

Huff N' Stuff

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, August 19 2008 7:00 PM -

Looking at next years rotation for the Indians, Cliff Lee and Fausto Carmona are the only really sure things. Obviously, the likes of Reyes, Sowers, Jackson (somewhat), and Aaron Laffey figure to be squarely in the mix for the middle-to-back-of-the-rotation, but the notable name in this pot of stew that figures to yield two starters for 2009 is the Indians' 2006 1st Round Draft Pick LHP David Huff, who is currently plying his craft in Buffalo. Paulie talks about Huff, and other stuff, in his latest.



As we took another quick look at Anthony Reyes' flat brim last night, who follows Jeremy Sowers and precedes [The Zach Attack](#) in the rotation as it is presently assembled, I thought that this may be a good opportunity to identify and enlighten you on a pitcher that may factor into the 2009 plans even more than those players currently starting games in Cleveland.

Obviously, the likes of Reyes, Sowers, Jackson (somewhat), and Aaron Laffey figure to be squarely in the mix for the middle-to-back-of-the-rotation for next year, but the notable name in this pot of stew that figures to yield two starters for 2009 is the Indians' 2006 1st Round Draft Pick LHP David Huff, who is currently plying his craft in Buffalo.

Coming into this year, Huff presented a bit of a mystery because he had pitched less than 70 innings in the system in two years, but remained an intriguing player to watch due to his draft position and performance in his limited time on the mound. He had experienced success when healthy, but he was shut down in late May of last year due to a strained ligament in his left elbow after starting only 11 games in Kinston in 2007.

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Huff, given his advanced age (he'll be 24 on Friday) and his success in his brief time in Kinston (where he posted a 2.71 ERA, a 1.21 WHIP with 46 K to 15 BB in 59 2/3 IP) began his 2008 season in the Aeros' rotation, where his star caught some rocket fuel:

2008 Akron (Age 23)

5-1, 1.92 ERA, 0.88 WHIP, 62 K, 14 BB in 65 2/3 IP over 10 starts

While it could certainly be said by the skeptics that Huff, as a 23-year-old, SHOULD have dominated AA hitters and it was only a confirmation that Huff was more advanced than the other players in AA to start the year, those numbers are hard to ignore as he struck out almost a batter an inning while whiffing nearly 4 ½ times the hitters he walked.

As everyone's attention started to turn to Huff's Stuff (ba-dum-bum), the numbers that Huff has posted since his promotion to AAA became even harder to ignore:

2008 Buffalo (Age 23)

5-4, 2.83 ERA, 0.99 WHIP, 73 K, 13 BB in 70 IP over 14 starts

If AA was beneath his level of development, how would AAA be classified as he INCREASED his K rate to over 1 per inning and improved his K/BB ratio to the point that he's struck out over 5 ½ times the number of hitters that he's walked?

All told, his combined 2008 numbers, at the upper levels of the minors are eye-popping:

2008 (Age 23)

10-5, 2.39 ERA, 0.94 WHIP, 135 K, 27 BB in 135 2/3 IP over 24 starts

But wait, you say, you've seen this song and dance before - a LH 1st round pick propels quickly through the minor leagues dominating his way all the way to Cleveland. Of course, after some success there, he'll hit the eventual wall at the big-league level, sending him on a sideways or downward trajectory that causes months or years to pull out of.

Jeremy Sowers v.2.0, right?

The guy that's still trying to re-establish himself in the Indians' rotation a full two years removed from his break-out debut?

Great...quite a precedent.

As most remember, Jeremy Sowers famously flew through the Indians system on a similar path in 2006 that culminated in his stellar performance with the parent club on a team going nowhere:

2006 Buffalo (Age 23)

9-1, 1.39 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 54 K, 29 BB in 97 IP over 15 starts

2006 Cleveland (Age 23)

7-4, 3.57 ERA, 1.19 WHIP, 35 K, 20 BB in 88 1/3 IP over 14 starts

Looking back at Huff's numbers from this year, what's the difference?

Both had phenomenally low ERA and WHIP in AAA as a 23-year old LHP...and Sowers actually posted lower numbers for both ERA and WHIP in Buffalo two years ago, right?

