

Hitting The Quarter Pole

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Wednesday, May 14 2008 7:00 PM -

The Indians brass constantly cites that magical 40-game mark as the first time in the season that they take a long look at the numbers and performances and seriously look at changes. Well, we're there. And it's time to evaluate what's gone right for the Tribe in the first quarter of the season, what's gone wrong, and what could be in store for the final 75% of the regular season. Paulie Kooz does this all for us in his latest column.



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And it's time to evaluate what's gone right for the Tribe in the first quarter of the season (in splendid fashion), what's gone wrong (which is pretty obvious, but bears revisiting with some new numbers), and what could be in store for the final 75% of the regular season:

What's Gone Right

Yes, it's the starting pitching coming at you in gobs as the statistics just keep getting better. How have the starters performed in May? After Byrd's win on Tuesday night, they've cumulatively compiled a 1.49 ERA, averaging more than 7 innings per start with a WHIP of 1.08 over the team's last 11 games, compiling 48 K to go against 18 BB (9 of them from Carmona). The crazy thing is that every night each of these pitchers seem to be playing a game of "Can You Top This?" as every starter is going deep into games, pounding the strike zone, minimizing baserunners, working out of jams, and basically carrying what is otherwise a very flawed team right now. If pitching carries the day, there's little doubt that the Tribe has it in spades without a weak link emerging. If anything, the fact that Westbrook is ready to come off of the DL means that the Indians have to make a decision on sending Aaron Laffey down to Buffalo.

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What has the Babyfaced Bulldog (Laffey) done since getting called up? Just post a 1.83 ERA with a 0.86 WHIP while watching opponents post a .192 SLUGGING PERCENTAGE against him. What does that mean? It means that nobody's getting on base (low WHIP) against the Indians "depth" starter and when they are getting on base, they're not getting much more than a single. In 19 2/3 IP, Laffey has given up one (ONE!) extra base hit, a double to Marco Scutaro of the Blue Jays. Laffey has done nothing but sparkle since his promotion and he's (technically) the 6th starter in the organization! As obtuse as it may seem, it's true that sending him down to Buffalo when Westbrook returns makes the most sense. With Carmona, Sabathia, and Lee (more on him in a moment) going like they are and with their track record, it's absurd to even consider such a thing. The only other option would be to consider moving Paul Byrd to the bullpen, but he continues to get hitters out with his beguiling mix of deception and Crisco, so I couldn't see the Indians sending a veteran like Byrd out to the bullpen after a performance like his 7+ innings against the A's on Wednesday. In reality, as much as Laffey has done everything asked of him, sending him to Buffalo to continue to go every 5th day and wait for his next chance to throw some sinkers in Cleveland as these things strangely have a way of working themselves out ... right, Fausto?

But enough conjecture about what's coming, let's get back to the glory that is the Tribe starters by focusing on the man who Lucifer apparently had a meet-and-greet with over the off-season ... one Clifton Phifer Lee. In my season preview, I "predicted" (loose term) that Lee's struggles from 2007 would continue and that he would be moved to the NL with Michaels for another arm and bullpen help. I'd like to now sit down with this heaping plate of crow before me and lay out some statistics for Lee for you as to see them altogether truly puts them in perspective:

7 games
53 2/3 IP
32 Hits Allowed
4 Walks Allowed
5 Runs Allowed
4 Earned Runs Allowed
44 Strikeouts
0.67 ERA
0.67 WHIP
.193 Batting Average Against
.220 Slugging Percentage Against

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Truthfully, I don't know how to paint a prettier picture with my words than to just sit and admire those numbers. The fact that they're coming from a player that was sent down to the minors, left off of the postseason roster, got into a fight with the unquestioned leader of the team, doffed his cap to the booing home crowd, and was essentially written off by most (I know one...) last year is nothing short of astounding. Can he keep this up? History says no (there have only been 16 instances of a pitcher's ERA finishing under 2.00 since 1969), but with each passing dominant start, it becomes harder to believe that he can't just do whatever he wants out there.

Let's be honest - if there's one aspect of your team that you want to be going right, it's starting pitching, and the Indians have quality coming out of their ears. Regardless of what the offense isn't doing and how unsettled the bullpen still seems to be, the starting pitching that the Indians are getting right now on a nightly basis leads me to still believe that the AL Central is theirs for the taking as no team in the Central (much less the AL, or even in all of MLB) can match the consistency that they get from their starters, allowing them to stay in games when their offense shows up, as well as when the offense goes MIA.

Would it be great if the starting pitching we're getting was supplemented by a potent offense? Absolutely...but since it's not, we'll have to force ourselves to watch the deepest and most talented rotation in baseball.

Sigh.

What's Gone Wrong

The offensive struggles of the team are well-documented as the entire team, with the exception of Grady Sizemore, is [hitting less than what should marginally be expected based on their career benchmarks](#)

. The team ranks next to last in OPS in the AL (besting only the Tony Pena, Jr.-led Royals' offense) and rank ahead of only the Nationals and Padres in all of MLB in terms of SLG, which means that the few times the Indians are able to make contact with the ball, there are very few extra-base hits (the lifeblood of the offensive rally) to go around. Unfortunately, it's not getting any better as the Indians have posted an OBP of .276 in the first two weeks of May heading into the Oakland series and a collective SLG of .305 in that timeframe.

