

Pitching In On a Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, June 13 2010 9:28 AM - Last Updated Sunday, June 13 2010 1:08 PM



As I ready myself for Steve Strasburg's visit to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario today, let's get going on this Lazy Sunday with [the hope that some Carlos Santana jerseys will join this collection of jerseys at the Merchandise shops](#) ...with a hat

tip to

[Craig](#)

[Calcaterra of Hardball Talk](#)

(who will be joining me today on the Tribe Social Deck aka "Mom's Basement") this afternoon. While much of the national focus is going to be on Strasburg and whether he's going to throw a perfect game or a no-hitter or strike out all 27 hitters, perhaps we'll take the opportunity to talk about pitchers...except it will be about the ones that don't pitch for the Chief.

And with that, we're off...

While this 4-game winning streak may be coloring my outlook a little bit and as absurd as it sounds when looking at the Indians' overall record, the Indians' pitching staff has emerged as a great source for optimism for the Erie Warriors. The old news is that Tampa Bay cast-off "The Fury" has an ERA of 3.59 in mid-June (good for 23rd best in the AL) with a WHIP of 1.35 (good for 35th in the AL) in his rookie year and even him performing at some level below that, the Indians may have found a middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation cog for the team (at a reasonable cost) for the foreseeable future. While Talbot is a nice story and certainly is a player to root for, the greater development has been among the two players in the rotation who legitimately project as top-of-the-rotation arms – Fausto Carmona and Justin Masterson.

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Just to reiterate, we are just in mid-June here, but it would seem that the Indians are seeing the emergence of two potential dominant front-of-the-rotation RHP. While this would seem to be premature to label Justin Masterson as such (more on him in a minute), let's realize that after Carmona's performance last night (in which he faced one batter above the minimum throwing not to Mike Redmond, but to his assumed batterymate for the next 5 years or so), his ERA has dipped to 3.23 (13th in the AL) and his WHIP has dropped to 1.24 (22nd in the AL) and he's trending in the right direction, posting a 2.72 ERA with 30 K to 18 BB over his last 8 starts.

Most impressive about Carmona's rebirth is the manner in which he's dominating opposing batters, using an economy of pitches to induce soft contact (his 13.1% Line Drive Percentage is 3rd lowest in the AL) and inducing ground balls at a 55.5% clip (4th in the AL, behind leader Justin Masterson) which is still below his 2007 level of inducing ground balls on 64.3% of the balls put in play against him, which was the highest GB% in AL. Perhaps The Faustastic One (the one from 2007) never fully re-emerges, but Fausto Carmona – the more composed, more efficient, more complete pitcher that has been on display this season – remains a pitcher capable of fronting a rotation, something that he has the capability to do in Cleveland through the 2014 season.

Then there is the curious case of Justin Masterson...

As he morphs back and forth, Jekyll and Hyde style from Justin Consistent (say it out loud to realize what I'm getting at here) or Justin Credible, he remains an enigma. While the debate over whether he belongs in the rotation or bullpen is going to rage for some time (with the people "ahead" in the argument being the ones who can clearly back up their position by his most recent start – so the "keep him in the rotation" crowd is ahead), his success is largely determined by his ability to throw his fastball for strikes. This is not ground-breaking stuff (for anyone), but the fact that he really throws 3 pitches effectively means that his success (or lack thereof) is largely dependent on his ability to throw his fastball for strikes, setting up his sinker and his slider.

While that may be true of most pitchers, compare the data from Masterson's start against the Red Sox this week to a game against the Orioles on May 14th, when he gave up 6 ER, 8 H, and 5 BB in 5 1/3 IP:

[Vs. BOS \(6-9-10\)](#)

Sinker – 55 thrown / 34 strikes (61.8%) / 4 swinging strikes (7.27%)

4-seam fastball – 37 thrown / 27 strikes (72.97%) / 3 swinging strikes (8.11%)

Slider – 18 thrown / 14 strikes (77.78%) / 3 swinging strikes (16.67%)

[Vs. BAL \(5-14-10\)](#)

Sinker – 31 thrown / 19 strikes (61.29%) / 2 swinging strikes (6.45%)

4-seam fastball – 39 thrown / 20 strikes (51.28%) / 0 swinging strikes (0%)

Slider – 29 thrown / 19 strikes (65.52%) / 6 swinging strikes (20.69%)

Change-Up – 8 thrown / 4 strikes (50%) / 1 swinging strike (12.5%)

The numbers for the sinker and the slider are remarkably similar, but the big difference is

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Masterson's ability to throw that fastball for strikes. When he does, as he did against the Red Sox (nearly 75% of the time), he's effective and can utilize his secondary pitches more than when he's not throwing that fastball consistently for strikes, with the Orioles game (just over 50% of his fastballs were strikes) being the obvious example.

Maybe the Indians did find a mechanical flaw in Justin Credible's delivery and tweaked it (and we sure are hearing a lot of "he's staying on top of the ball") that have contributed to his newfound success (1.69 ERA, 1.08 WHIP, .551 OPS against in his last three starts), something that will continue. If they have, the Indians have the potential to have two big, RH arms at the top of their rotation, inducing ground balls at an absurd rate and flummoxing opposing batters. Whether Masterson is able to continue his success in the rotation remains to be seen, but his last three starts show why the Indians are so willing to give him that long leash in the rotation as his repertoire has the ability to dominate good lineups (like the Red Sox, whose lineup included 5 LH hitters when he mowed his way through them), but the ability to repeat that success seems to be tied to his ability to repeat his delivery.

That being said, he remains a favorite among the statheads as he racks up the K's and the groundball outs when he's on (and [FanGraphs goes in-depth as to how good he really was against the Red Sox](#)), going so far as to wonder who had a better outing during the week – Masterson or...wait for it, Strasburg. No, seriously), so the Indians have the "opportunity" of a lost season to see if he can find the consistency that has eluded him in the rotation.

Watching Carmona and Masterson assert themselves over the last two months (Carmona) and two weeks (for Justin Credible) brings something that reader Kevin Holz wrote into focus. He wrote, "is it just me or are you placing more emphasis on seeing Masterson or Carmona continue to develop (or re-develop in Fausto's case) than on anything else. If those two guys can develop into top of the rotation homeboys then that seems infinitely more important than a simple W."

In this lost season of 2010, where development and looking past 2010 has become the focus, Kevin is absolutely right. As frustrating as a Rafael Perez outing might be or as much venom has been thrown in the direction of Rusty Bryan, there is no greater need for this team going forward than legitimate top-of-the-rotation arms. If Carmona and Masterson can assert themselves as such (and each has the repertoire to do it), then 2010 becomes a season that provides the bedrock for the organization, with both Carmona and Masterson under club control through 2014.

Masterson dominating his former team brings an interesting sidebar to the 2010 season as the trades of last July have been analyzed, re-analyzed, and condemned in some circles, that it is easy to brush aside a performance like that of Masterson. In fact, the Victor deal has taken a back seat this year as there has been SO much talk about evaluating the Lee deal, be it to label Jason Donald a "future Utility IF" (and I'd like a word with anyone who thinks that about Donnie Baseball) or bemoan the fact that Lou Marson is already destined for a back-up position (not realizing that he's already trade bait, seeing as how he currently ranks 3rd in MLB by gunning down 38% of would be base stealers...a stat that I'm sure is not lost on the Red Sox), or point to

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Carlos Carrasco's inconsistency (although his last outing had him going 8 IP giving up 0 ER and 3 H with 9 K) while pointing out that Jason Knapp has yet to throw a pitch in the Cleveland organization, that the haul of Masterson, Nick Hagadone, and Bryan Price often gets overlooked.

Before getting into those other two, can we just acknowledge that Lee's going to get traded again?

