

Shutting Down Sowers The Right Decision

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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In Lastoria's latest, he reflects back on the very successful rookie campaign of Tribe hurler Jeremy Sowers, and applauds the Indians decision to shut him down three weeks before the end of the season. Tony argues that the Indians should have done the same thing with Jaret Wright, and that you can never be too cautious with talented young arms.



In a season chock full of mistakes in handling the roster, one of the best moves the Indians made this week was shutting down young lefty Jeremy Sowers.

After pitching a combined 185.2 innings at Cleveland and Buffalo, compiling a 16-5 and 2.42 ERA in 25 starts, Jeremy Sowers season is done. Complete. Finished. Not because of an injury which is the usual reason for a season ending prematurely, but because the Indians feel he has reached an innings pitched threshold they felt he did not need to exceed. In a season going nowhere and ending fast, being cautious and protecting your premium young pitching from injury is a must. Since he is still so young and is still building arm strength, you just don't risk overworking him at this stage in his development.

Right now, the fans and front office have a very good idea of what type of pitcher Sowers is, and 3-4 more starts won't really change that opinion. Throwing him out there for a couple more starts is an unnecessary gamble since, barring a freak injury this offseason, he'll be a big contributor in the 2007 rotation and beyond. Yes, he is still learning and could use some more innings to gain experience, but eventually the risks start to outweigh the benefits. The best thing to do with Sowers at this point is roll him up in bubble wrap, store him away for the winter, and bring him out of storage for Spring Training next year ready to go for the 2007 season.

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Some may wonder why it is such a big deal to shut him down now, and what good saving him from the exposure of 3-4 more starts really does. As fans, we all tend to be greedy and we'd like to see him get those 3-4 more starts to get a shot at double digit wins and continue to develop and gain experience. And, yes, he might be one of the biggest draws to actually watch a Tribe game for most people these last few weeks of the season.

Simply put, you just do not overwork young pitchers. Overworking a young pitcher so early in their career often leads to arm trouble shortly down the road, which could be a death sentence. In the minors these days, pitchers are on strict pitch counts specified by the organization, usually below 100 pitches even up through Triple-A. Managers for the organization's minor league affiliates are mandated to follow these pitch counts since young pitching is so precious, especially to small market teams. With that, most pitchers who make the big leagues as a rookie are still ramping up their workload, and overworking a pitcher early in their career usually leads to burnout and arm/shoulder injuries.

The best example of this to Indians fans is Jaret Wright.

Many fans will remember back in 1997 the Indians called up 21-year old top pitching prospect Jaret Wright shortly after the All-Star break. Prior to joining the Indians, Wright was a combined 7-4 with a 2.82 ERA in 99 innings at Akron and Buffalo in 1997. With the Indians, Wright proceeded to go 8-3 with a 4.38 ERA in 90.1 innings. In total, he logged 189.1 innings in the 1997 regular season

Prior to 1997, the most innings pitched Wright had in the Indians system was the 129 he had for Class-A Columbus in 1995. In 1996, he only had 100 innings pitched, and prior to 1997 he only had pitched 243 total innings in 2 ½ seasons in the Indians farm system.

The fact that Wright had a sudden jump in innings pitched from 100 in 1996 to 189.1 in 1997 makes you wonder if the arm issues he suffered through from 1999-2003 were a result of over-work as a youngster. In fact, in that 1997 season, as a 21-year old he not only logged 189.1 innings in the regular season, but he also chipped in 24.1 more innings in 5 starts in the playoffs that year. That is 213.2 innings pitched for a young 21-year old, over double more than

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he had the previous year (100) and very close to the total he put up through 2 ½ seasons in the system (243).

Yes, the situation with Sowers and Wright is different. In 1997, the Indians were contending and the pitching staff was in shambles, so the option of shutting him down was not there. In 2006, being out of the pennant race, the Indians can afford the luxury of being extra careful with Sowers. That said, the point here is that when you start pushing young hurlers near or above 200 innings, you are asking for trouble. Sowers has had a much larger workload than Wright had in his early days as an Indian. From 2002-2004, Sowers pitched in 101.0, 115.0 and 122.2 IP respectively in each of his three seasons at Vanderbilt University. In his first season in the Indians organization last year, he logged 159.1 innings pitched. Still, while Sowers has shown an ability to handle the larger workload, it is still very early to risk pushing 200 innings.

Apparently, Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro took note and learned a lesson from what happened with Jaret Wright. Back in 1997, Shapiro was the Indians Farm Director (1994-1998) and he saw firsthand the talent Wright possessed and also saw firsthand how the overwork ruined his promising career with the Indians. For the most part, during his tenure as the Indians General Manager, Shapiro has been one to learn from mistakes, and this is a mistake he wants to avoid at all costs.

And, this cautious handling of the top pitchers in the system extends to the Indians farm system, namely Adam Miller. Coincidentally, Adam Miller also likely made his final start at Akron in Game 1 of the Eastern League finals Tuesday night, the same night fellow top pitching prospect Sowers made his final start in Cleveland.

But, the Indians made the right decision to handle Sowers with kid gloves and shutdown his season. When Sowers is constantly compared to a young Tom Glavine or John Tudor, sitting back and playing the prevent defense is a no-brainer for the Indians.