

## Starting to Come Together?

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Wednesday, September 08 2010 9:05 PM -

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After a brief trip out of state and a longer shelving due to the virus that just wouldn't go away, I'm back on the horse and ready to revel in the Indians...wait for it...perhaps climbing out of the cellar. Nothing like a West Coast trip (with nobody watching) for the Indians to breathe life back into what many took to be the corpse of a season to bring us all back to the brink of optimism after emotionally punting on 2011 and 2012. Nevertheless, the Indians find themselves back around mediocrity and, while some of that can be attributed to the teams on their schedule, the more pertinent topic is the reason that the Indians find themselves in the win column recently, albeit intermittently – the rotation. That's right, after much hand-wringing and teeth-gnashing over how the Indians' rotation looks like a subpar AAA rotation, it is worth noting that heading into Wednesday night's tilt with the Angels, the Indians starters had posted a 2.30 ERA in the month of September with a WHIP of 1.11 with 35 K to 11 BB in 47 innings pitched over the first 7 games (pitched by 6 pitchers) of the month.

Unsurprisingly, the team went 4-3 in those games and while the caveat of who they were playing (Mariners, the preseason darling because they were built on defense and...um, a little help here and the Angels, whose fall from the heavens despite some aggressive moves is amazing to watch) applies here, there are unquestionably some bright spots coming from the rotation as of late for the Tribe.

While Fausto Carmona's Post-All-Star Break ERA of 4.84 and Unleash the Fury's of 5.54 do less than inspire confidence, Justin Masterson and Carlos Carrasco have started to emerge as pitchers whose floors may be back-end-of-the-rotation fodder, but whose ceilings are well above that. Of course, the small sample size siren is blaring, but after a season in which the Indians' rotation resembled a contest to see who could get to Columbus the quickest at times, the recent performances have been comforting, particularly in light of where they're coming from and how they're coming.

For our first feature in Small Sample Size Theater, Carlos Carrasco has arrived to the Indians

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as a completely different looking pitcher, using command and poise(!) to post an two-game line of a 119 ERA+, 3.38 ERA, 1.13 WHIP, 10 K, 3 BB in 13 1/3 IP. It obviously bears mentioning that Carrasco has given up 3 HR in just 13 1/3 IP, which was a major problem for him last year in Cleveland as well as in Columbus to start the year, but he has shown an ability miss bats, which is not a skill that's been seen in the Cleveland rotation with much consistency for a while.

True, two starts is two starts for Carrasco, but this guy is 23 years old and struck out 130 while walking only 46 in 150 1/3 AAA innings and had posted a 2.08 ERA, 0.84 WHIP, 44 K, 8 BB over 47 2/3 IP in his last 8 AAA starts with just 1 HR allowed (he gave up 15 HR in his first 102 2/3 IP), so the potential that always seemed limited by a lack of poise or confidence or whatever you want to chalk it up to is finally being scratched and he's thrived against MLB competition...well, the M's and the Angels.

Back to his numbers from AAA, look again and notice how he struck out more batters than allowed baserunners in his last 8 starts in AAA...dramatic pause for you to re-read that...and now realize that he's struck out 10 MLB hitters while allowing 15 baserunners in his first two starts this year in MLB. For some context to that, Dave Huff struck out 37 hitters while allowing 135 baserunners...but isn't that kind of the point?

After Sowers, Laffey, and Huff nibbled and gutted their way through 5 innings, how refreshing is it to see a young Indians' pitcher come up and miss bats and show signs of having dominant stuff not reliant on luck or on stranding runners or getting by on guile?

Beyond Carrasco, the other live arm in the rotation belongs to Justin Masterson, who over his last 7 starts has posted a 2.95 ERA, 1.34 WHIP, 29 K, 20 BB in 42 2/3 IP while limiting opposing hitters to a .682 OPS against. Lest you think I'm just cherry-picking numbers and dates here (as I am wont to do), included in there are 2 games in which he surrendered only one fewer run than inning pitched (4 ER in 5 IP and 5 ER in 6 IP), so it's not as if he's been a lights-out starter, only that he has the capability to be that lights-out starter when he's on. He's certainly not "on" every time he takes the pill, but he does have a 4.13 ERA since the All-Star Break and, while that may not cause any calls to Cooperstown, his pre-All-Star Break ERA was a full run higher at 5.31.

It has been reported that he'll be moved to the bullpen soon as his inning count is reached, but if you're looking for a pitcher with the kind of repertoire that can dominate an opposing lineup for 7 innings on any given night, Masterson (who is still only 25) has shown that he has the ability, if

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not the consistency. Perhaps that consistency will take a while to emerge (and everyone remembers how these pitchers arrive to MLB as finished products, right?), but in terms of Masterson's future role, I'm in full agreement with my TCF colleague Steve Buffum, who feels that Masterson stays in the rotation until five better options emerge for the rotation.

Unless you can name those five starters for Goodyear for next year, Masterson (inconsistency and all) stays in the rotation because let's be honest about the fact that if/when he moves to the bullpen to start a season or in June or July, there is no going back to the rotation and the die has been cast on Masterson's role. If the Indians were fighting for a playoff spot or (as Buff says) five better options obviously exist, maybe the Indians consider moving Masterson to the bullpen, but now represents the perfect time to explore and exhaust his usefulness in the rotation to see if he can harness his obvious talent and contribute 200 innings in 30 games instead of 60 innings in 50 games.

