

Pitching In On A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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After spending an extended afternoon in the Tribe Social Suite yesterday to watch the Indians take the second in a row from the O's (whose fast start actually does look like a mirage), the good vibrations are flowing on the North Coast and the Tribe is hitting all of the high notes – and I don't mean just because [Castrovince did the dirty work for us compiling the Indians' ACTUAL at-bat music](#). The music coming from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario is like nothing we've heard (to start a season, at least) since 2007 and while I'll stop short of predicting that this summer will follow along the same lines as that one, it sure is fun to see the parallels.

So as the news that [Grady is officially returning](#) (hey, Travis Buck has an option) percolates and gives some sense that it perhaps really could feel like 2007 again, we're off on a Lazy One...

With the Indians now sitting at 10-4, tied with the (gasp) Royals for (gasp) 1st place in the AL Central, the question has to start to come out as to when the "it's too early" line reaches its expiration date. Certainly 14 games out of 162 is still a small percentage of a baseball season, but the Indians' victories in the past two games have looked eerily close to the wins during the 8-game winning streak – paced by excellent starting pitching, getting ahead due to timely hitting, and closing out the game with bullpen progression that is developing an air of dominance.

After losing two, winning eight, and losing two, the Indians seem to be putting together another winning streak and one has to start wondering if this who the Indians are as a team and who they will be throughout the 2011 season. Even without consistent contributions from Santana

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and Choo (though the last couple of games show signs of a ship being righted), the Indians have scored the 3rd most runs in the AL, paced by their young SS, one Asdrubal Cabrera, about whom [a scout told B-Pro's John Perrotto](#), "He's really cutting the bat loose and learning that he has some pop. He used to be content just to punch the ball through the infield, but you can see him really growing and gaining confidence as a hitter."

To go straight to the horse's mouth, Asdrubal told [CBS Sportsline's Scott Miller](#) that, "I feel more strong" and with an OPS still over .900 after two weeks and no signs of slowing down (plus some dramatically improved defense), Asdrubal has started to show that the signs of hope that once existed for his ceiling may not be in vain, with a greater commitment to conditioning obvious and with the injuries that plagued him in the past. But for as exciting as Asdrubal's start has been, it pales in comparison that of the rotation.

Just two Saturdays ago (after Game #2), I was out at a Bachelor Party in which one of my buddies asked me if I thought that the starting pitching would be consistent enough for the Indians to compete this year. After having just witnessed the team give up 23 runs in the first two games, started by the pitchers that I had the most hope for (Carmona and Carrasco) coming into the season, my answer came back a resounding "no" as [the disclaimer from Dan Szymborski's ZiPS projections about the Tribe pitchers](#) (and you should read it if you haven't, particularly with the benefit of hindsight) flitted around in my head.

In my heart, I wanted to be optimistic that Carmona would improve on his 2011 season, even if he wouldn't be approaching Fausto v.2007 status, and I wanted to be hopeful that Carrasco and Masterson would show enough bright spots that they at least represented some hope for the future of the rotation. Maybe it was the doom-and-gloom pieces that I couldn't avoid leading up to the season or maybe it was just that Cleveland mentality that if something could go wrong it would with these guys. After two games, I was ready to dismiss the Tribe starters, this despite writing about [why there was hope for the pitching staff back in February](#), based on the second half of last year and the pedigree of some of the arms in the rotation.

But then something funny happened on the way to the bottom as Masterson threw a beauty in the series finale against the Pale Hose and Tomlin and Talbot followed suit against the Sawx. Carmona and Carrasco kept the good vibes going and Masterson whiffed 9 in his second start. Suddenly, before you knew it, the rotation was clicking on all cylinders to the point that the expectation was a 7-inning outing, perhaps allowing 1 or 2 runs. If you think that's hyperbole, here is what the individual Indians' starters have done over the last 12 games, since that Game #2 turning point:

Carmona

1.23 ERA, 0.75 WHIP, .460 OPS against, 10 K and 5 BB in 14 IP

Carrasco

2.77 ERA, 1.07 WHIP, .618 OPS against, 11 K and 5 BB in 13 IP

Masterson

1.33 ERA, 0.93 WHIP, .503 OPS against, 12 K and 4 BB in 20 1/3 IP

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Tomlin

2.75 ERA, 0.92 WHIP, .564 OPS against, 11 K and 6 BB in 19 2/3 IP

Talbot

1.46 ERA, 1.22 WHIP, .569 OPS against, 11 K and 5 BB in 12 1/3 IP

Realizing that taking 2 games out of 14 is not quite fair, those numbers are cumulative over 12 straight games with Carrasco and Tomlin's ERA being the only ones over 2.00. Additionally, those numbers for Just Incredible (say it), Tomlin, and The Fury represent their season totals thus far, all of whom have kept opponents below a .575 OPS against through their first few starts.

Obviously, nobody is here to assert that this is what the Indians' pitchers are going to do all year as the 1954 pitching staff's legacy is going to be threatened and Anthony Castrovine has a great lines in [a piece that you should probably read all of](#), when he says that "two and a half turns does not a rotation make," going further to point out that "the starters will come back down to earth a bit".

That's absolutely true, but it begs the question that even if the "starters come back down to earth a bit", given what we've seen, what does that mean for expected ERA at the end of the season? Could guys like Carmona and Masterson finish in the low-to-mid-3.00's, or could Carrasco finish with an ERA in the high-3.00's, or could Talbot and Tomlin even end the 2011 campaign in the low-to-mid-4.00's?

Maybe that's putting the cart before the horse and jumping to conclusions based on "two and a half turns" in the rotation, but [SI.com's Joe Sheehan has an interesting piece delving into the fast start for the Indians](#), specifically looking at the improved K/BB numbers for the starters, concluding that "these numbers reflect a change in skills that has shown up on the scoreboard". If we're talking about a "change in skills" for these pitchers, one that started in the 2nd half of last year and that has continued through the first two weeks of the season, what's to stop it from continuing?

Maybe not at this high level, but remember how the Indians' pitching staff posted a 3.89 ERA after the All-Star Break last year (4th in the AL)...yeah, maybe these first two weeks have shown that it wasn't a fluke. To wit, going into Saturday's game, the Indians' pitching staff had a 3.34 ERA, good for 5th in the AL and the amazing thing about looking at that number is realizing that the starters have posted a 3.44 ERA (6th in the AL) and the relievers have posted a 3.09 ERA (3rd in the AL), meaning that the pitching staff has not been simply carried by a particular portion in the early going, as success has been realized throughout the staff.

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