

Arms Raised on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, June 12 2011 7:44 AM -



The slide into ignominy continues for the Tribe, now caught by Detroit in the Central, with the Cleveland offense only able to score 2 runs in 16 2/3 innings against – get a load of this list – Ivan Nova, Mo Rivera, Bartolo Colon, David Robertson, and Boone Logan over the past two games. Sure, The Sandman is The Sandman and Robertson has his uses, but the Indians' offense scored 2 runs against Nova on Friday and couldn't get to Boogie Colon (stem cells or not) on Saturday as the Indians' offense has fallen on hard times...then fallen a few more for good measure. Yes, the Indians scored 5 runs in the 8th and 9th innings on Friday night...against Kevin Whelan (in his MLB debut...as a 27-year-old), Amauri Sanit (in his 4th career MLB appearance) and Lance Pendleton (in his 9th career MLB appearance), so you can count those late-inning runs on Friday if you'd like, but any thought that the momentum gained from whacking away at non-MLB pitchers would lead to a break-out game on Saturday quickly gave way to the realization that the 8th and 9th innings on Friday were more aberration than announcement that the Indians' offense has broken out of its collective funk.

What makes it all the more frustrating is that all of this is coming against the Yankees and while the Indians' "rivalry" is one that's only considered a rivalry on the North Coast, to see the Indians look like a non-contender in the Bronx is especially disheartening. Even more disheartening is to read Mark Teixeira's lips after being hit by Carmona to "throw the ball over the plate" and – for the first time – find myself in complete agreement with a Yankee as the slide that the Indians are riding down the AL Central W-L column seems to be covered in grease.

Certainly, the Yankees are just as deplorable as ever as a group of unlikable mercenaries, as evidenced by Alex Rodriguez inexplicably writhing around in pain, getting tended to by two trainers, and limping into the dugout...all after being hit by an 88 MPH Mitch Talbot "fastball", but watching the Indians and the Yankees square off for the first two games of the series

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evokes thoughts (or is it a reminder) that the Indians look out of their league in the Bronx, despite what the overall records of the two teams might be. Realizing that there are still two games left to be played against the Yankees, the problems that have existed for the Tribe in the past few weeks are just as obvious and, even against the lesser lights of the Bombers' thin rotation, the Indians have struggled (still) to get on track offensively, while the Yankees' hitters predictably feasted on the pitching that they always feast upon.

Despite the efforts of Talbot on Saturday, the offense remained offensive and I'll be honest with you in admitting that the offense probably cannot be analyzed any more than it has been – the team misses Hafner, nearly the entire lineup (and Choo and Santana most importantly) have been disappointingly inconsistent while Sizemore is still working through an injury and the veterans brought in that weren't thought to hit much...well, haven't hit much.

The Indians have already acted in rectifying one of the issues as Cord Phelps has arrived (although the DiaTot prefers "Plug" Phelps and [I suggested on Twitter a couple of weeks ago that he be referred to as "Bobby" or "Bob"](#),

given that his full name is Robert Cord Phelps) and the offense has continued to look listless. Certainly nobody was suggesting that Bobby Phelps (which has a kind of "Bobby Grich" ring to it...and

[a "Grichian" mustache](#)

would definitely look tremendous on the baby-faced Phelps) would serve as the savior to the offense – just an upgrade over one of the worst offensive players in the league – and while it's too early to make any kind of pronouncement on Phelps, the recent performance of the offense brings to the forefront the deepest fears about this season as it slips away. Mainly, the notions that some of the prospects that need to take steps this year (mainly LaPorta) aren't going to improve, that the health of Sizemore and Hafner are never going to approach 100% again, and that something has gone horribly wrong with Choo (whose routes in the OF have looked progressively worse) have not only started to simmer...those fears are bubbling over the side of the pot.

That said – and realizing that this topic has been beaten to death as the onus is squarely upon the players to pull out of this – let's get going on a bit of an abridged Lazy One as The DiaBride and I welcomed our third child (and first girl) onto the Reservation earlier in the week. Perhaps that will please those among you, for whom 2,500 to 4,000 always seems like overkill...but I'll be overkilling it again soon enough. For now, let's get loose on a Lazy Sunday while I wolf down my fourth cup of coffee on the day...

Remember, I'm not talking about the offense today (as I'd like to keep my breakfast down) and while the pieces are going to start flying as to whether the Indians can hold the fort or if the invaders are over the wall, finding the Indians with arms raised or holding white flags, what's going to dictate whether the Indians stay in this playoff race or slink back into the depths of the division as the Royals did is their starting pitching. What paced the Indians' hot start this year and what represents the only path to redemption for this team (that's conceivable right now, watching the lineup) is for the rotation to string together a consistent stretch of games to keep the team in games to see if they can back to even treading water.

