strikes.

But, when looking deeper into this matchup, throwing Byrd in Game Four against this powerful Yankees lineup looks very wrong on many levels.

Byrd is a fly ball pitcher and will face a Yankee lineup tonight that is left-hand heavy with a lot of power and a short porch in right field. The Yankees will trot out seven left-handed hitters against Byrd, and not only are all seven of them tough outs, but all of them have the power to hit the ball out of the ballpark.

This year, lefties hit .302 with an .802 OPS off of Byrd, and from 2004-2006 lefties hit .330 with an .856 OPS. So, he has a lot of problems getting left-handers out.

When you add in the two right-handed hitters, Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez, this is a tough lineup for a fly ball finesse-pitcher like Byrd to face as he does not have the strikeout ability to put batters away himself. On the season, when the Yankees face a finesse pitcher like Byrd, they hit .340 as a team with a .931 OPS. When you look at the numbers as a whole, they are frightening. On an individual basis, here are the career numbers for the Yankees projected

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lineup versus Byrd tonight:

Johnny Damon: .158 AVG (3-19), 0 HR, 2 RBI, .411 OPS
Derek Jeter: .400 AVG (12-30), 0 HR, 4 RBI, .986 OPS
Bobby Abreu: .400 AVG (2-5), 0 HR, 2 RBI, .971 OPS
Alex Rodriguez: .294 AVG (5-17), 1 HR, 4 RBI, .929 OPS
Hideki Matsui: .286 AVG (2-7), 1 HR, 1 RBI, 1.000 OPS
Jorge Posada: .158 AVG (3-19), 0 HR, 3 RBI, .501 OPS
Jason Giambi: .250 AVG (4-16), 1 HR, 1 RBI, .771 OPS
Robinson Cano: .300 AVG (3-10), 1 HR, 1 RBI, 1.000 OPS
Melky Cabrera: .600 AVG (3-5), 1 HR, 6 RBI, 1.771 OPS
TOTAL (including bench players): .291 AVG (46-158), 5 HR, 30 RBI, .841 OPS

Hey, this Yankees lineup is tough on anyone, so it is not like Byrd is the first pitcher to come into Yankee Stadium and be a bad matchup against the Yankees. But, as noted above, the Yankees hitters have had some success in the past off of Byrd.

In the last two seasons with the Indians, Byrd is 0-3 in three starts against the Yankees with an 8.52 ERA and has given up three home runs and 23 hits in 12.2 innings pitched.

Byrd did pitch in Yankee Stadium back in 2005 for the Los Angeles Angels when they faced the Yankees in the playoffs and his team won that game; however, that was more because of excellent run support (Angels won 11-7) than Byrd doing anything spectacular on the mound. Byrd only went 3.2 innings that game, giving up four runs on seven hits and two walks.

The best hope for Indians fans is that Byrd can give the Indians five solid innings where he only gives up three or fewer runs. If the Indians can get at least five innings out of Byrd and still be winning the game or within a run or two, they can bring in the triumvirate of Jensen Lewis, Rafael Perez and Rafael Betancourt to slam the door shut from the sixth inning on to give the offense a chance to catch up or add to the lead. Good or bad, Byrd should be on an extremely short leash tonight where we bring in Aaron Laffey if things start to go bad in the fourth or fifth innings.

With Byrd having to start Game Four, we are now we are seeing how important it was to wrestle away home field advantage from Boston the last week of the season. In addition to them having home field advantage if we play them in the American League Championship Series (ALCS), we also could have chosen the eight-day series starting last Wednesday instead of the seven-day series we ended up with that started last Thursday.

This would have allowed us to skip Byrd in Game Four and bring C.C. Sabathia back on normal rest for Game Four and then Fausto Carmona on normal rest for Game Five.

I don't know about you, but I'd feel a lot better having our two aces going the final two games only needing one win.

Personally, I would have strongly considered throwing Sabathia in Game Four. Yes, he would

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have been on only three days rest instead of the normal four, but Sabathia on three days rest is still a lot better than Byrd or any other starter on the staff not named Carmona.

If they were to start Sabathia, you hope for five to six innings out of him to where he can battle and hold the Yankees to one or two runs, and then if needed, you still have Carmona on normal rest waiting to start Game Five.

Some may view this as a panic move, but not too long ago this used to be the norm in the playoffs where you brought your best starters back on short rest but recently changed in the past decade or so for whatever reason.

If Sabathia was not an option for Game Four, I would have also seriously considered giving left-hander Aaron Laffey the start. During the regular season, the Yankees were only 20-19 in games started by a left-hander while they were 74-49 in games started by a right-hander.

Also, the Yankees have a history, like the Indians, of struggling against pitchers they have never seen, and when you combine that with some of the struggles they have facing lefties, starting Laffey (or Sabathia) instead of Byrd makes a lot of sense.

Here are the Yankees key statistics against left-handers and right-handers this season:

Vs. Left: .284 AVG, .362 OBP, .427 SLG, .789 OPS, 38 AB/HR, 5:1 AB/K

Vs. Right: .292 AVG, .367 OBP, .477 SLG, .844 OPS, 26 AB/HR, 6:1 AB/K

The Yankees team batting average and on-base ability take only small hits against left-handed pitchers, but seeing a 50 point drop in the slugging percentage and the at bat per home run rate drop significantly shows me left-handers have a much better chance of holding the Yankees in check and keeping the ball in the ballpark. This is key when facing the Yankees, as they often rely on the home run ball.

Another thing to consider with a Byrd start in Game Four is not only do we start the mediocre Byrd instead of the Cy-caliber Sabathia (and then Carmona in Game Five), but we also sit one of our most potent bats in Ryan Garko in order to start Byrd's personal catcher Kelly Shoppach.

That is a double whammy there.

Obviously, the Indians are aware of all these statistics and trends as they have an entire staff that researches this information not only with the use of traditional statistics listed above, but also with the new a lot of the new non-traditional statistics ([sabermetrics](#)) as well. Still, when looking at all the data above, it is hard to really make a case of why Paul Byrd is the smart play here.

It is great Byrd won 15 games this year, and he is a veteran and all, but the Indians need to put loyalty aside and do what works best to win games.

And what is best for the team is not putting Byrd on the hill tonight.

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Of course, Paul Byrd can go out and pitch the game of his life tonight and lead the Indians to victory, and this all could be a moot point anyway after the game. And I hope this happens. Still, going into this game I just do not feel confident Byrd will get the job done.

Games are not played on paper, but in baseball it is one of the sports where the numbers usually do not lie, especially when they are as overwhelming as they are in this case.

That all said, even if Byrd is a disaster tonight and we lose, the series is far from over for the Indians. But, it will have gotten a whole lot tougher and intense as they head to a great pitching matchup of Sabathia versus Andy Pettitte in a do-or-die Game Five in Cleveland this Wednesday.