When he does, there will be specific players that will have been moved for him with 1 ½ years remaining on his deal, 1 year remaining on his deal, and ½ year remaining on his deal, plus whatever draft picks his acquiring team will get when Lee leaves via FA to go to the Bronx (if they're not the acquiring team). Thus, we'll be able to stack up what the Indians got for him against what the Phillies got for him and what the Mariners get for him into eternity

This is brought up to point out that it is still far too early to judge the Lee deal (as much as everyone wants to), particularly in the context of the fact that he's about to join his 4th team in one calendar year. However, it is equally early to judge the Martinez deal...although that trade seems to be bearing some immediate fruit.

Beyond Masterson, the Indians received the much-ballyhooed Nick Hagadone, who has now ascended to Akron and has put up cumulative 2010 numbers of a 2.86 ERA and a 1.51 WHIP with 57 K to 38 BB in 50 2/3 IP. While his control remains somewhat of an issue, he is a LH power pitcher that projects either to the front of the rotation or the back end of the bullpen. While projections are just dreams and wishes (paging Atom Miller), Hagadone has gained the attention of scouts by still averaging nearly a K per inning since his promotion to AA. How quickly he moves in the system will remain a point of interest as he is 24 years old and fills an obvious void in the organization as a LH power arm.

Hagadone's journey and possible destination is well-noted and well-documented, while the same can't be said for the 3rd pitcher involved in the Martinez deal – Bryan Price. I'm not sure how many people realize this, but Price was the highest draft selection among the three pitchers acquired (#45 overall to Hagadone's #55 overall and Masterson's #71 overall) with the biggest signing bonus among the 3 pitchers.

Currently, he sits in the bullpen in Akron and has struck out 30 hitters while walking just 5 in the 25 innings that he's worked for the Aeros. This is his first real venture into the bullpen as the Red Sox worked him almost exclusively as a starter in 2009 and the Indians have shown a sudden prescience for converting some of these MiLB starters to relievers in the hopes of FINALLY building a home-grown (and effective) bullpen, so don't be surprised if Bryan Price's name starts being bandied about as a legitimate bullpen option, perhaps as early as late this year.

All told, it's not outside of the realm of possibility that the Indians have all 3 of these pitchers on their staff (in some capacity) in 2011, a year-and-a-half after the Victor trade. All of them being strikeout pitchers (something that was lacking in the organization previously, if you hadn't noticed), all of them under club control for the next 4 to 6 years (or longer, depending upon when Hagadone and Price arrive), and all of them being 25-years-old or younger means that

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the Indians did add projectable high-level arms into their organization that was lacking them. Whether any or all of them make an impact remains to be seen, but the return from the Martinez trade plays a large role in the whole “Layers of Arms” (not to be confused with the now-defunct “Waves of Arms” strategy) that the Indians have taken in all of these trades over the last 2+ years.

Regardless, the jury is still out on both the Lee and Martinez trades and will remain out, regardless of how quickly anybody wants to deride it or chalk it up to malfeasance. If you remember, by the end of 2004 – 2 ½ years after Colon was dealt – the Indians had “enjoyed” an OPS of .556 from Brandon Phillips in 136 MLB games, a 4.88 ERA and a 1.42 WHIP from Cliff Lee in 44 starts, and had received 159 plate appearances from Grady Sizemore.

Again, that was 2 ½ years AFTER Bartolo Colon was dealt and the Indians’ return for Colon looked like it was lacking in a return on investment. Is this pointed out to justify the Sabathia deal, or the Lee deal, or the Martinez deal? Absolutely not, it’s meant simply to put the timeframe of evaluating these trades into the proper context by reminding everyone of the Colon deal, which looks fabulous in hindsight but lacked immediate results...or even results 2 ½ years after the fact.

Speaking of trades (and ones that are probably coming), in case you were wondering how seriously the Indians should consider retaining Jake Westbrook through the end of the season with the rationale being that even if he leaves, they’ll still get some draft pick compensation, realize that [Westbrook is not currently designated as even a Type B Free Agent](#) (due to his injuries limiting his past few years) and the Indians would not receive any draft pick compensation (as of right now) if Westbrook were to stay with the team through the season and leave via Free Agency this Fall/Winter.

