

A Master Plan for Justin Masterson's Role

Written by {ga=ninocolla}

Tuesday, August 24 2010 3:00 PM - Last Updated Tuesday, August 24 2010 8:34 AM



I keep looking at the statistics, trying to figure things out when it comes to Justin Masterson.

There was a point at the end of April where a left-handed hitter would come up to the plate and you could really just flip a coin as to them getting on base or not.

I almost don't know where to start because of all the angles that are involved with Masterson and whether or not he's suited for the starting role he currently holds. Never have I gone through a season and flip-flopped on a pitcher and what role he should have as I have with Masterson in 2010.

There are times I've thought he was cut out to be a starter, there are times when I've been ready to move him into the eighth inning role and at one point, back in early May, when I thought his future was nothing but a power-armed right-handed specialist. The left-handed numbers were that abysmal.

The league caught on to getting to Masterson, which is why as it stands now, he's faced more

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left-handed batters than he has right-handed.

In his first game against the White Sox, Chicago had just two left-handed hitters in their lineup in Juan Pierre and Mark Teahen. Three starts later against Oakland, manager Bob Geren loaded his Athletics lineup with six hitters that could hit from the left side of the plate.

The results to this experiment? Masterson went just four innings, gave up seven runs off eight hits and four walks. A start later, a mangled Twins lineup still managed to run out as many left-handed hitters as they did the last time they faced Masterson and against Baltimore where he gave up six runs off eight hits and five walks? Six more left-handed hitters.

Corey Patterson was on base four times, Markakis twice, Scott three times, and the bottom three of the lineup, all hitting lefty, four times off walks.

Look no further than Masterson's [log against left-handed hitters](#) this season to see some of the tragic numbers. What makes matters worse is that the two best teams in the division both have no shortage of Masterson's kryptonite to run out there.

There is no hiding [the ugly numbers against left-handed hitting](#) . The sad part is that at this point in the season, his right-handed splits have actually got worse and his left-handed numbers don't look as bad as they used to.

After Friday's start against the Tigers, Masterson's left-handed opponents are getting on base with a .392 percentage. They're hitting .309 off of him with 10 home runs, and they've collected 42 walks, nearly double what he's given up to right-handers.

All of the numbers are ugly, but I think nothing shows how bad he is against left-handers more than his strikeout numbers against right-handers. I think everyone knows by now that Masterson

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is a strikeout pitcher; he leads the team in them with 111. In 48 less at-bats against right-handers, Masterson has struck out 19 more hitters.

All the left-handed stuff set aside, this guy can't get past six innings to save his life. A lot of it has to do with the amount of pitches he has to throw against the lefties, in addition to all the pitches he throws to get strikeouts against the righties; things just pile up quickly.

Masterson has gone at least seven innings in just four of his 25 games this season. He's gone less than six innings in 13 of those games. Those numbers can't cut it for a starting pitcher because it puts a bind on your bullpen every five days.

The first inning hasn't been good for him, but Masterson is clearly better in the second and third innings compared to the fourth and fifth. If anything, this gives you more evidence than anything else that perhaps Masterson is more suited to be coming out of the bullpen.

This has nothing to do with what side of the plate players are hitting from and everything to do with how much trouble Masterson gets into the deeper he goes into a game. That more than anything is reason enough for one to believe a move has to be made to get Masterson out of the rotation.

If the fact that he can't get left-handed hitters out is contributing to him not going deep into games, then you hope him pitching in an inning or two every other game resolves things. It is more likely that Masterson moves to the eighth inning, or at worst the seventh. With a majority of the world hitting right-handed, it seems more likely that he faces right-handed hitters way more than anything else.

Take the guy who's been the Indians primary late-inning guy this season, Chris Perez, for example. He's faced 31 more right-handed batters than he has left-handed ones. Perez is a lot like Masterson in a way that he's a power fastball and slider pitcher. Perez has dominated the right-handed hitters he's faced, striking out 32, walking just seven, giving up just one home run and holding them to just as many hits as left-handers, in more at-bats.

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Would managers be more tempted to play the match-up game with Masterson late in the game? Absolutely, but if the club can rely on Rafael Perez and Joe Smith in the seventh inning, Manny Acta can hold the upper hand in bringing in a guy like Masterson for the eighth and simply facing what is in front of him.

This brings us to a topic that has been brought up continuously when the media has tried to discuss moving Masterson to the bullpen to both Acta and pitching coach Tim Belcher: How does the pitching staff fair with Masterson moving into the bullpen?

For one, I think by eluding to Smith and the Perez-Left earlier, the bullpen gets much stronger, especially the back-end. The main concern though seems to be who takes the innings that Masterson occupied? Can you argue with the first-half success the Indians had with the pitching staff? Masterson was actually a small part of a surprising rotation this season.

Lately though, he's actually been worse in the second half, leading me to believe that you could probably run someone else out there in place of Masterson's innings, and you may find something better. Look at what Jeanmar Gomez has done in that fifth rotation spot that the club just couldn't nail down all year. Josh Tomlin has also had moderate success; even he has given the Indians at least five innings on short rest.

The club has an abundance of options to plug into the rotation, I think they can afford to give in and move Masterson to the bullpen full-time. One can understand their reluctance in making this move, just because of what they've invested (and traded) and just how good Masterson could be if he were to be a reliable starter.

But at some point, you have to make a decision and if the end of last year and this full-season isn't enough evidence, I'm not sure what is. I was all for giving him a chance for the entire season, and at this point, it looks as if they will have done that. You have to base your decision off this entire year audition and also what he did with Boston as a relief pitcher.

You throw Masterson's abilities as a reliever, or at least what we think he could do as a power arm in the back-end, in with Chris Perez, and you have a young tandem that is going to make the game a lot shorter for the starting rotation regardless.

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Most people think that this club does not have an ace or a big number one pitcher in the upper levels of their system. They may not need one with two guys like Masterson and Perez at the back. So you fill your rotation with five middle of the rotation starters, as long as they give you six innings on a consistent basis, you might have a working formula in terms of a pitching staff.

The Minnesota Twins are 21st in the majors in quality starts. Yet they are still ninth in innings pitched from their starting rotation. Six pitchers have started all but two of their games, five have started all but eight and four have pretty much not missed a start (Kevin Slowey was just recently placed on the disabled list however).

Carl Pavano is their defacto number one, and while some would say Francisco Liriano probably has stuff that only "aces" do, he's the Twins' Fausto Carmona in a sense that he can be very puzzling in terms of what you are going to get.

Their four best starters don't have numbers that blow anyone away. Their success lies in the back end of the bullpen, which is still thriving, despite the absence of their All-World closer Joe Nathan.

Matt Guerrier and Jesse Crain shorten the game. While Jon Rauch hasn't been lights out and far from the ninth inning eliminator that Nathan was, he provided some stability until the club acquired Matt Capps, who's done his job since coming over from Washington. This has been the formula for Minnesota for years now.

The Indians can build a pitching staff like the Twins and find success. They can place Justin Masterson at the back end in front of Chris Perez and shorten the game for their starting rotation.

They can plug in their multiple starting options (including their most recent option, Zach McAllister) and find ways to make up for those innings that Masterson occupied.

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And with a 5.33 ERA and disastrous looking 1.63 WHIP, why wouldn't you try to find someone to occupy those 145-plus innings? Those are numbers not even worthy of a fifth starter on a contending team, at least not where I come from.

Masterson moving would give the Indians a bullpen that would look roughly as such.

Closer – Chris Perez

8th Inning – Justin Masterson

6th/7th Inning – Rafael Perez/Joe Smith/Tony Sipp

That is with young options like Bryce Stowell and Zach Putnam also waiting in the wings and not far away. Those are options that some regard as legitimate back-end solutions to the Indians' future as well.

And not all has been bad with Joe Smith and Rafael Perez as of late. Perez has been stellar since June, giving up just five earned runs in 32-plus innings of work. He's also only allowed 25 percent of his inherited runners to score this season as a whole, and that isn't close to the 16 percent he was at in 2007, but it is better than the 32 percent from 2008.

Smith meanwhile has been great since returning from Columbus and a large part of it has to do with him only facing right-handed hitters. Smith is holding right-handers to a .187 average over the course of the season and since he was recalled in June, overall he's held hitters to an identical .187 average.

The other component in the current bullpen is left-hander Tony Sipp. The difference between Sipp and the other two is sort of a reversal of fortunes. From the start of the season up until May 23rd, Sipp was perhaps the Tribe's best reliever, carrying a 1.40 ERA through 19 innings. Then he imploded in a weekend series against the Yankees to end the month of May and it took

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awhile to get back on track.

Sipp rode out of a rough June and started to regain form in July and has been much better since. He's holding hitters to a .143 average and a .268 on-base percentage in the months of July and August and he's given up just three home runs, compared to the five he gave up in that 12 game stretch from May 28th to the end of June.

The positives of those three, give you enough to believe the club can fill in that inning or short inning-plus (with those three or a combination of them and players like Stowell and Putnam), assuming Masterson and Perez are shortening the game in the eighth and ninth.

The ultimate decision is in the hands of the front office. Tim Belcher, Scott Radinsky, and Manny Acta can give their input, but one of Chris Antonetti's first tasks is going to have to be the future of Justin Masterson. Did he and Mark Shapiro acquire enough talent in the upper levels of the organization to be comfortable with a move of Masterson to the bullpen? That and are they comfortable with ending the starting experiment after a little under a season and a half of data?

All in all, I think it goes directly back to Masterson's performance in those innings they've allotted him this season. He hasn't been consistent and the numbers over the long haul haven't been there. The choice for the Indians may have already been made for them.

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You can follow Nino on Twitter @ [TheTribeDaily](#) where he often tweets about his parties with Andy Marte and sometimes about the Indians.