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Realizing that writing that a couple of days after Carmona looked like an absolute trainwreck at this point (and did anyone notice the sweat dripping from the BRIM of his hat during Friday night's game), there is cause for some optimism for the Indians on the starting pitching front. Yes, Mitch Talbot and Josh Tomlin have performed at a level at or above what is expected of them, or any other middle-to-back-of-the-rotation arms, but the real cause for optimism came in the final two games against the Twins.

Yes, it was against the Twins and their injury-ravaged lineup, but Masterson's 8-inning start on Tuesday (8 IP, 9 H, 2 ER, 0 BB, 3 K) was followed up by Carrasco's near-complete game shutout (8 1/3 IP, 3 H, 0 ER, 6 K), perhaps providing a glimpse into what could be (or maybe what is not all that far away from "being") for those two in the Tribe rotation. While Masterson's success this year has been well-documented, to see Carrasco dominate a lineup like that serves as a reminder of what Carrasco was purported to be (by the organization, among others) when he was the key "close-to-MLB" arm acquired in the Lee deal.



Realizing that the timing of pointing out these numbers is not too coincidental given Carrasco's last start, since CarCar returned from his stint on the DL, he has posted an ERA of 4.17, a WHIP of 1.20 and has struck out more than twice the batters that he has walked in his last 36 2/3 IP over 6 games. While most of these numbers are admittedly influenced by Carrasco's gem on Tuesday night, Carrasco now has the 15th highest GB% in the AL on the year – and 3rd highest GB% in the AL in the last 30 days – among starters (despite the fact that [Hoynes wrote that he is "usually a fly ball pitcher"](#) after the 1-0 win against the Twins), meaning that the success that Masterson has enjoyed (thanks to inducing GB and missing bats) is perhaps on the way for the other big arm added by the organization in late July of 2009.

Maybe it's hard to imagine sustained success for Carrasco at this point because of his inconsistency to date, but since we saw ol' Bartolo yesterday, it's worth remembering that Colon's first year in MLB with the Indians (as a 24-year-old, which is how old Carrasco is now) resulted in a debut season that saw him post a 5.65 ERA and 1.62 WHIP in 94 2/3 IP over 19 games. Even after that inauspicious debut, Colon regularly struggled with inconsistency from start to start, although the potential was always there as Colon began to harness his talent into production on the mound.

Since his late-season call-up last year, Carrasco has a 4.24 ERA, a 1.33 WHIP and a 2.30 K/BB in the 110 1/3 IP over his last 30 starts.

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Is that going to have anyone running out to dub him another “aCCe”?

Certainly not, but remembering his age and his potential is important here as is realizing that he’s going to be inconsistent as a young starter still adapting to MLB. At this point, he’s a 24-year-old starting pitcher in MLB with 132 2/3 career innings under his belt and I’m not sure if anyone remembers how every prospect publication’s preseason darling – Kyle Drabek – looked when he faced off against the Indians in Toronto...but it wasn’t good.

You remember Drabek, right?

The player that the Indians were panned for missing out on when they moved Lee to Philly, the one whose “pedigree” and “upside” made Carrasco’s slow, steady trip through the minors made prospect “experts” pen love letters to Drabek while questioning Carrasco’s toughness, makeup, and ability to be much more than back-end-of-the-rotation fodder?

Since I haven’t done this in a while, here’s how the two of them stack up with the numbers for each coming in MLB rotations this year, with Drabek being the younger of the duo...by 8 ½ months:

Carlos Carrasco – 2011

4.52 ERA, 1.31 WHIP and 2.00 K/BB in 65 2/3 IP over 11 starts
3.49 FIP / 3.82 xFIP

Kyle Drabek - 2011

4.98 ERA, 1.73 WHIP, and 0.90 K/BB in 68 2/3 IP over 13 starts
4.97 FIP / 4.98 xFIP

Yes, Carrasco has only 3 fewer innings pitched despite starting TWO fewer games and Drabek leads the league in BB (hence the K/BB rate under 1), but I included the [FIP](#) and [xFIP](#) on a separate line to show how Drabek’s ERA has fallen exactly in line with his FIP and xFIP, while Carrasco’s FIP and xFIP are much lower than his 2011 ERA. Remember that

[FIP is a metric](#)

that attempts to “measure all those things for which a pitcher is specifically responsible” while attempting to “understand how well a pitcher pitched, regardless of how well his fielders fielded” while

[xFIP is an extension](#)

of FIP that attempts to “normalize” the HR component of what a pitcher can control and while it’s far from perfect, it “theoretically should be a better predictor of a pitcher’s future ERA”.