Do you want that collective absurdity in perspective?

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Jason Bartlett, the Tampa Bay Rays SS who couldn't hit enough to stay on the Twins (and his numbers are actually down from his time in Minnesota), is sitting on an OBP of .276 for the season with a season SLG of .295. So, for the first two weeks of the month, the Indians' offense has been about as effective cumulatively-speaking, as nine Jason Bartletts. I know that the characterization is a bit broad, but the Indians' offense is struggling so completely and the fact that the team has posted an OPS of .619 over the last week prior to the Tuesday's game against the A's (which includes the 18 runs scored in the first two games of the Blue Jays' series) shows that this team is not close to coming out of their offensive funk.

Knowing that the problem is widespread, why is so much of the blame heaped on the struggles of Travis Hafner, whose OPS sits at .667 and who now occupies the #5 or #6 hole in the lineup? Essentially, the problem that trickles down from Hafner's difficulties at the plate is that it throws the whole lineup into flux as the team has used 33 different batting orders in their 39 games. The effect of Hafner's inability to anchor the lineup (as opposed to BEING an anchor in the lineup) is that Martinez is forced into the #4 hole, The Looch is thrown into the #3 hole, Peralta and Garko are forced to struggle ABOVE Hafner instead of allowing their problems to be worked out deeper in the lineup, and the maturation of Frank the Tank, The Ben Francisco Treat (who, after posting a .623 OPS in Buffalo, has batted ahead of Hafner in the lineup more times than he has followed him since his call-up from AAA), and Asdrubal are exposed as some of the run-producing burden that Hafner was thought to shoulder falls to the youngsters and so on and so on.

Does this team need Hafner to return to his 2005 and 2006 numbers?

It would be nice if it were to happen, but all this team needs Hafner to do is to develop some consistency and settle even around the .850 OPS, which would allow the rest of the lineup to settle and would form some sort of semblance of a middle of the order with Martinez. As obvious as it is, it bears mentioning that they can win without Pronk setting the tone from the middle of the lineup; it just won't be as smooth or easy as it would be with him.

Now, for as much heat as the offense has taken and the frustration of watching a starting pitcher go nine scoreless innings, only to see a loss come about in the 10th, the 2008 bullpen has been nearly as guilty as the offense in squandering games for the Indians' brilliant starting pitchers. The Indians have the worst save

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percentage in the AL, blowing 6 of 12 save opportunities, tying them at the bottom of the AL with the Tigers with a putrid 50% save percentage. And this is all with Brodzoski (The Close) only pitching 4 of the 97 2/3 innings that the Indians' bullpen has logged so far this year. While JoeBo did blow 2 saves in his limited time on the Tribe, he certainly has not been alone in his struggles as Perez and Betancourt are both sporting WHIP's over 1.50. The bullpen has had its bright spots with Masa Kobayashi acquitting himself nicely to MLB and Jensen Lewis having an excellent year, except for a weeklong stretch in mid-April; but the relievers as a whole seem to still be sorting themselves out in the new season.

Where Borowski fits when (or, I hope, rather if) he comes back remains a mystery as Wedge has said that he'll be re-inserted as the closer and Betancourt hasn't exactly evoked memories of his 2007 season that made it look like his ascension to the closer role was a foregone conclusion. Maybe Borowski comes back and (somehow) settles the bullpen by allowing the rest of the relievers to settle back into their roles by saving games with an arm full of bubble gum and chicken wire...stranger things have happened. Of course, he could just as easily find out in a bullpen session that the tank is simply empty (or he's feeling bone on bone in his elbow or shoulder or wherever), leaving the Indians to sort out the back end of their bullpen before it blows too many games, working in concert with the anemic offense to sabotage the starting pitching to prevent the team from making a sustained run to distance themselves in the division. Whatever should happen, the bullpen remains a work in progress that needs to be settled, particularly with the small margin of error it figures to continue to work with if the offensive woes continue.

What Could Be In Store

With the knowledge that very few teams are running up the white flag this early in the season and are likely to be reticent to move any piece of value that would help the Indians immediately, it remains obvious that all internal options to remedy the Indians' offense and fortify the bullpen need to be exhausted before any external move is made. The DFA and trade of Jason Michaels was a decent (if very minor) first step, but nobody thought that it would serve as the cure-all for the offense (it was simply [a move that should have been made before the season](#) , as insignificant as it was). Ben Francisco has played well in his brief time in Cleveland, but simply inserting him into the "Michaels" role surely isn't going to fix everything. At this point, minor moves like that are really all that the Indians can do, offensively-speaking, until the principals of the lineup (hopefully)

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turn the corner.

