

Tomahawks With Relief From Unlikely Sources

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Friday, May 29 2009 7:00 PM -

Why the sudden turnaround for the Indians if the rotation looks to be in shambles and the 5th starting spot has become a revolving door? Buckle up, kids...but it's the bullpen. And more specifically, it's the bullpen NOW populated with veteran "retreads". In chucking this week's tomahawks, Paul also hits on the Indians easier coming schedule, what the returns of Rafael Perez and Joe Smith mean, and the state of the Indians rotation.



With the last couple of non-Lazy posts not exactly painting a rosy picture (what with the "I hate this team" declaration to the post-apocalyptic jaunt to the realization that the rotation is a mess) let me reassure you where I stand here.

Lest anyone think that I'm turning into one of those bittermen, happy to sling arrows from afar and decry the position that we may find ourselves in and not look at the positive side of things as I always have, just know that the last few weeks have been nearly impossibly difficult to bear and if it feels like what I'm throwing out here takes you through the roller-coaster of emotions that we're all on - know that it is precisely that and that the catharsis of writing about this stuff generally makes it a little better for me...as odd as that sounds.

As frustrating as this team has been over the course of the first 50 games, there may be a silver lining to all of these gray clouds as we see that a simple four-game winning streak has the Indians suddenly 3 games out of second place.

By the way, since I wrote that I "hate" this team on the 18th of May, the team is 7-3, so apparently, all I need to do around here is show a little negativity and...the whole season turns around, right?

What, oh what, can I write about that other team that plays down in Gateway to

get some good karma going for them for the last couple of games here?

While I think about that, let's release the 'hawks:

If we're talking about the Tribe getting closer in the Central, it's worth pointing out that the Tribe has moved up the ladder in terms of worst record in the AL, passing the Oakland A's for 2nd worst record in the AL...White Sox, that bulls-eye is on your back now.

While that is meant to be amusing and lend a little perspective in terms of getting too excited about a four-game winning streak, the AL Central is really still wide open and the Indians could be looking at a portion of their schedule that they can make up some ground in a hurry.

Want some ridiculous news?

After the Yankees leave town, the next AL East opponent for the Indians is Baltimore...on August 27th. The next AL East opponent not named the Orioles for the Indians (after the Bombers leave town, obviously) is the Boston Red Sox on...wait for it...October 1st.

If there's any thought that the AL East boasts some of the more talented teams in the AL, know that after Monday, the Indians have 10 games left against them, and only 4 of those games DON'T come against the O's.

If we're looking for a silver lining to this start by the Indians, maybe there is something to the fact that their early-season schedule slotted them against some of the heavyweights outside of their division early on and that this will all come out in the wash, with the Central ultimately being won by the team with the best record against the Central.

Longtime readers (going back to the White Sox run in 2005 and the Tigers run in 2006) will know that this my favorite thing to say this time of year if the Indians are scuffling and an unexpected divisional rival is thriving, but...the Tigers can't keep this up...can they?

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Remember all of those years whey we moaned about Graves and Oldberto and Jose Jimenez and asked why the Indians couldn't just get over their infatuation with these over-the-hill relievers and just go with the young arms from the get-go?

Um...as is the case with bullpen and construction of a bullpen, scratch that. The Indians bullpen has been settled by Matt Herges, Luis Vizcaino, and Greg Aquino stepping in to mop up for short starts by the rotation and have allowed Rocky Betancourt and Kerry Wood to simply pitch the 8th and 9th innings as some semblance of order has finally emerged in the bullpen.

In the last 9 games, in which the Indians are 7-2 (and which would start the night AFTER the Kerry Wood meltdown in the 9th in KC, here are the numbers for the Tribe's bullpen:

2.20 ERA, 1.20 WHIP, 32 K, 21 BB in 41 IP over 9 games

I'm not sure how many of you caught those last two numbers there, but 41 IP in 9 games is $4\frac{2}{3}$ IP per game for the bullpen in games that the Indians went 7-2 in BECAUSE of the bullpen.

Throw in the fact that $1\frac{2}{3}$ of those 41 innings were Jensen Lewis' 5 earned run extravaganza on the night of the comeback and there's no doubt that those numbers are unbelievable.

So why the sudden stability and where is this coming from?

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Of the six best FIP ([which measures how a pitcher pitched regardless of how his fielders fielded](#)) currently residing on the Indians' pitching staff, an astonishing FOUR are held down by players that have often been described as "retread"; signings or acquisitions:

CP Lee - 3.16 FIP
Herges - 3.69 FIP
Pavano - 3.77 FIP
Betancourt - 4.03 FIP
Aquino - 4.16 FIP
Vizcaino - 4.74 FIP

Without getting into WHY these guys even find themselves on the team and how much had to go wrong for one (much less three) to be topside, how is this even happening as these guys have come off of the scrap heap to settle the bullpen?

Can we have whoever did the scouting and recommendation on these guys take a look around the starters that may become available in the near future?

So, now with this settled bullpen, how do we handle the news that Rafael Perez and Joe Smith are getting ready to re-join the Indians? While this may be a crazy thing to ask given what we've seen recently in the bullpen - who goes down to AAA or gets the DFA?

This is crazy to think about, but follow me on this in terms of who has earned the right to stay on the 25-man with their recent performance:

Rotation

Lee
Pavano

Bullpen

Wood
Betancourt

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Herges
Lewis
Aquino
Vizcaino

The other pitchers on the 25-man roster, all of whom a case can be made for their demotion would be Carmona, Sowers, Huff, and Ohka (only because he is...you know, Tomo Ohka). So here's a scary thought - if we've already seen a revolving door and the bullpen is showing signs of stability, what happens when Perez and (more specifically) Smith are ready to come up?

In terms of the rotation, I stick with Carmona and hope that Carl Willis can work some magic, give Dave Huff every opportunity to stay on the big-league club because...well, because he's the Indians best prospect that is available to the team and not at AA, and use that 5th starter spot to get a couple of starts out of...let's say Jeremy Sowers until Jake Westbrook is (hopefully) ready to come back by the end of June.

With the off days sprinkled around the month of June, it could be 3 or 4 starts we're talking about between Monday's game against the Yankees and the last weekend series at home against the Reds if they skip that 5th spot in the rotation from time to time to essentially minimize the damage that can be done from that 5th spot from Sowers, who needs to be told that he is fighting for his future in this organization and that if, when Westbrook is ready to come back, he's the weakest link, it's time to look for something more permanent than an apartment in Columbus.

Not exactly confidence-inspiring to make a run at .500 in June, but there it is for the starters.

As for the bullpen, with Perez getting the call-up and the tenure of The Looch officially over, you would think that Ohka goes down when Hafner is ready to emerge to make the bullpen whole again. Obviously, Perez's return puts a LHP in the bullpen and allows him to work his way into the bullpen slowly as they've done fine in the last week or two without him and with the way they're going now, if they can get the production from The Scarecrow that they're used to, that's just gravy.

Smith's readiness, however, presents a bit of a different problem as the reliever who has probably been the most inconsistent that would figure to be in the bullpen

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when Smith is given a clean bill of health would be Jensen Lewis. Lewis, however, has been serving as a kind of de facto long man and the question would become whether guys like Aquino and Vizcaino can continue to contribute multiple innings to give Stomp a respite in AAA.

Truthfully, while Lewis may ultimately benefit from a stint in Columbus, when Smith is ready (and because he has options remaining), I don't mess with a good thing. If one of the pleasant surprises goes awry, Smith can make his way up to replace a pitcher whose effectiveness may have waned; but if the bullpen is showing signs of stability, it may not be a good time to rock the boat for fear of another capsizing.

With the Yankees in town, it's time to take a look at this beauty again:



Now would be a good time to mention that there were some...um...Canadian soldiers outside of my house this morning when I went to get the paper. They must have known that the Yankees were in town.

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When is Justin Chamberlain scheduled to start again?