

Plugging The Leaks

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, April 21 2009 7:00 PM -

Now two and a half weeks into the season, the biggest disappointment of the young season, in terms of what was expected when the season started against what we've seen thus far, has been far and away the performance of the re-worked bullpen. In Paul's latest, he analyzes what we've seen thus far from the pen, and what he would do to try and shake the Indians relievers from the nasty funk they're in.



Now two and a half weeks into the season, with the Indians preparing to make up some ground at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario against the 1st place Kansas City Royals, the biggest disappointment of the young season, in terms of what was expected when the season started against what we've seen thus far, has been far and away the performance of the re-worked bullpen.

Obviously, the starting pitching has been more than concerning as no Indians' starter has thrown a pitch in the 7th inning and the starters are averaging just over 5 innings per start, but isn't this what we kind of expected out of the rotation? Wasn't the sense that the rotation would evolve on the fly and experience some growing pains (some being very painful) in the process the prevailing notion coming out of Arizona?

To me, the starters looked to set up as a trial-and-error sequence, where the names and the arms changed until the right mix was found, hopefully before the season got out of hand. And while the season certainly hasn't gotten out of hand, the starters are culpable for a good deal of the issues with this team as C.P. Lee and Fausto have thrown decently, but certainly not well and Pavano and Reyes have been an inconsistent and frustrating duo, whose leashes should start to tighten with a few rough outings, while Aaron Laffey attempts to make an impression in SLewis' absence to make the case to stay topside. Among the five starters, the progression and the evolution is underway...but we knew that was

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coming.

Not so in the bullpen, where the Indians' addition of Kerry Wood was supposed to settle the bullpen by immediately slotting the relievers below him on that "Ladder of Progression" into their roles as set-up relievers, mop-up guys, long men, and specialists. The idea was actually quite simple as the Indians' two best relievers last year (Stomp Lewis and The Scarecrow, Rafael Perez) would alternate their roles in the 7th and 8th innings, depending upon the opposition's lineup as the RH Lewis and the LH Perez could be used in tandem to maximize their effectiveness as the bridge to Wood in the 9th, depending upon the handedness of the scheduled hitters for the late innings.

The idea continued that, with Wood locking down the 9th and Lewis and Perez sharing duties in the 7th and the 8th, that Rafael Betancourt could re-build his confidence that eroded in 2008 in the 6th inning or as needed to work himself into a more meaningful role while Joe Smith would find work in strategic match-ups with tough RH hitters from the 6th inning on. With the track records of the pitchers involved, the idea wasn't too much of a leap of faith as, past Wood, all four had two or three year track records that seemed to imply that their success could and would be sustained.

Unlike the rotation, the bullpen out of Goodyear looked pretty solid and pretty set in terms of who did what, and when:

9th - Wood
8th - Perez/Lewis
7th - Perez/Lewis
6th - Betancourt
ROOGY - Smith
Mop-Up - Kobayashi
Long Man - Jackson

As much confidence as that progression gave so many that the ugliness of the 2008 bullpen was safely behind us...well, look out:

[2008 bullpen in April](#)

4.54 ERA, 1.54 WHIP, 6.99 K/9, 4.05 BB/9, 1.72 K/BB in 27 games

[2009 bullpen in April](#)

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7.38 ERA, 1.83 WHIP, 6.60 K/9, 6.02 BB/9, 1.09 K/BB in 14 games

That's right, kids...the 2009 bullpen has been statistically worse than the 2008 bullpen, who assisted in the sabotage of the season that we're trying so hard to forget.

In fact, when you take Kerry Wood's dominant performances out of this year's numbers, the rest of the relievers have walked more batters (30 without Wood) than they've struck out (25 without Wood). This year's bullpen has already given up 38 earned runs in 14 games, while last year's incarnation gave up "only" 37 earned runs in 27 games.

Knowing what the 2008 bullpen did to the season, it doesn't feel "too early" on the bullpen anymore, does it?