One of those minor moves that looks to be nothing more than a pipe dream at this point is to see Andy Marte play even a few games a week at 3B instead of Casey Blake, who apparently has grown some deep roots at the Hot Corner. Let me start this by saying that I do think that Blake is a valuable piece of this team, but the valuable aspect of Blake (namely, his versatility) is not being utilized as his inclusion in the lineup nearly every day at 3B have turned him into strictly a 3B instead of the super-sub, capable of playing the OF or 1B, that best suits him at this point in his career. But, despite posting dreadful batting numbers and leading the team in errors (that one's not even that close), he gets penciled into the lineup at the expense of the Indians at least finding out what they have in Marte and whether the youngster represents an upgrade over the known quantity that is Casey Blake.

But this is all really a lost cause at this point as if the Indians wanted to work Marte in during the first quarter of the season, it would have been too easy for Blake (if he HAS to be in the lineup every day as it seems) to spell a struggling Garko at 1B or take some AB from Michaels (before he was sent away) against LHP in LF. Since neither of those things has happened, we're left to realize that Andy Marte will not see significant time in 2008 for the Indians and is pretty unlikely to be a member of the Tribe after this year.

For whatever reason, Marte remains chained to the bench as The Frisco Kid has more 3 more AB than Marte since being called up on May 7th, despite Marte being on the roster (I'm told to believe) since Opening Day. To me, I have no idea what went so completely soured the Indians on Marte and have yet to find a compelling argument that Marte should not be in the lineup, at the very least against LHP. The only fathomable explanation that I can come up with is that the proponents of Marte that existed in the Indians' Front Office either are no longer banging the table for Marte or are no longer there to bang said table. If the latter is true, we can only assume that Pirates' GM Neal Huntington was the cheerleader for the Marte camp in the organization and his departure for Pittsburgh has left Marte without many supporters and leaves the impression that Marte somehow ran over the dogs of EVERYONE in the Front Office simultaneously to fall so ridiculously out of favor in such a short amount of time, as just 13 months ago he was handed the 3B job out of Spring Training to "grow into it".

Regardless of the rationale (or lack thereof) for Marte sitting, he's not going to see

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the field anytime soon and if it is true that Huntington was the Marteniak in the Tribe Front Office, it's time for Shapiro to lob a call to the Steel City to see if Huntington would like to be reunited with Marte. In my own flight of fancy, I'd love to see that conversation take place to at least get something of worth for Marte, and at no point should Jason Bay be mentioned. Matt Capps, however...

Speaking of Matt Capps (who, if you're unaware, is an excellent young closer for the Pirates), at this point I'd much rather see the Indians explore the trade market for a reliever as the value that may be available from other teams' bullpens is going to be much more readily available and at a cheaper price than any position player that may hit the trade market. To me, the struggles of Betancourt are very real and my inclination to believe that JoeBo isn't coming back (and if he is, it's not going to be for long) leads me to the conclusion that another bullpen arm is needed. I think that some pieces are there with Kobayashi, Perez, Lewis, and Betancourt (in what I see evolving into a lesser role as his 2007 looks like it will go unmatched...and with good reason due to the brilliance of 2007), but unless the Indians suddenly move Atom Miller to the bullpen in Buffalo to ingratiate himself into the rhythm of being a reliever, I don't see an impact arm that will augment the rotation enough to quell my concerns about the bullpen going forward.

If the Indians do decide to make a trade going down the stretch, the best candidates I can think of are Paul Byrd and Jeremy Sowers. With the Indians' starting pitching depth, the only position of strength that the Indians can deal from is from their stable of starters. Byrd, obviously, is a FA after this year and would essentially serve as a rent-a-player for a team in need of pitching with the thought that Aaron Laffey's ascension to the rotation would simply be moved up a year to replace Byrd now instead of the dawn of the 2009 season. Since Byrd is a FA (and is not as cheap as a younger player), the return for Byrd would not be great and the argument could certainly be made that Byrd's value as the resident veteran is most appreciated down the stretch of the regular season and in the playoffs.

The more intriguing option could be Jeremy Sowers and it would have more to do with the development of the players in similar situations to Sowers coupled with the success he experienced in 2005 and his successful start to 2007. If the Indians feel that Sowers' ceiling is essentially as a 5th starter and that more arms are ready to step into the pipeline to replace Sowers at that level of a 5th starter if he were to go, the market could be strong enough for a young LHP with a modicum of success at the MLB level to merit a move. It's certainly possible that

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Sowers could be packaged with some lower-level minor leaguers or Andy Marte (because, again, it's become abundantly clear that he's not going to be here next year) to add a young bat or a young reliever to strengthen a weakness while not overwhelmingly weakening a strength.

Where the Season is Going

After the Oakland series, the Indians get into a part of their schedule (which I'll get into more later in the week) that could really catapult them into a strong lead in the AL Central. Their starting pitching will keep them in every game (or at least it seems that way) and as long as the offense can cobble together a few runs a night and the bullpen can settle itself (with or without Brodzoski), the Indians stand in the enviable position of rattling off a winning streak to put some distance between themselves and their AL Central peers.

As frustrating as this team has been to watch as they scuffle along, it's important to remember that the season is still not even one quarter of the way to the finish line and if the starting pitching remains the constant, the Indians remain poised to defend their AL Central crown as they're only ½ game out of 1st in the Central playing with a non-existent offense and a still-evolving bullpen.