That could be subject to change, but while the Cardinals seem to have filled their need for a starter as they inked Jeff Suppan (although [it remains to be seen how that will work out](#)), it will be interesting to see how aggressive the Indians get with their veteran players as, you may not remember this, but Mark DeRosa was dealt on June 27th of last year, so if you think that the Indians are going to wait to make moves here, you’re mistaken...

Speaking of DeRosa, does anyone else marvel that the Indians were able to turn 3 months of him into what looks like their Future Closer (who probably should be their Present Closer) in Chris F. Perez and into Jess Todd, who is now sitting on an ERA of 3.58 in Columbus after a rough start to the year, striking out more than a batter an inning in AAA?

For years, the Indians were lambasted for “not developing a homegrown closer” or for not “being able to promote legitimate relief arms” (neither of which are incorrect) and now the Indians seem to be sitting on a bounty of them, largely because of making trades like the DeRosa one that netted them what looks to be a “homegrown closer” (kind of) and a potentially legitimate relief arm less than a year after the DeRosa deal.

While the Blake deal has been getting so much attention this week (and rightfully so as I prepare myself to see “The Axe Man” in person for the first time this afternoon), but the DeRosa

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deal could go down as an equally impressive heist.

How many of those can be pulled off in the next 6 weeks or so will be interesting to watch as Austin Kearns is sure to generate some interest (even if [Terry Pluto tells us that the Indians are interested in keeping him](#)) and

should be moved in the next 6 weeks, despite my [earlier assertions that he should be retained](#)

. Additionally, if the

[Angels are in the market for a 1B](#)

(and their DH situation has been awful as well all season), I happen to know a guy that The DiaTot (adamantly) refers to as “Muscle” Branyan who might fit the bill.

[They may not simply want a rent-a-player](#)

, but to that I would add that...wait for it...don't forget about Branyan's 2011 club option. Anaheim, we'll be expecting a call...

Regardless of how the Trading Season shakes up, during a week in which [the White Flag has gone up over the South Side of Chicago](#)

(and do you think that they're regretting trading those prospects for Peavy now), it now seems apparent that 3 teams in the AL Central are in the midst of rebuilds, and the Indians' effort actually looks to be ahead of the not-yet-started process in Chicago and the interminable “Process” in Kansas City.

On the topic of Kansas City, here's [a fantastic piece by Rob Neyer](#) on how watching what the Royals do over the next 6 weeks will be the most telling actions/non-actions that their Front Office can do:

So what should the Royals do? Podsednik's played decently this season. At third base (Gordon's old position), Alberto Callaspo has played decently. In right field, David DeJesus has played better than decently. Here's the thing, though: If the Royals are somehow competitive in 2012, none of those guys will be significant contributors; their value will probably never be higher than it is today (or in a few weeks, when contending teams are a little more eager to make deals).

The interesting line to me is “if the Royals are somehow competitive in 2012, none of these guys will be significant contributors”, which can be applied to the likes of Branyan, Kearns, Westbrook, Wood, and Peralta. What the Indians' Front Office has shown (unlike the Royals in recent years) is that they're unafraid to make decisions that are wildly unpopular and that weaken the team in the short term because the long term vision is in place.

While that “long term vision” still looks a little fuzzy at times in a season like this one, which has certainly felt like rock-bottom more than a few times, on a day like today when Carlos Santana is sitting in the #3 hole against Cy Strasburg, with some of the young talent already on hand in Cleveland (most notably Choo and Donald) and more on the way when these veterans are moved (when LaPorta, Brantley, and perhaps more pitching), that “long term vision” starts to come into focus.

Of course, I may just be excited about the prospect of an afternoon spent under the summer

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sun watching Carlos Santana face off against Cy Strasburg in mid-June, drunk with the “momentum” of a 4-game winning streak...