

## The Six-to-Seven Year ... Pitch

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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Moving on in this comparative look to see how closely the 2010 season could parallel the 2004 season, we turn our attention to the area of the team that looks the shakiest at the outset of 2010 – the rotation. One could argue that [the 2010 offense stacks up positively in comparison to the 2004 version](#) and since interest (not to mention expectations) is subterranean entering the 2010 season while the 2004 season was viewed with some optimism for the future, the rotation must be the difference.

The pitching (particularly the rotation) was the great separator between the two incarnations of the Indians, right...right?

Um...I guess you could say that the 2004 pitching staff eventually got to that point of “separation”, but want to know what the Starting Rotation was out of the gate for the 2004 season?

CC Sabathia  
Jason Davis  
Cliff Lee  
Jeff D’Amico  
Jason Stanford

No, seriously...

D’Amico (who had been released by the Pirates at the end of the 2003 season) started games until mid-May, when he gave way to Chad Durbin (yes...that Chad Durbin), who stuck around for a couple of starts before getting replaced by Joey Dawley (wait...who?) until the Indians finally found the “answer” for their rotational woes in Scott Elarton, whom they claimed off of waivers from Colorado in mid-June.

Not exactly the settled rotation that we all reminisce about now, was it?

Consider that Jason Stanford started two games before Durbin entered the rotation for 1 start, eventually giving way to Jake Westbrook, who emerged on a white horse from the bullpen. In their first 53 games, 13 of the games were started by Jeff D’Amico, Chad Durbin, Jason Stanford, or Joey Dawley. In the first third of the 2004 season, 25% of the games were started

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by one of that quartet of largely forgettable pitchers.

Eventually, the Indians settled in with a quintet of (in order of effectiveness in 2004) Westbrook, Sabathia, Elarton, Lee and Davis; but that didn't occur until late June and, even then, did not proceed to the end of the season without a serious regression in the last third of the year by Lee and a demotion for Jason Davis with some late-season starts for Kaz Tadano, Kyle Denney, and Francisco Crucea. When it was all said and done, the Indians' best starter of the season (Westbrook) started the season in the bullpen and the third-best starter of the season (Elarton) was cut by the Colorado Rockies in late May of 2004.

This was not a set rotation going into 2004 and the evolution to that rotation was neither an easy nor linear path upwards. Rather, the 2004 rotation matured from one with many question marks and attempted career resuscitations to one that was able to provide the baseline for the stability of the 2005 rotation and beyond. Seeing as how the 2010 rotation looks to be just as full of young question marks and attempted career resuscitations, let's keep going on this comparison on the principals of the 2004 team and those that look to be the main contributors for the 2010 season.

For the purposes of this exercise, I'll keep it with the aforementioned five as much as I'd like to include the "merits" of a 28-year old D'Amico (who would never pitch in MLB after the Indians released him in late June of 2004), a 26-year-old Durbin (who had just been cut loose by the Royals after posting an ERA+ of 81 over 270 2/3 MLB IP), a 27-year-old Stanford (with 50 career MLB innings to his credit prior to 2004), and a 32-year old Dawley (with a total of 7 1/3 MLB IP on his resume prior to 2004), we'll keep that information contained in this sentence.

In matching up these pitchers (since it's not as clean as comparing Asdrubal to Omar in terms of positional analysis), I attempted to place similar ages and/or performances together, if only to get a sense of comparing apples to apples and oranges to oranges. Grouping a 23-year-old CC in 2004 to a 30-year-old Westbrook in 2010 because both are the presumed Opening Day starters goes against the logic of the comparison, so the groupings may seem oddly placed, but they are done so with some thought behind them.

