

MLB Spring Training 2011: Cleveland Indians Starting Pitching Preview

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Spring Training is well underway, and after assessing what the Indians have to offer in terms of position players, it's time now to take a look at the team's pitching.

In this installment of my Spring Training Preview (part two of four), I'll begin looking at the Indians 2011 pitching staff by reviewing the starters. The next article in the series will examine the Tribe bullpen.

You can get Part 1 of this preview right here:

<http://bit.ly/gKBk6O>

Based on early Spring Training chatter, there seems to be a lot of disagreement among observers as to whether the pitching staff, as a whole, is in relatively good shape or has some serious problems.

There's a good argument for both of those perspectives, but realistically, the divide isn't necessarily between good and bad as a summation of the whole staff, but rather between the

caliber of the bullpen and the caliber of the rotation.

The Tribe appears to have a really solid group of relievers and a rotation that could go either way. Still, there are too many unknowns this early on in Spring Training to assess either part of the staff in absolute terms. At this point it's looking like bullpen: good, rotation: eh...

Either way, the most pervasive quality of Indians pitching in general appears to be inconsistency, both from one player to the next as well as within many of the individual pitchers' ability to be consistent from one appearance to another.

*** Author's Note: The order in which pitchers are listed in this article is not necessarily the order of the Indians 2011 rotation. Aside from Fausto Carmona being named the Opening Day starter, the order of the rotation has not yet been established.*

1. Fausto Carmona

Unsurprisingly, the Indians have already declared Fausto Carmona their Opening Day starter. That Carmona is the best starter in the rotation is, at least at this point, indisputable. The question is whether he can truly fill a number one starter role in the greater sense, rather than just standing out as the best among a mediocre, underdeveloped lot.

There's no doubt Carmona has the pure stuff to do it, but his control has flickered on and off over the years. Of late, he seems to have steadied himself adequately, and no one who had to watch the rest of his Indians teammates last season ought to be complaining about his 2010 performance. Still, it's tough to shake the fact that he's never really panned out to be the guy we thought we were seeing in 2007.

Carmona won 19 games in 2007 and boasted a 6.6 WAR. Things got ugly quickly in 2008 and even uglier in 2009, when Carmona hit rock bottom, posting just five wins on the season, an ERA over six, and a WAR of -1.9 before eventually being shipped out to Arizona midway through the season to work on his control. He gave up more earned runs in 2009 (88) in 125.1 innings pitched than he did in 215 innings pitched in 2007 (73 ER).

Whatever he did during his Arizona exile seemed to work, as he had a bounce back year in 2010. The number of wins (13) from last season isn't a good indicator of his performance given the lack of run support he received and the horrific defense he had behind him, but his ERA came down to a respectable 3.77 and his K/BB rate started to creep back up to where it was in 2007. Perhaps most telling is what the numbers don't show: in 2010, Carmona's confidence and control on the mound seemed to have been repaired, and he began to again display the kind of commanding presence he had in 2007.

This will be a good year for Carmona to test his mettle. The team will have more offense and better defense than last year to help him out, and he's coming off a season during which he pitched solidly and respectably despite everything around him going up in flames.

2. Justin Masterson

If you're anything like me and everyone else I know, you probably spent weeks of your life that you'll never get back during last season arguing with others on whether Justin Masterson should or should not move to the bullpen. Let me guess: no one ever won the argument, and you all just sort of decided to refocus on complaining as a group about how David Huff shouldn't be allowed to use Twitter without supervision.

So the question on the table entering 2011 is, once again, does Masterson really belong in the rotation? In an ideal situation, probably not. But since we're talking about the Indians, where the concept of "ideal" has been missing in action since the late 1990s, expectations have to be readjusted.

Masterson is not my favorite, I'll say that much, especially when you consider how sinkerball-heavy the Indians pitching staff is with or without him. However, the Indians are already short a fifth starter. Whatever our complaints about Masterson, we don't really have the depth at this point to come up with a fifth starter and find someone to take Masterson's spot on top of that.

I think we've all resigned ourselves to the fact that Masterson won't be the guy we were all

hoping he would be when handed Victor Martinez to the Red Sox in exchange for him, but at least he hasn't been a total bust. The numbers may not be there yet, but the potential still exists.

The problem is, as Indians fans, we spend a nauseating amount of time talking about "potential" as though it exists in a vacuum. Will it ever really translate for a guy like Masterson? Look at it this way: I can light a stove, but that doesn't make me a cook.

3. Mitch Talbot

Mitch Talbot spent the first half of 2010 looking like an all-star, and the second half of the season looking like the last kid picked in a gym class game of tee ball.

The swap that brought Talbot to Cleveland in exchange for Kelly Shoppach at first looked like a killer deal where the Indians came away with a fistful of diamonds in exchange for a big rock. By the break though, it just looked like Cleveland and Tampa Bay both wasted plane fare shipping boulders back and forth.

Talbot put up some impressive numbers out of the gate in April and then entered a slow decline beginning in May, but things didn't really get bad until August, when his performance was nothing short of disastrous. Last August he failed to win a game, had an ERA close to eight, allowed opposing hitters a .368 average, and posted all sorts of other grossly awful stats. In a matter of months, he'd gone from a trade steal to an embarrassment.

