

## It's The Pitching, Stupid!

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Thursday, June 18 2009 7:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, May 13 2011 9:22 PM

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Manager Eric Wedge has drawn criticism from all quarters for his handling of the Indians this year -- especially for the revolving carousel that the starting lineup has become.

Yet, the fact of the matter is that Wedge has done a man-sized job of squeezing water out of a rock, of squeezing production out of everyday lineups that currently have only one "rock-solid" player who is set at one position: Shin-Soo Choo in right field.

For a team that has struck out more times than any other in the league (nobody is even close), the Tribe is third in total runs scored, behind offensive powerhouses Tampa Bay and New York. Despite having a slugging average that's 56 points lower than the vaunted Yankees (.422 to .475), the Indians have scored just 11 fewer runs. Who knows what a healthy Grady Sizemore and Travis Hafner could have done for this team's offense?

The real problem -- and it comes as a surprise to no one -- is that Wedge and coaches Carl Willis and Chuck Hernandez have not been able to squeeze as much as one drop from a sorely lacking pitching staff. Break it down statistically any way you want, but Tribe hurlers are the

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worst in the majors. Their team ERA of 5.28 is almost a quarter-of-a-run worse than the next-worst A.L. team, Baltimore. The only pitching statistic in which the Indians lead the major leagues is, sadly, bases on balls: 272.

Beyond Cliff Lee (4-6, 2.88 ERA) on the front end and an underworked Kerry Wood (4.63 ERA) on the back end, there's not much apparent major-league talent. Matt Herges, in a relief role, has been a pleasant surprise (2.70 ERA), but he's only got 20 innings under his belt and his most recent outing wasn't his finest. The now-injured Raffie Betancourt (3.71 ERA) had been the steadiest reliever. Carl Pavano (6-5, 5.73 ERA) has actually surprised quite a few people, considering his recent history.

Fausto Carmona (7.42 ERA) and Masa Kobayashi (8.38 ERA) have flamed out so spectacularly that they are no longer with the team. The rest of the "pitching staff," (note quote marks) is dead meat, led by Raffie Perez (11.09 ERA) and quite a few youngsters who general manager Mark Shapiro had mistakenly pinned his hopes on, including Jeremy Sowers, Aaron Laffey, Jensen Lewis, the now-injured Anthony Reyes, and the oft-injured Adam Miller.

The pitching staff, as it's currently composed, is reminiscent of the Boston Braves' in 1947-48. ("Spahn and Sain ... and pray for rain.") This year, the Tribe's corresponding refrain could be "Lee and done ... and pray for runs." (Sorry, fans, but that's the best I could do on such short notice.)

This non-development of the pitching staff comes as no surprise to anyone. Our own writers predicted as much months ago:

**Erik Cassano** (April 6): "The starting rotation feels more like a starting dartboard. Carmona has electric stuff, but can't find the strike zone with regularity. Pavano hasn't pieced together a decent, injury-resistant season in five years. Jake Westbrook is out until at least midsummer. Reyes hasn't proven anything over the long haul. Scott Lewis, Laffey, Sowers and Zach Jackson? Roll the dice."

**Paul Cousineau** (March 4): "The starting pitching holds the most question marks ... even more than the notoriously volatile bullpen. Perhaps the Indians' brass feels that the sheer number of possibilities, if not certainties, in the rotation will shake itself out as the season progresses. But

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that's a sharp departure from years past."

**Cousineau** (Feb. 25): "The rotation is the one spot I keep coming back to with questions. Through attrition and ineffectiveness, the Indians' rotation is going to be composed 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?"

Doubts about the pitching staff's lack of talent came not only from TheClevelandFan.com writers. This past spring, virtually every observer on every northeastern Ohio newspaper and radio station, plus every national sports outlet, voiced the same concerns. Hell, my guess is that even Wedge in spring training knew he was in for a long season.

The question is why Shapiro -- who is paid well to field a decent team -- didn't see what was so obvious to everyone else in fandom? Over the past five years, have his player assessment skills been so bogus as to allow him to mistakenly believe that the top 20 pitchers in the organization might make something of themselves? Ha! Or have his hands been so tied by owner Paul Dolan's purse that he couldn't make the roster moves that he wanted and needed to make?

The fault, dear readers, does not lie with Eric Wedge, who appears to be getting as much production as possible from the available talent. The fault falls squarely upon the shoulders of either Mark Shapiro's misguided evaluation of pitching talent.