

## The Rate Of Rotation & Evolution

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, February 24 2009 7:00 PM -

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3:05 PM today baby! The Indians take on the San Francisco Giants in the first spring training game of the season! STO will be carrying the game. Making the start for the good guys will be Jeremy Sowers, who is embroiled in a spring training battle royale for the final spot in the Tribe's starting rotation. In Paul's latest, he talks about the rotation candidates and says that establishing their five man rotation by May could very well be the most crucial component to the coming season.



With the first Spring Training game scheduled for Wednesday at 3 PM (airing both on STO and MLB Network, by the by) and all of the focus on these "Spring Training Battles", I think that it's necessary to remove this focus on these "Battles" for the last few spots on the roster for a moment and take a longer look at the season, specifically in terms of how important the evolution of the rotation is to the season, long after Spring Training concludes. That is, as fun as it figures to be to watch these youngsters (Laffey, Huff, Sowers, Jackson, Lewis) battle it out for the 5th spot out of Spring Training in Goodyear, all it really means is that the "winner" is just getting the first crack to stay in what could be a rapidly revolving door (or doors) in the rotation.

Obviously, that "first crack" shouldn't be discounted as, if the pitcher remains healthy and effective, it's much easier to stay in the rotation than it is to be promoted to said rotation. But, the way that questions abound around the Indians' rotation, whether it pertain to health or effectiveness, I don't think that there's much doubt that the Indians will be moving pieces and parts in and out of the rotation throughout the season to optimize the performance in the rotation. This isn't a surprise, of course, as it's nearly impossible to expect the 5 starters that break camp with the team to essentially start every game for a team (in an amazing accomplishment and aberration, [all but 4 Indians's starts were made by the five main starters in 2005](#)

), with some years seeing a virtual carousel of pitchers work their way through the rotation

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To wit, take a look at how deep the Indians have had to go into their depth to get starters, even in that magical 2007 season when everything seemed to go right:

2008 - 13 pitchers started games (Lee, Carmona, Byrd, Sowers, Sabathia, Laffey, Jackson, Reyes, Westbrook, Scott Lewis, Ginter, Bullington, and Mastny)

2007 - 8 pitchers started games (Sabathia, Carmona, Byrd, Westbrook, Lee, Sowers, Laffey, and Stanford)

2006 - 9 pitchers started games (Lee, Westbrook, Byrd, Sabathia, Sowers, Jason Johnson, Carmona, Slocum, and Guthrie)

Now, seeing some of those names and knowing the starting pitching has been a pillar of the team in all three of those years, raise your hand if you think that Lee, Carmona, Reyes, Pavano, and whoever wins that 5th spot is going to go all 2005 on us?

Yeah...me neither.

And as much as the depth that the Indians seem to have is going to allow the Indians to preclude starts from guys like Matt Ginter or Bryan Bullington, the management of that depth and the massaging of those spots is, to me at least, probably the most important part of the Indians' 2009 season. Whereas the bullpen looks to be fleshed out (on paper, at least) and the second half of 2008 showed that the offense can survive without Pronk (though getting him back will help), the rotation is the one spot I keep coming back to with questions. The crazy thing is, though, that the potential answers don't seem to be lacking as the sheer volume of candidates for the rotation who can thrive almost guarantees that the Indians can cobble together an efficient rotation, particularly if you think that Jake Westbrook is coming back after the All-Star Break (which still looks awfully optimistic to me) to augment the rotation.

All of that talent considered, though, herein lies the rub - with all of the arms that could potentially contribute for the Indians, which pitchers are the ones that will eventually settle into that rotation and how can the Indians expedite the evolution to that effective mix of starters? To put it another way, through attrition and ineffectiveness, the Indians' rotation is going to be comprised of different starters throughout the course of the year, so how do the Indians find that right combination earlier rather than later, with later being the point that they're sitting in 3rd or 4th place in July due to portions of their rotation being ineffective?

Unfortunately, there's no great answer out there as the Indians look to be set on breaking camp with the predetermined foursome of Lee, Carmona, Reyes, and Pavano (assuming they're all healthy and even mildly effective in Goodyear), allowing the rest of the pitchers to attempt to slot themselves for chances to become a part of what would be that final combination of pitchers.

But what if Pavano is just moderately effective for two months, not good enough that anyone's slapping the Tribe brass on their collective back for finding a diamond in the trash heap; but also isn't awful enough that his performance merits a one-way ticket out of Cleveland? What if that mediocre pitcher then blocks a pitcher from joining the rotation that may represent an upgrade over what Pavano is putting forth every fifth game?

And what if Reyes struggles to find the groove that he got into was in at the end of 2008 or what if he struggles, without apparent injury, to the point that the Indians are forced to make a decision on him due to him being out of options?

By the same token, how do the youngsters slot themselves in Columbus or how do the Indians promote from within in a manner that isn't going to result in some of these pitchers taking turns in the rotation when a more effective option exists still in Columbus?

In essence, the Indians rotation needs to find that effective combination of five pitchers early in the season so the performance of the starters taking the hill prior to that mix being found puts the team behind the proverbial 8-ball. How they do this and how long of a leash they have on some of these question marks could, in effect, play the most vital role in the Indians' ability to contend in 2009.

For instance, what if Carmona or Reyes or Pavano attempts to pitch hurt or does find himself of the DL - how do the Indians fill that spot in the rotation quickly and effectively without turning every fifth game (or worse, two out of every five games) turning into an audition that could go either way. And how do they manage those pitchers in terms of shuttling them back and forth to Columbus (the ones that can be shuttled, at least, which would be one spot out of Goodyear) to maximize production in Cleveland?

The short answer is that they need to be constantly evolving and evaluating these players because other options exist. Those "other options" may be better or they may be worse, but the Indians need to find answers sooner rather

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than later. Finding that combination sooner rather than later could mean the difference between holding on in a divisional race in September and trying to catch up to a divisional race in September.

To me, as Spring Training games begin, the success of the season is going to be determined by the Indians finding the best five pitchers for their rotation in May or, at the very latest, June and not "seeing how things play out" as one or more of their starters struggle, digging a hole that may ultimately be too deep to climb out of. Who those five pitchers end up being is anyone's guess as the calendar remains on February, but for the Indians to be squarely in the mix for the AL Central Crown in 2009, the evaluation and evolution of the starting rotation into an effective unit is the key for the whole season.