### **CC Sabathia's career numbers prior to 2004 season**

4.12 ERA, 1.34 WHIP, 7.1 K/9, 1.85 K/BB in 588 IP

### **Justin Masterson's career numbers prior to 2010 season**

3.97 ERA, 1.36 WHIP, 7.7 K/9, 1.87 K/BB in 217 2/3 IP

This is not quite a fair comparison as most of Masterson's innings in MLB have come out of the bullpen and CC was still just 23 during the 2004 season. However, since CC is shoved down our throats by the national media (who think that the Yankees are so brilliant for having him front their rotation) as the finished product that he now is, it's easy to forget the growing pains that took place as The Hefty Lefty evolved into The aCCe. It certainly didn't happen in 2004 as Sabathia tallied a total line of 4.12 ERA, 1.32 WHIP, 6.7 K/9, 1.93 K/BB in 188 IP, hardly

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top-of-the-rotation numbers. With Sabathia, the potential was always there, just not always the production or the consistency. From the game in which he threw out of the wind-up with the bases loaded against the Yankees (hello, bases-clearing single) to his atrocious record in Oakland, Sabathia never really reached his potential as a consistent performer until the last two months of the 2005 season. Don't get me wrong – Sabathia's accomplishments prior to those last two months of the 2005 season were impressive, particularly given his age. But the great leap forward that he took at the end of 2005 took him from a potential top-of-the-rotation starter (career ERA+ going into the 2006 season – 106) to the actual top-of-the-rotation starter that he's been since then (ERA+ from 2006 through last season – 140).

What does all of that mean for Masterson?

That he's going to continue to go through his growing pains and while he was never has universally well-regarded as Sabathia (CC was Baseball America's #7 prospect in MLB prior to the 2001 season) and there is more than a little disparity in the ages (Masterson will be 25 this year), I don't think that anyone's expecting Masterson to turn into what Sabathia has. Masterson's MiLB totals (3.79 ERA, 1.18 WHIP, 7.5 K/9, 3.27 K/BB) don't look too bad in comparison to those of Sabathia (3.43 ERA, 1.29 WHIP, 10.4 K/9, 2.39 K/BB)...that is until you put the totals into the proper context of age and level of advancement. Perhaps a guy like Rondon (#17 on The Hardball Times' top prospect list), who just turned 22 and has MiLB numbers that come close to CC's (3.92 ERA, 1.21 WHIP, 8.0 K/9, 4.23 K/9) is a better comparison in that he provides the young, high-upside arm like Sabathia did back then.

However, we're talking specifically about 2004 and 2010 here and Sabathia is a pretty unique case having compiled 588 MLB innings before turning 23 with every expectation that he would eventually be an ace. Maybe that's the biggest difference here, in terms of expectations for results. Even if it is, Sabathia was still an oversized riddle when the 2004 season began, still overly prone to bad innings, and still more potential than performance.

### **Scott Elarton's career numbers prior to 2004 season**

5.03 ERA, 1.42 WHIP, 6.7 K/9, 1.84 K/BB in 558 IP

### **Jake Westbrook's career numbers prior to 2010 season**

4.31 ERA, 1.38 WHIP, 4.9 K/9, 1.78 K/BB in 1,070 1/3 IP

If we're talking about the "veteran presence" on a pitching staff, Elarton was two years older than anyone else among the 5 pitchers that saw the majority of the starts in 2004. Elarton was waived from a Colorado team that lost 94 games and finished last in the NL in team ERA at 5.54. Elarton did his part in contributing to that dreadful ERA in Colorado, posting a 9.00 ERA, 1.86 WHIP, 1.15 K/BB line in 41 1/3 IP with an improbable 6 losses in 8 games started for the Rockies before being released.

Elarton was claimed off of waivers in mid-June and inexplicably became the team's third-best starter posting a line of a 4.53 ERA, 1.27 WHIP, 6.1 K/9, 1.90 K/BB in 117 1/3 IP as a member

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of the Indians' starting rotation. Little was expected of Elarton and he performed admirably for the Indians, eating innings in 2004 and 2005 until he was replaced at the back-end of the rotation with the ill-fated Jason Johnson experiment. While little was expected of Elarton, he contributed those much-needed innings to a young rotation, a role that Westbrook can hopefully duplicate.

Though expectations were low for Elarton, they were there because of his recent performance in Colorado and because Elarton was still coming off of a lost 2002 season in which Elarton missed the entire season because of major shoulder surgery. In fact, from 2001 to 2003, Elarton threw only 184 1/3 MLB innings in those three years, posting an ERA+ of 70 in the process. That inning output puts the number of innings that Westbrook has thrown in the last three years (186 2/3 MLB innings from 2007 to 2009) into some perspective in that the Indians are once again looking to resurrect a once-promising career, though Elarton pre-shoulder surgery and Westbrook pre-TJ surgery are completely different animals.