Put on your miner's hat and turn on the headlamp, because we're going deeper than that.

Not to get too elementary or oversimplify anything, but numbers that are much more relevant than ERA or WHIP for pitchers' performance are gauged as K/9, which measures how many hitters a pitcher strikes out every nine innings, H/9 and BB/9 as well as HR/9, which do the same thing as K/9 just with hits, walks and home runs, and finally K/BB ratio, which...well, compares the number of strikeouts to walks. These numbers are important as they measure accurately the number of baserunners a pitcher puts on base, how those baserunners get on base (hit vs. walk), and how effective a pitcher can be to get out of his own jam with a strikeout instead of depending on things that can sometimes be more luck than anything (a grounder turns into a DP as opposed to finding a hole in the infield) strictly in the pitcher's control.

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Consider now how the two compare as 23-year-old LHP in AAA in those categories over a comparable number of starts (Huff's 14 to Sowers' 15):

K/9

Sowers 2006 - 4.99
Huff 2008 - 9.38

H/9

Sowers 2006 - 7.21
Huff 2008 - 7.20

BB/9

Sowers 2006 - 2.68
Huff 2008 - 1.67

HR/9

Sowers 2006 - 0.09
Huff 2008 - 0.77

K/BB

Sowers 2006 - 1.86
Huff 2008 - 5.61

Huff has struck out batters at a rate nearly twice that of Sowers in 2006 while walking 1 fewer batter over 9 innings and has a K/BB rate three times as high as Sowers did two years ago. Knowing what we know now about Sowers - how dependent he is on batted balls falling into players' mitts as opposed to finding holes (his 2008 H/9 is 11.26 in Cleveland) as opposed to relying on a K every now and then for outs (Sowers' K/9 in 2008 is 5.41) and how his predilection to be too fine with his pitches results in a high number of BB (his 2008 BB/9 is 3.55 in Cleveland, while his K/BB rate in 2008 is 1.85 for the Tribe), are you seeing the difference here?

Huff, unlike Sowers, strikes batters out - as his 8.96 K/9 rate (combined over

Akron and Buffalo) rank second highest in the whole organization for starters, behind only [LHP Kelvin De La Cruz](#) (a 20-year-old you should be very excited about, who just got promoted to Akron) and just ahead of [RHP Hector Rondon](#) (which is another name to file away). Additionally, Huff tends to limit the damage done as his .563 OPS against is best in the organization...better even than another certain LHP with a similarly short surname having a tremendous season for the parent club.

As easy as it would be to peg Huff as another LHP who was a 1st round pick and lump him in with Sowers, the fact is that Huff and Sowers, while similar on the surface in terms of their handedness and arsenal are completely different pitchers as Huff has an ability to strike batters out that Sowers has not shown above Kinston while posting a K/BB rate that's in line with what C.P. Lee has been putting forth this year in MLB.

Now, don't take this as a rip job on Jeremy Sowers as his run of excellence for the Tribe in 2006, at the very least, shows that he can find success in MLB, perhaps in the middle-to-back of the rotation. Over Sowers' last 6 starts, he's posted a respectable 4.31 ERA with a WHIP of 1.13, so there is certainly something that Sowers is building that can hopefully provide a foundation for him to figure into the 2009 rotation race.

Rather than this being designed to take away from Sowers, it's meant to put what David Huff is putting forth in 2008 in the proper perspective. He's finding all of the success that Sowers found in 2006, but he's doing it in ways that portend a better translation to the Bigs.

Could he find himself struggling in Cleveland, as many young pitchers often do?

Absolutely...and he probably will at some point, but the numbers that Huff is posting right now would translate into him likely being on this team already if the Indians were in contention for the playoffs as his ceiling looks to be higher than some of the other LHP that he will find himself competing against next Spring. Given the performance of all of the potential candidates for that #3/#4/#5 area in the rotation (depending, of course, upon what is done in the offseason), it's hard not to see how Huff is seen as one of the leaders in the clubhouse as his success in Akron and Buffalo this year, and in particular HOW he's achieving that success, figures to give him a leg up on the competition when the team leaves Goodyear

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next Spring.