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Always tagged as a player to watch as he moved through the Indians' farm system, he made his big league debut in 2006 bouncing around among various roles before settling in as a setup man, one of the few bright spots of that '06 bullpen.

If Indians management had kept him in that role, who knows how his future might have panned out. But as we all know, the Indians, solidly out of contention that year, traded Bob Wickman to the Braves and decided to toss Carmona into the fire of ninth-inning save situations.

The result might have ruined a lesser pitcher. Two walk-off homers surrendered in the span of a week. One to Pudge Rodriguez in Detroit and one to David Ortiz under the bright lights of Fenway Park.

By the end of the season, Carmona's name was a 10-loss punch line. Fans of other teams giggled when mentioning Carmona's name in the presence of a Cleveland fan, usually accompanied by a snide remark like "Bet you just LOVE him, don't you?"

We've seen it before, this paralysis-by-overanalysis mishandling of a pitcher that seems to get the better of the Tribe's big brains every few years. Danys Baez bounced around between the rotation and the bullpen, eventually bouncing his way out of the organization. Jason Davis had other issues, namely command of his stuff, working against him, but the Tribe's waffling on his role probably didn't help him get his sea legs.

So you could be excused if you expected to see Carmona arrive for spring training 2007 as a bundle of knotted nerves in need of a psychologist more than a pitching coach.

But what transpired was a great show of perseverance from a young ballplayer. Carmona, reinstated as a starter, had to wait his turn, but when injuries to Cliff Lee and Jake Westbrook opened the door, Carmona rushed in and hasn't looked back.

Nineteen wins later, Carmona was fourth in the AL Cy Young Award voting and, along with C.C. Sabathia, formed the best 1-2 pitching punch in baseball.

Through two starts in 2008, Carmona has shrugged off concerns about his endurance after pitching 215 innings a year ago. He has been nothing short of dominant, far and away the best pitcher in the Tribe's rotation in the young season.

Armed with a mid-90s fastball, heavy sinker and developing off-speed stuff, there is reason to believe he'll only get better, granted the blessing of good health.

He's the right pitcher coming along at the right time for the Tribe. With the more-than-likely departure of C.C. to a deep-pocketed team this winter, Carmona will soon be thrust into the role of undisputed ace, Game 7 starter and stopper of losing streaks. It's a hefty load, but if Carmona's showing since last April is any indication, he'll be up to the challenge.

In a roundabout way, Carmona's disaster of a stay in the closer's role two years

ago was a blessing in disguise. It gave birth to a new pitcher, one who is battle-tested, even-keeled and mature. Those are just the qualities a staff ace needs. And that's just what Carmona is becoming.