

Staying Grounded

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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With the Indians now back from the Left Coast and back in the friendly confines, some attention has been paid to the idea that the Indians faced off against two of the top starter duos in the AL in Cahill/Anderson and Weaver/Haren (going 2-2 in games started by that quartet) with Price/Shields sitting at the Tribe's doorstep to close out the Rays' series. While the general public may not know that the A's and Angels frontline starters are as good as they are because they don't call Fenway or the Bronx their home, Cahill and Anderson are among the elite pitchers in the AL whose names are certain to be thrown around in the Cy Young conversation when the year comes to a close. Haren and Weaver are more "known" quantities, and while they may toil in some obscurity on the West Coast (just because ESPN is still inexplicably where most people go for sports coverage), realize that [those two are at or near the top of just about every metric, standard or advanced](#), for pitchers.

Now having played the last 8 games against the A's, the Angels, and the Rays (the "elite" in the American League, if you want to call them that), the Indians continue to hold their own and, as a quick aside here, [the Indians' Strength of Schedule is now the 9th highest in the league](#) (the Rays have played the "easiest" schedule to date), which is particularly interesting, given that the records of the Tribe's opponents include playing the juggernaut Indians.

Regardless, back to the top of the rotation duos in the AL in the context of the Indians squaring off against Cahill/Anderson and Weaver/Haren, the Indians figure to continue to be tested as this Rays series continues when the Tribe faces off against the Rays duo of Dave Price and James Shields. But if we're looking at top duos in the AL at the top of rotations, how about the inclusion of a couple of guys who are helping the Indians keep up this torrid pace as they go toe-to-toe with the AL's "elite" because the Indians aren't winning these games with smoke-and-mirrors, they're winning them on the strength of their starting pitching.

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Of course, the obvious duo to look at in terms of effectiveness in the early going is Masterson and Tomlin, with both appearing in the top 9 in ERA in the AL with Tomlin ranking 2nd in WHIP (behind Haren, who the Indians SHOULD have beaten), but just like everybody else who has ever considered Josh Tomlin in his life (and [here's a great piece from Jordan Bastian on this very topic](#)), I'm going to look past Tomlin – unfairly, I know – and take a look at the two pitchers that have played a major role in the Indians' success in 2011 and how their repertoire and effectiveness portend good things for the Tribe going forward, both in terms of the specific players and as them being representative of a greater organizational philosophy.

That duo is, of course, Fausto Carmona and Justin Masterson.



While Masterson's inclusion is obvious, the question may come out as to why Carmona is being put under the magnifying glass instead of Tomlin and to that I would answer that Fausto's still impressive overall 3.83 ERA includes that Opening Day disaster against the Pale Hose. If you go only on the last 7 starts that Carmona has logged, you're looking at a pitcher with a 2.22 ERA, a 1.03 WHIP, and a .541 OPS against whose Line Drive Percentage given up is NINE PERCENT since his second start. While the accepted narrative on Fausto is either that "Good Fausto" or "Bad Fausto" strides to the mound every 5th game, realize that he's allowed 8 extra-base hits in the 48 /23 innings that he's thrown and he's striking out more than twice as many batters as he's walking.

Perhaps those numbers still pale in comparison to what Tomlin has put forth for the WHOLE year, but with Carmona's history, it is worth noticing that Fausto is doing exactly what he was doing in 2007 – inducing weak contact and bunches of ground balls while (and this is important) minimizing walks. He's evolved as a pitcher for sure in terms of his repertoire and while I'll stop short of saying that the kid that ignored midges has returned, [look at the comparative rate numbers for Carmona in 2007 and thus far in 2011](#)

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, realizing that those 2011 numbers include his trainwreck of a first start. Seriously, is Fausto back?

While I'm not ready to make that broad assumption, let's go back to the notion that Carmona is still inducing a fair amount of groundballs. Again, perhaps Carmona's GB% is not quite on par with what he did in 2007, but here's where he ranks in the AL this year, sandwiched around a couple of names you might recognize from the past week:

GB% Leaders – AL

- 1) Brett Anderson – 63.5%
- 2) Fausto Carmona – 60.6%
- 3) Justin Masterson – 60.4%

Remember [what was written here in those dark days before the All-Star Break last July](#), when the GB% of the recent additions to the pitching staff were examined?

In case you don't (and there's a handy link there), the takeaway was wondering if "the Indians have attempted to target pitchers who may have fallen 'under the radar' because of lower K rates and higher GB rates (because every team is looking for high-K pitchers) in some of their recent acquisitions", something that has started to play out for the parent club this year because if you want to include all starters in the AL, regardless of innings pitched, how about where this duo fits into the GB% leader board:

- 4) Mitch Talbot – 58.8%
- 11) Al White – 52.9%

All told, the Indians' rotation has the 2nd highest GB% in the AL (behind the A's) and before moving on, it should be noted that the other observation from last July was that "one would think that the movement toward more GB pitchers would prompt some acquisitions to improve the infield defense" with the additions of Jack Hannahan and The OC justifying this seemingly prescient moment.

Ahem...regardless, what the Indians' Top 2 have done (and I'm tagging Masterson and Carmona as the "Top 2" over Tomlin) is pretty compelling as, even with Fausto's Opening Day start included, Carmona possesses the lowest Line Drive Percentage among MLB starters (tied with Texas' Colby Lewis) at 11% with Masterson coming in a tick below (tied for 2nd in the AL) at 12%. So, Masterson and Carmona are among the best in the league and limiting solid contact (low Line Drive %) and are among the best in the league at inducing grounders (GB%), ranking in the Top 5 among AL starters in both categories. Even further, realize that there are only three pitchers in the AL with Groundball-to-Flyball Ratios over 1.50 – that ubiquitous trio of Masterson, Brett Anderson, and Carmona.

Going past Masterson and Carmona, if you want something to really be excited about, realize that Al White has a Groundout-to-Air Out Ratio of 2.57 in his first two starts and, while that is certainly unsustainable, it is not out of character for White, whose Groundout-to-Air Out ratio last year was 2.07 in Akron and Columbus and was 1.39 in AAA this year. For some context for that, the MLB average for Groundout-to-Air Out ratio this year is 1.05 and only 9 qualified AL pitchers have a ratio over 1.50 in 2011...two of whom are named Justin and Fausto.

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