Unfortunately, the idea that the additions to the bullpen (Wood and Smith) coupled with the maturation and continued development of Lewis and Perez as set-up men would settle the bullpen simply hasn't come to fruition. Look at those two links of results again and see how Kobayashi, like last year, has been among the Indians' most effective relievers while the pitchers thought to be the back-end relievers when each season started dot the bottom of each links.

That is to say, the pitchers that struggled in April of last year were the assumed set-up man in Betancourt, who was striking a lot of people out (10.24 K/9), but giving up a lot of HR (3 in 9 2/3 IP) and Perez, who was walking a lot of people (6 BB in 12 IP) and giving up a lot of hits (14 H in 12 IP).

Sound familiar?

A cursory look at Jensen Lewis' pitch mixture, strike to ball ratio, and hit percentage doesn't reveal much other than that Lewis is giving up more fly balls than he ever has, although it's really not THAT much more than his career averages. What has happened is that those fly balls have been depositing themselves in the bleachers of stadiums instead of in the gloves of his outfielders. There may be a correlation as to where Lewis has allowed HR, as 3 of the 4 HR against him have come in the notorious launching pads in Texas and NY, but against nearly half of the batters he's faced (34), he's either struck them out (8), walked them (4), or given up a HR (4). I've heard of [Three True Outcomes](#), but that's pretty ridiculous, even when you consider the small sample size.

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All told, I think that Lewis will likely be in the mix throughout the season in the back-end of the bullpen and may just be pressing, just missing a few spots that have been costly, or may be overextended in terms of when and how he's being used instead of being used strictly as a 7th or 8th inning set-up reliever.

As for Perez, obviously something has changed with Perez as a noted strike-thrower whose induction of swings-and-misses has not only seen a wild divergence in the number of walks he's given up and the damage done when contact is made is positively horrifying.

Consider the slugging percentage against Perez over the last three years:

2007 - .292 SLG against
2008 - .353 SLG against
2009 - .630 SLG against

That's not OBP against, that's Slugging Percentage against, meaning that when opponents did get on base against Perez, it was usually via a single. If that doesn't make sense to you, how about this:

2007 - 12 extra base hits allowed in 60 2/3 IP
2008 - 17 extra base hits allowed in 76 1/3 IP
2009 - 4 extra base hits allowed in 7 IP

Now throw that on top of his walk totals and how different 2009 looks and you can see that there's a serious problem:

2007 - 15 BB in 60 2/3 IP
2008 - 23 BB in 76 1/3 IP
2009 - 9 BB in 7 IP

Yes, it's 7 IP and, yes, Perez can still rebound from this dreadful start as he's always struggled out of the gate. But what has always made Perez so effective - pounding the strike zone, minimizing BB, inducing weakly hit balls - seems to be completely reversed in this 2009 incarnation of The Scarecrow and that development throws the whole "Ladder of Progression" for these relievers into flux as his status as a late-inning reliever is simply not valid right now and the rest of the bullpen needs to adjust accordingly, however that may be.

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What's so concerning about that hole in the 7th and 8th innings, though, is that the Indians are inexplicably unable to find consistent success in any of their relievers outside of Wood. Even the guys who have looked good at times (Kobayashi, Smith, Betancourt) have been far from confidence-inspiring. With 8 relievers in the bullpen instead of the normal 7 (presumably because of the stretch of games without an off-day and the concerns in the rotation), you would think that somebody would be able to log some meaningfully effective innings for the bullpen.

But that hasn't happened and the Indians have now played 13 games and to exacerbate the problem, beyond Wood and Smith, no reliever has a set "role" because of the issues in the back-end with Lewis and Perez and at that front-end with the starters not contributing enough innings to the cause. Certainly some of it can be traced to the starters and their short outings, but at the end of the day, the relievers (regardless of the inning) have to come in, protect leads or keep games close, and get batters out. To date, outside of Wood and Kobayashi (and to a lesser degree, Smith), that just simply hasn't happened.

The difficulty, of course, with relievers is that their exposure to MLB hitters is so limited that to "work through" any issues generally need to occur in game situations, meaning that if the Indians believe that a pitcher like Perez simply needs to work out the kinks that he'll do it for the Indians, but maybe in some lower pressure situations or in games in which the game's outcome has already seemingly been decided.