In 2004, the Indians benefited from the pleasant surprise of Scott Elarton and would be happy to do the same with Jake Westbrook. Obviously, the major difference is that the Indians are pegging a still-unproven-as-healthy-and-effective Westbrook as their Opening Day starter, an issue that never faced the 2004 team.

### **Jason Davis's career numbers prior to 2004 season**

4.45 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 4.8 K/9, 1.88 K/BB in 180 IP

### **Fausto Carmona's career numbers prior to 2010 season**

4.69 ERA, 1.49 WHIP, 5.6 K/9, 1.43 K/BB in 535 2/3 IP

This is the strangest coupling of the group, placed together by virtue of each being big, hard-throwing RHP with control issues. While Carmona unquestionably comes in with the longer track record, remember that Davis was the assumed #2 starter on this team and, at the age of 24, the idea that he could sit behind the LHP Sabathia still held merit to some in the organization...the guy was on the cover of the Media Guide for goodness sakes.

With a decent 2003 in his back pocket, Davis regressed severely in 2004 when, at the age of 24, he posted a line of a 5.51 ERA, 1.74 WHIP, 5.7 K/9, 1.41 K/BB in 114 1/3 IP. He was eventually demoted to Buffalo and again, remember that he was pegged as the #2 starter out of Spring Training for a team that won eventually 80 games. Some of the reason for Davis' struggles can be placed on his rapid ascent through the system as he never pitched in AAA until he was demoted from the parent club in 2004 after logging nearly 300 career MLB innings. Davis was always the bewitching arm in the system who, "if he could ever figure it out", could really take off and establish himself in the rotation. That step would never come for Davis, who would eventually bounce around to Seattle, then Pittsburgh, finishing 2009 in the Pirates' organization as he posted a 6.06 ERA and a 1.73 WHIP for AAA Indianapolis.

While Davis looked like the "could-be" in the 2004 rotation, Carmona is the "at one point was" in

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the 2010 rotation, where the Indians look to recapture the pitcher that dominated the league in 2007. If we're going off of the idea that Carmona needs to get physically back, [the recent quote from Shapiro](#)

that his "demeanor is good" and "physically he's better than last year, but that's not enough" certainly doesn't inspire a lot of confidence that 2010 is the year for Carmona to turn his once-promising career around.

Carmona's already done his stint in the Minors as Davis did in 2004. Whether he begins the bounce around MLB after the 2011 season, as Davis began in the 2007 season, should have a clearer answer at the end of 2010.

### **Cliff Lee's career numbers prior to 2004 season**

3.30 ERA, 1.20 WHIP, 7.2 K/9, 1.79 K/BB in 62 2/3 IP

### **Dave Huff's career numbers prior to 2010 season**

5.61 ERA, 1.56 WHIP, 4.6 K/9, 1.59 K/BB in 128 1/3 IP

Yes, CP Lee's numbers look great...until you see that he accumulated them in 62 2/3 IP and that his 2004 line (as a 25-year-old) was a 5.43 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, 8.1 K/9, 1.99 K/BB in 179 IP. Admittedly, I've already made [this comparison in a piece a couple of months ago](#), but just to frame it again in the context of getting a full look at 2004 Cliff Lee vs. 2010 Dave Huff (who turns 26 in August), here it is again to fit into this comparison...

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 (numbers shown above as they represent Huff's body of work to date).

Is that to intimate 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 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**

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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.

The road to becoming that middle-of-the-rotation LHP is not a linear or a clean path (not sure if you remember who got demoted and left off of the playoff roster in 2007), but Huff has the MiLB resume and the pedigree that portend that 2010 could be the year that he separates himself from the pack of “soft-tossing lefties” with whom he’s often grouped.

### Jake Westbrook’s career numbers prior to the 2004 season

5.23 ERA, 1.55 WHIP, 4.6 K/9, 1.35 K/BB in 246 IP

### Aaron Laffey’s career numbers prior to 2010 season

4.39 ERA, 1.50 WHIP, 4.3 K/9, 1.27 K/BB in 264 2/3 IP

Making his second appearance on this list (and being the only duplicate from 2004 to 2010 in the rotation, a nearly unfathomable feat), we see once again how Westbrook’s 2004 season came as a complete surprise as he compiled a line of 3.38 ERA, 1.25 WHIP, 4.8 K/9, 1.90 K/BB at the age of 26 after starting the 2004 season in the bullpen. That stint in the bullpen lasted for all of 3 appearances as Westbrook famously relieved Jeff D’Amico (who was unable to record an out) against the Tigers and [threw 7 perfect innings](#), never to return to the bullpen as he threw a complete game 2-hitter in his first 2004 start.

Prior to that 2004 season, Westbrook had appeared in 71 games and only 34 of them as a starter, posting an ERA+ of 85 with the line above representing his compiled career numbers. Prior to the 2010 season, Laffey has thrown in 50 games, starting 44 of them as his only use out of the bullpen came last season. In those 50 games, Laffey has posted an ERA+ of 98 and while he may not have the 1st Round Pedigree that Westbrook did (though Westbrook was traded three times as a Minor Leaguer from Colorado to Montreal to New York to Cleveland), his numbers stand up comparatively to Westbrook. Again, I know I made [this comparison before with Laffey and Westbrook in that aforementioned piece](#) but to once again put the comparison in this context...

This is 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:

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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?

Once Westbrook took the opportunity to start every fifth day, he ran with it, putting up a line befitting of a middle-of-the-rotation starter from 2004 to 2007 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

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

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

Sure the odds are against it, and maybe the presence of Mitch Talbot prevents the opportunity, but stranger things happened in the 2004 season that snowballed into the 2005 and 2007 seasons of contention, so watching it all play out should generate some interesting subplots this season in the rotation.

Among those sub-plots and in the context of examining the events and the performances that shaped the evolution of the 2004 rotation, the questions come pouring out for a largely-unproven 2010 staff...

Where is the surprise going to come from?

Where is the disappointment going to come from?

Who is this year's Jason Davis?

Who is this year's Scott Elarton?

Do any of these pitchers have a chance at becoming a top-of-the-rotation horse?

In hindsight, the easy conclusion to arrive at is that the Indians had two future Cy Young winners and a middle-of-the-rotation innings eater on that 2004 staff cutting their teeth in MLB. Seeing as how Sabathia, Lee, and Westbrook will earn a total of \$43M in salary in 2010 alone from their current employers, it is now obvious that the Indians' pitching staff did contain some promise, if unfulfilled to that point.

That idea of the unfulfilled promise in 2004 is the important one here as Sabathia was still a 23-year-old trying to find some consistency, Lee was a young LHP still adjusting to MLB having logged only 62 2/3 MLB innings prior to 2004, and Westbrook was just beginning the transition

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from long man/spot-starter to middle-of-the-rotation cog.

Don't forget that the Indians signed Millwood and Byrd to complement these three and thought that Carmona and Atom Miller would eventually graduate into the starting rotation.

Comparably, if the Indians can get two or three of the arms that figure in prominently in the 2010 mix, it goes a long way towards settling the rotation and allowing the Indians to perhaps use the same blueprint of adding a veteran arm in FA (like Millwood and Byrd) while the young arms (Rondon, Carrasco, Hagadone, and White being the closest), shake themselves out on the farm.

Some of those arms could end up in the bullpen, but the idea that the Indians' 2004 rotation was an obvious strength of the team is revisionist at best when you consider that 60% of the Opening Day rotation would throw 193 total MLB innings after that season as Davis threw 166 2/3 innings and Stanford would throw 26 1/13 innings after 2004...D'Amico would throw none.

Was there potential there and were some of the ceilings (notably Sabathia) much higher?

No question, but looking back at the 2004 rotation on the basis of the track records to that point of the players thought to fill out that rotation show that the 2004 rotation was as full of question marks and inconsistent performers, both young and old, as the 2010 rotation looks to be.

Some members of the 2004 rotation used the innings available to them to establish themselves as pillars of the rotation for the teams in 2005 and beyond and 2010 will tell if any of the assumed members of the 2010 rotation can do the same.