Of course, “expectations” and “fielding independence” and “normalizing HR rates” go only so far as the numbers attached to a player in terms of ERA or OPS is what ultimately sticks close to them as it represents what they are doing, rather than what they should be doing. But it is worth noting where Carrasco fits in among AL starters and (since it’s time to bring Masterson back into the conversation) how Carrasco and Masterson are among the AL’s best in both FIP and xFIP:

FIP - 2011

Masterson – 3.18 (9th among AL starters)
Carrasco – 3.48 (16th among AL starters)

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xFIP – 2011

Masterson – 3.53 (14th among AL starters)

Carrasco – 3.85 (27th among AL starters)



There's 54 eligible pitchers on that list and perhaps that duo is not Jared Weaver and Dan Haren (#1 and #2 on the FIP list) or Dave Price and James Shields (#1 and #2 on the xFIP list), but seeing them in that rarified air (relatively speaking) is a reminder as to what the Indians could have in the duo. Masterson's inclusion and placement on those lists probably doesn't come as much of a surprise (although [Masterson does have a better FIP than Verlander and a better xFIP than CC](#)), but Carrasco's almost certainly does. As a quick reminder, Masterson is 26 years old and under club control through 2014 and Carrasco is 24 and under club control through 2016.

And maybe that's where the excitement should exist with this Indians team, as frustrating as they've been to watch, as if there's going to be anything that carries this team going forward for the remainder of 2011 and beyond, it is that the idea that these two pitchers can front a rotation isn't as far-fetched as you would have thought just two months ago. Perhaps you scoff at that notion because of the inconsistency of Carrasco and the fact that Masterson still has trouble with LH hitters, but if you start to think of the idea that these two can constitute 40% of a solid, and possibly spectacular, rotation that's starting to congeal right now, the context of the steps being made this season start to gain some perspective.

Certainly more of that "possibly spectacular" rotation was supposed to also be in place as Al White's injury sabotaged the idea that Masterson, Carrasco, and White would all log significant MLB innings this year with an eye on today and off in the distance. While the nature of White's injury was particularly scary for Indians fans (and you should read [this superb piece from Al Ciammiachella on Atom Miller](#), complete with pictures of his middle finger), Jordan Bastian passes along in [the most recent \(and always excellent\) "Inbox"](#) that "Indians head athletic trainer Lonnie Soloff said the only similarity is that both injuries deal

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with the right middle finger. Miller's was far more serious. White is expected to be back on the mound and potentially available for the Tribe later this season."

Maybe the Indians' history in reporting injuries doesn't buy them a lot of goodwill in terms of expectations of a return for White, but if White can return – even next year – and can be joined by Drew Pomeranz, who has struck out 63 of the 196 batters faced in Kinston this year – go read those numbers again – and is likely to be on his way to Akron at some point soon to continue his quick climb up the ladder towards Cleveland, the Indians' "rotation of the future" doesn't look all that far off. Truthfully, it's not that hard to picture Masterson, Pomeranz, Carrasco, and White filling out the Indians' rotation for years to come and the time that they all might be together may not be much further away than this time next year (if White is healthy and Pomeranz's ascent follows that of White)...and that is reason for excitement, regardless of what's happening in the Bronx.

While "best-laid plans" are just that when lining up rotations of the future, you don't need to remember Jaret Wright or Atom Miller or Jerry Sowers to know that sometimes the "best-laid plans" go awry for young pitchers as TINSTAAPP (There Is No Such Thing As A Pitching Prospect) is an acronym for a reason. History is full of promising rotations that were supposed to arrive together and carry a franchise with the latest exhibit coming across the diamond this weekend as Joba joins Phil Hughes on the list of "Future Yankee HOF", whose paths took an...um, detour on the way to Cooperstown.

While that last comment is put forth tongue-firmly-in-cheek, the idea that pitching prospects can (and do) go wrong in every conceivable manner, as [detailed by Tom Verducci of SI this week](#) . Just cherry-picking from Verducci's piece, remember these "can't miss" future rotations, all from the last 20 years?

- *The "Four Aces" of Oakland from the 1990 draft: Todd Van Poppel, Dave Zancanaro, Kirk Dressendorfer and Don Peters: Total games they won for the Athletics: 21.*
- *"Generation K" of the mid-90s Mets. Total games won for New York by Paul Wilson, Bill Pulsipher and Jason Isringhausen: 29.*
- *The Big Three of the 2003 Cubs. