

Ten Little Indians - Part II

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Friday, February 12 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, February 17 2010 9:06 PM



After reviewing the ["known quantities" that figure into the 2010 rotational mix](#) (or at least the arms that seem to have a secured spot in the starting staff coming out of Goodyear), let's get into the next batch of arms who figure prominently into the 2010 mix and (more importantly) beyond the 2010 season. Whereas it would seem that Westbrook, Carmona, and Masterson would all be locks to start the season in the rotation and stay there, until injury or trade removed them from the quintet, the other players who have logged significant MLB success in the past few years is where our eyes will cast today.

In Dave Huff and Aaron Laffey, the Indians have two young LHP who have graduated from the Minors for all intents and purposes, with very little left to prove in AAA but still retaining options, meaning that their roster "flexibility" could have them taking that "I-71 Shuffle" a couple of times this year. Looking at the coupling, there's no way to ignore the fact that each has shown some promise in his brief MLB career, with consistency being the elusive factor for each in terms of solidifying a rotational spot above all other options. The question with both becomes whether starting every 5th game will give them the opportunity to settle into some semblance of consistency and allow them to take hold of a middle-of-the-rotation spot going forward past 2010 or if the regular work this year will reveal them to be simply what they may be - inconsistent, back-end-of-the-rotation fodder whose usefulness to the team is tied very neatly to their affordability.

For the pitcher who finished with the most wins on the team last year (as if "wins" is a suitable gauge of success), Dave Huff shook off some injury concerns to start the season and finished very strongly in the rotation, with his cumulative numbers over his final 8 starts, from the beginning of August to the end of the season, looking like many thought they would, based on his phenomenal 2008 season in AA and AAA:

Dave Huff's Final 8 Starts (47 2/3 IP) - 2009

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3.59 ERA, 1.43 WHIP, .706 OPS against

Those numbers look great and all, but just to illustrate what "inconsistency" means for a young starting pitcher, here are the pitching line associated with the 7 starts that Huff logged prior to those final 8 games from the end of June to the beginning of August:

7.94 ERA, 1.82 WHIP, .978 OPS against in 39 2/3 IP

And...just to illustrate the point further and to dip deeper into Huff's 2009 season, here's his line from the 6 games prior to those, from the end of May to the end of June:

3.41 ERA, 1.19 WHIP, .690 OPS against in 34 1/3 IP

See where this is going?

This is not a revolutionary concept, but young pitchers like Huff are bound to struggle with inconsistency as they adjust to MLB (which is why Tim Lincecum truly is such a freak) and determining what type of pitcher Huff eventually projects as is tantamount to realizing what the team has in a player like Huff, who turns 26 this August. That is, does Huff legitimately have the chance to put together a consistent line close to those stretches with ERA's under 4.00 and WHIP's under 1.50 or is he simply going to battle this inconsistency throughout his MLB career?

Obviously it's too early to get a gauge on that, but the importance for a player like Huff to attempt to pitch through the difficulties (if the Indians are convinced that he can be a contributor to the next incarnation of a contender) can best be seen when you consider the "Tale of Two Seasons" by another mid-20's LHP back in 2004:

Cliff Lee's First 19 starts - 2004

3.81 ERA, 1.39 WHIP, .737 OPS against in 113 1/3 IP

Cliff Lee's Final 14 Starts - 2004

8.22 ERA, 1.71 WHIP, .948 OPS against in 65 2/3 IP

Just to throw another bone of interest onto the pile, Cliff Lee was born in August of 1978 and Dave Huff was born in August of 1984, meaning that the comparable seasons of age and development for the two are Lee's 2003 (9 starts, 52 1/3 IP) and Huff's 2009. Ultimately then, the Indians should treat Huff's 2010 just as they treated Lee's 2004 season referenced above, to keep him in the rotation despite the options factors tied to him and others to see if Huff can become the middle-of-rotation starter that most people saw as Lee's ceiling back in 2004.