Perhaps this is putting the cart before the horse here and extolling the virtues of a couple of young, inconsistent starters on the basis of what we'd like to see and there certainly should be some caveat for granting these types of pitchers the benefit of the doubt based on potential, much less recent performance. After all, Carmona has a 5.47 ERA over his last 8 starts with a 1.62 WHIP to boot as he's struck out only 28 and walked 15 in his last 49 1/3 IP. So, even with the "Renaissance Fausto" that has emerged from the Dark Ages of the last two years, he's been far from fully recovered. However, Carmona, like Carrasco and Masterson, does possess that repertoire and has achieved results that project as more than just the fringe starter/middle relief pitcher that the Indians have been far too reliant on since CC and CP found themselves in other uniforms.

If you want to see the key for the next year or two for the Indians, look no further than Carmona (26), Masterson (25), and Carrasco (23), all of whom fit the bill of possessing the potential to be a front-to-middle-of-the-rotation stalwart, something obviously currently missing from the organization, outside of these three and a few hopefuls in the middle-to-lower levels of the Minors.

That may be a terrifying notion, given the inconsistency that we've seen from all three, but if the Indians are to find a modicum of success in 2011 or 2012, it isn't going to be because Huff, Laffey, Sowers, Gomez (who I do like), Tomlin, Kluber, McCallister, or any other organization arm suddenly "figure it out" because those pitchers project as fringe starters/organizational depth/middle relievers, something that we've found take a team to about 3<sup>rd</sup> place.

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Sure, you can group Alex White, Joe Gardner, Matt Packer, or even (yet-to-throw-a-pitch-in-the-organization) Drew Pomeranz as guys who project as top-to-middle-of-the-rotation starters, but a lot can go wrong between Kinston and Cleveland (paging Atom Miller) and even in a perfect world, those guys are a few years away from appearing, much less thriving for the parent club.

Back to the trio of Carmona, Masterson, and Carrasco, consistency may be an issue (understatement alert), but if you're looking for starting pitchers that are going to be more than just back-end-of-the-rotation fodder, there is a distinct difference between an arm like Carrasco and that of Josh Tomlin

That's not to be totally dismissive of Josh Tomlin...well, maybe it is, but Tomlin's numbers since he has arrived in Cleveland (95 ERA+, 4.14 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 21 K, 11 BB in 41 1/3 IP) don't scream that he's built to last and thrive in MLB. Sure, he may be a nice role filler/swing starter/middle reliever/depth option or he may even evolve into a decent back-end-of-the-rotation guy, but in speaking to a friend about Tomlin, he summed it up as well as I would have hoped when he said, "Look, I like Tomlin...I'm rooting for the kid to succeed and not just because it would be a nice story and something that this team could use in a legit rotation arm. But I'm not going to emotionally invest myself in Tomlin in the way that I didn't emotionally invest myself in Scott Lewis...because I just don't see it. Maybe that's callous...but "IT" just doesn't jump out at me for Josh Tomlin."

Even the other rookie starter who arrived and has thrived with Tomlin still has me scratching my head a bit as Jeanmar Gomez is only 22 (Tomlin is 25) and has posted a line of a 129 ERA+, 3.07 ERA, 1.40 WHIP, 23 K, 12 BB in 44 IP. The problem is that I think that Gomez still may be pitching over his head a little bit, given his 5.20 ERA in AAA this year prior to his call-up. However, a level of talent is there as he posted a 3.30 ERA in Kinston and Akron in 2009 as a 21-year-old, but he could project as more of a 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> starter/depth option for the team for the next couple of years unless he shows potential in MLB that he was never able to harness at any level in the Minors...which is a pretty high branch to reach.

That being said, that "ability" to be the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> starters/depth option may be a valuable skill for the organization as Aaron Laffey's velocity and groundball rates both bottom out and David Huff is so far out of contention for getting another shot in Cleveland that I'm wondering if it's time for the Indians to call Neal Huntington to see if he's interested in a Dave Huff-for-Andy LaRoche swap (a quick nod to reader Ken Feigert, who points out that LaRoche is expendable with Pedro Alvarez on the scene and could join a burgeoning list of 2011 3B candidates, none of whom inspire much confidence) because Huff has no cheerleaders pleading in case, either from the

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Indians' dugout or Front Office.

So, where does all of that leave us with about less than a month of baseball to play in terms of the 2011 rotation?

In looking at the usual list of suspects, it does make sense to bring in a veteran...you know, perhaps one that has a history with the team, who did the Indians a favor when they were trying to move him. Put your hand down Millwood, I'm not talking about you...

Regardless, realizing that we're still playing September baseball and much can change from now to then (although probably not much will), I could see the Indians going into Spring Training with the rotation looking something like this:

Carmona

Masterson

Carrasco

Vet(brook)

Talbot

As for depth past that, Gomez and Tomlin can be among the first calls, along with Corey Kluber and Zach McCallister with the likes of Alex White, Scott Barnes, Matt Packer, and even Joe Gardner and Drew Pomeranz hopefully pushing their way into quick promotions, but I fear (well, maybe not "fear") that the shelf lives of Huff and Laffey are nearing their expiration dates as Indians.

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You could ask what the difference was between that list of a potential starting five for 2011 and the 2010 rotation (the one with the 4.51 ERA, 12<sup>th</sup> of 14 AL teams) and I would answer you that Mitch Talbot is no longer the #2 starter, but the #5 starter (and rightfully so) as the talent of Carmona, Masterson, and Carrasco will be given long leashes to find that consistency that has eluded them.

Maybe they'll hang themselves with those long leashes and that may not elicit a lot of confidence, but the only way that the Indians are going to pull themselves out of this hole that they find themselves in is from the development of the pitching that they currently have in house. At a certain point, the cream needs to rise to the top and the final month of the season represents a good opportunity for Masterson and Carrasco to build off of while Carmona looks to get on that roll again to carry some momentum into 2011.

Right now, any momentum into 2011 is going to feel like a strong wind in the sails of the Tribe that have remained limp for the better part of the last month...