Unfortunately, the problems go deeper than just Lewis and Perez, though, despite the fact that the failures of those two have been the most surprising and have affected the bullpen the most; so the question needs to be asked of whether help or new arms is anywhere to augment this bullpen and perhaps provide the Indians with a consistent reliever other than Wood?

That answer came after another epic failure last night in the bullpen when they were handed a 6-1 lead, needing only 3 outs to get the ball to Kerry Wood, and promptly imploded in full meltdown mode, prompting the Indians to call up Tony Sipp from Columbus to fill the needed role of LHP in the bullpen with Perez struggling.

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Sipp has performed fairly well in Columbus, notching 10 K in 7 IP, but he has 5 BB to go against those 10 K and, the position of a LHP that can walk people at an alarming rate is currently filled. Sipp has experienced a good amount against LH hitters in the short time he's been in Columbus, striking out 3 of the 10 LH hitters he's faced. It will be interesting to see how Sipp is used as he's always been thought of as more than just a LOOGY and calling him to Cleveland right now essentially slots him into that LOOGY role, which may stall his development as a reliever who is effective against both RH and LH hitters.

Regardless, the other alternatives to get a legitimate LHP that can be used with some regularity and the nightly failure of ANYBODY to record even a couple of outs (particularly after last night) made the move for another arm that may be even moderately effective a necessity.

To make room for Sipp, the Indians sent The Zach Attack to Columbus, presumably because he has an option and other relievers (read: Chulk) don't. Behind Sipp, there are other options in Columbus, but each of them may or may not be an upgrade over what we're seeing in Cleveland...not unlike Sipp.

The question becomes whether calling up Tony Sipp feels like that "one move" that's going to make this bullpen whole again?

Who knows...and that's the difficulty with this bullpen as the Indians almost have to play the cards in their hand right now as the track record on most of these relievers suggest that better results are possible, as difficult as that may be to believe now. What remains unbelievable is that the Indians, for the second straight April, have experienced what is nearly a bullpen-wide meltdown with relievers that they felt comfortable going into the season relying upon.

So, if these are the cards in their hand and they're going to have to play them, what do the Indians do now?

First and foremost, I think you move Perez out of any situation to pitch in meaningful game situations and try to build his confidence back up gradually, maximizing his effectiveness by putting him into situations that he SHOULD be

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able to succeed without the pressure of the game being in the balance being at play.

Secondly, let's summarily dismiss the idea that Kerry Wood should go more than one inning, regardless of how nice it would be to see that nastiness for more than three batters. It is still April and it is unwise to tempt fate at any time in a baseball season...much less April.

Beyond that, I think that the Indians have to balance past track record with current results and start to develop that "Ladder of Progression" in the bullpen based not only on who's been there before, but also who's succeeding now. If pressed to take a stab at it, I suppose this is how I'd build it:

9th - Wood
8th - Betancourt
7th - Lewis
6th - Sipp/Kobayashi
ROOGY - Smith
Situational LHP - Perez
Mop-Up/Long Man - Chulk

Before getting into this, how wild is it that Tony Sipp, yet to throw a pitch in MLB, immediately feels like one of the Indians' best options in the bullpen?

Yeah, it's that bad...

Back to that "Ladder of Progression" above, of all of the pitchers with a track record of back-end success, Betancourt has been the most consistent performer despite his recent predilection for BB. He was victimized by Choo's non-catch in New York (although he put himself in that jam with the walks) to see his ERA rise from 2.45 to 6.14, so if there's going to be someone to get that "next first crack" at the 8th Innings, Senor Slo-Mo is probably the best in-house option.

Beyond him, I'd give Lewis, Kobayashi, and Sipp some work in the 6th and 7th innings with Smith complementing them accordingly to get RH hitters out. Perez

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needs to find work in games without meaning, while Chulk continues to mop-up for the imminent long man work that's going to come.

The way that the season is going for the bullpen, let's hope that these relievers replace their gas cans with fire extinguishers to put out some fires on the mound before the bullpen, thought to be an area of relative strength entering the season, becomes the season's undoing.