Now, am I intimating that Dave Huff is Clifton Phifer Lee (the Cy Young Award winner, not the "simply Cliff Lee" guy who didn't make the 2007 post-season roster) just waiting to break out?

Of course not, but since the two of them seem to have traveled very similar development paths

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in terms of age and level throughout their MiLB career, compare the cumulative numbers for the two pitchers put up over their MiLB careers in the upper levels, specifically AA and AAA:

Lee - AA in 120 IP

3.22 ERA, 0.99 WHIP, 10.7 K/9, 2.8 BB/9, 3.76 K/BB

Huff - AA in 65 2/3 IP

1.92 ERA, 0.88 WHIP, 8.5 K/9, 1.9 BB/9, 4.43 K/BB

Lee - AAA in 147 IP

3.48 ERA, 1.41 WHIP, 8.7 K/9, 4.8 BB/9, 1.81 K/BB

Huff - AAA in 120 IP

3.45 ERA, 1.12 WHIP, 8.5 K/9, 2.3 BB/9, 3.65 K/BB

Again, none of this is meant to intimate that Dave Huff is a couple years away from winning a Cy Young here...mainly because something that is still unexplained happened to Cliff Lee prior to the 2008 season. Rather, the idea is that Dave Huff could realistically project to be what most of us saw Cliff Lee as back in 2004 and 2005 - a middle-of-the-rotation LHP who can contribute (at a low salary for a while) quality innings to a still-maturing club.

In turn, it's also meant to point out that sometimes a pitcher simply needs to be given regular turns in a rotation before a level of comfort and consistency is achieved. This obviously does not apply to every potential starting pitcher, but for a pitcher with Huff's pedigree as a 1st Round Pick and with [a sparkling Minor-League resume](#), a long leash and steady use is necessary to properly get a read on a pitcher like Huff.

To that end, a long leash and steady use in the rotation is something that Aaron Laffey has never experienced as he's ridden the organizational yo-yo on multiple occasions, moving back and forth between MLB and AAA and even between the rotation and the bullpen. When he's been asked to start, his overall numbers are nothing to dismiss in 44 games started over 3 seasons as he's accumulated a 4.42 ERA and a 1.51 WHIP as a starter for the Indians.

No, his K rate and K/BB as a starter aren't impressive (career 118 K in 252 IP as a starter, against 96 BB), but Laffey turns 25 this April and his 3.60 career MiLB ERA and 1.30 career MiLB WHIP shows that there's something to what he's put together as a body of work both topside and on the farm. Lest anyone forget, Laffey was assumed to be the 5th starter out of Spring Training last year and was "beaten out" by Scotty Lewis, whose tenure as the 5th starter lasted for all of 4 1/3 innings. From the time Laffey was placed back into the rotation to the time he was moved to the bullpen in an effort to stop the bleeding in the bullpen, he posted a 4.09 ERA and a .731 OPS against despite a gaudy WHIP of 1.64 accumulated over 22 innings and 4 starts. Of course, Laffey then moved into the bullpen (where he thrived again, to the tune of a

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3.65 ERA and a .604 OPS against) before he was placed BACK in the rotation when he came off of the DL in early July.

From his return from the oblique strain on July 8th up to (and excluding) his last start of the season (85 1/3 IP over 14 starts), Laffey posted a 3.90 ERA and, while that is just 14 starts in one season, he put up a similar 14 start stretch (over 84 IP) in 2008 from May 4th to July 18th, posting a 3.43 ERA.

What's crazy about Laffey's career with the Indians is that he has yet to get more than 16 consecutive starts in any of the three seasons that he's been a part of the parent club. Whether he's been injured or moved to the bullpen or was sent to AAA in the midst of a stretch of starts, he's never simply been given the ball every 5 games from the beginning of the season to the end despite being a little better than league average (102 ERA+) as a starter in his career.

What can Laffey do being handed the ball every 5th day, without a break?

Can he be a Jake Westbrook, circa 2004 to 2007?

If you remember (or even if you don't), Westbrook put up a line befitting of a middle-of-the-rotation starter over those four years in 121 starts to this tune:

4.07 ERA, 107 ERA+, 1.34 WHIP, 2.6 BB/9, 5.0 K/9, 1.93 K/BB

Not to keep these comparisons to the 2003 and 2004 pitching staffs coming, but take a look at what Jake Westbrook did in 2003 (the year in which he bounced around between the rotation and the bullpen) as a 25-year-old in those instances when he did start games:

4.64 ERA and 1.54 WHIP with peripherals of 3.9 K/9, 0.94 K/BB in 118 1/3 IP

Now, compare that to Laffey's line as a starter looked like in 2009 as a 24-year-old when he...wait for it...bounced around between the rotation and the bullpen:

4.53 ERA and a 1.67 WHIP with peripherals of 4.1 K/9, 0.94 K/BB in 109 1/3 IP

Frighteningly similar peripherals, no?

Now, how about the leap then that Westbrook made in the subsequent 2004 season as a 26-year-old when he was a regular in the rotation?

3.38 ERA, 1.25 WHIP with peripherals of 4.8 K/9, 2.5 BB/9, and a 1.90 K/BB over 215 2/3IP

While that season ultimately proved to be somewhat of an outlier for Westbrook, it helped to establish him as a solid middle-of-the-rotation starter and if Laffey can make the same leap to be the middle-of-the-rotation starter that Westbrook was for those four seasons relying on his groundball tendencies (like Westbrook), it would behoove the Indians to find out in 2010.

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The reason that making that determination is so important this year is that Laffey is likely to be arbitration-eligible after the season and a middle-of-the-rotation starter is certainly worth a slight increase in salary given that kind of production from the rotation. On the flip side, if Laffey projects as merely a swing man or a reliever, the Indians need to determine his worth to the team as his salary begins to rise based on service time and comparable player salaries.

This makes the 2010 season that much more important for Laffey, still looking to legitimately establish himself as a starter able to thrive in MLB and for the Indians, watching Laffey's service time clock click forward with more questions about him than answers. Handing the ball to Laffey every 5th game in 2010 is really the only way for the Indians to get a good read on whether The Babyfaced Bulldog could project as a middle-of-the-rotation innings eater that Westbrook eventually evolved into or if he simply looks like a long reliever/swing man/bullpen arm, a role that has rested on the shoulder of many LHP before Laffey.

With Huff and Laffey, the Indians need to find out if they're sitting on two reincarnations of Lee and Westbrook, circa the mid-2000s, or if they simply have two middling LHP who will continue to struggle in their attempt to find consistency in MLB. The numbers of each would certainly suggest that it's not a huge leap of faith to consider the former as a distinct possibility, particularly if you remember how Lee and Westbrook were viewed back then - as complementary pieces meant to fill out a rotation adequately and cheaply.

Huff and Laffey may present the Indians with a similar situation, as neither is going to be asked to suddenly become an elite pitcher in MLB. Rather, their track record shows that the possibility of being a league-average or above-league-average pitcher is there for each...and for 25-year-old LHP, that's nothing to dismiss (particularly when you consider that [the Twins won the Central last year with 1 starter that posted an ERA+ over 100](#), which actually defines league average) particularly in the situation the Indians find themselves in, both in terms of payroll and contention.

The opportunity is there in the 2010 season to answer questions about both Huff and Laffey, assuming the Indians don't imprudently decide to start the season with out-of-options starters or bounce Huff and Laffey around to maximize the amount of pitchers that can all get MLB exposure this year. In light of the track record of each, the youth of each, and the affordability of each going forward, they should be starting 2 out of every 5 games for the 2010 Indians in an effort to determine if they can be counted on in rotations past this year of likely non-contention.