Talbot had a bit of a bounce back at the end of 2010, posting September numbers nearly comparable to those he registered in April, suggesting that perhaps the issue was that hitters had simply figured him out after about half a season, but that ultimately he was able to make the necessary adjustments to get the upper hand back in the end, even if he went about it rather slowly.

It's tough to say for certain though until we see how Talbot fares in 2011. A repeat of the way things went in 2010 would suggest a pattern indicating that Talbot is simply a "first half guy", and that Alex White and Drew Pomeranz better be ready by the end of July.

Conversely, if Talbot can temper the highs and lows to a more modest and consistent performance throughout the entire season, he'll make an excellent middle of the rotation pitcher for now and for the future.

4. Carlos Carrasco

Poor Carlos Carrasco was not exactly dealt a good hand when he was traded to the Indians in 2009 as part of the Cliff Lee deal. He was 22, inexperienced, and tossed into the midst of a fanbase that was absolutely furious at the team for letting go of the guy he was traded for.

The Indians called up Carrasco in September of 2009, far before he was ready to face major league hitters. He performed about the way you'd expect a 22 year old who was in way over his head would, and proceeded to go 0-4, post an ERA of almost nine, a WHIP over two, and gave up as many runs as innings pitched (22).

He spent most of 2010 in the minors, and made a brief appearance with the Tribe when the rosters were expanded in September, where he still looked a little green, but was clearly much improved and much closer to major league ready than he was the year before.

Based on this and his performance thus far in Spring Training, it stands to reason that Carrasco is ready to step in and claim a spot in the rotation for 2011. Many would argue that his right to be in the rotation is, at this point, even greater than that of Talbot or even Masterson.

Still, with no real track record in the majors and being just 24 years young, Carrasco will enter the season as a bit of an unknown commodity. The Indians, not exactly an organization known for their risk taking, will be forced to take a chance on Carrasco anyway, given their lack of other options.

It's always a little scary to see a team begin a season with a pitcher in the rotation who, at least on paper, remains largely a question mark. Luckily, there is every indication that Carrasco is

prepared to handle the job. I'll admit he does make me nervous, but in all honesty, he scares me a lot less than Talbot does.

5. A Fifth Starter To Be Named Later

At the moment, there are three candidates for the final spot in the Indians rotation: David Huff, Josh Tomlin, and Jeanmar Gomez.

Let's begin by discussing David Huff, who, while far from the team's most productive pitcher in 2010, was certainly the most entertaining, though not in a good way.

For starters, there was the infamous Twitter scandal, in which Huff displayed not only a complete lack of self-awareness and tact but also an inability to follow directions that an eight year old should be able to understand. Of course Huff's overzealous tweeting would never have mattered if he'd pitched well enough before that to earn the right to have his poor judgment excused. Unfortunately, when you've performed so poorly that you've cost the team numerous wins and been subsequently demoted, the powers-that-be don't take to kindly to it when you start oversharing on the internet.

Obviously, Huff's off-field indiscretions aren't the main concern here. That alone would never keep Huff from being guaranteed the fifth spot in this year's rotation, but when coupled with his poor performance in 2010, it just prompts the team to have more misgivings.

Some of the appeal of giving the fifth spot to Huff (in addition to the fact that he has in the past shown an ability to pitch effectively in the majors) is that he would allow the Tribe to have a left-handed starter in a rotation which has all righties slated for spots one through four.

Huff has the talent and the pure stuff in theory, but there are still questions about his execution, and his attitude and ego issues only further the problem. Consider this: Huff has a tattoo that reads "silent assassin". Personally, I don't remember Huff being either quiet or deadly. Let's hope his 2011 offering on the mound is more in line with his ink than with what he's demonstrated on the field in the past.

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Huff has pitched well in Spring Training thus far, and has the most major league experience of the three candidates for the fifth spot in the rotation. Whether he can keep his ego and his emotions in check may wind up being the determining factor in whether he gets (and keeps) the starting job.

Like David Huff, both Jeanmar Gomez and Josh Tomlin were both signed by and developed in the Indians' system. All three know the organization well and have been groomed to fill the team's needs by its own farm system. Also like Huff, both Gomez and Tomlin have put on a respectable show thus far in Spring Training.

Still, it's far too early in the spring to name any one of the three the front runner for the job. Huff has the advantage of having the most major league experience and also of giving the Indians a left-handed option in the rotation, but both Gomez and Tomlin have strengths as well.

In addition to the fact that neither of them has showed any signs of character issues or provoked a small off-field scandal like Huff, you can also make the argument that both turned in far better performances with the big league club last season than he did.

Gomez and Tomlin posted identical 5.3 K/BB ratios in their time with the Indians in 2010, though Tomlin had the edge in WHIP, wins, ERA, WAR, and nearly every other important statistical category for pitchers. Huff lagged behind them both in every one of the categories mentioned.

If forced to make a decision today, it would appear that Tomlin is the best choice, based on what he did last season and the performance he's turned in thus far in Spring Training. But with nearly a month still to go before the start of the season, the race is still much too close to call. At this point, the fifth spot is up for grabs to any of the three candidates.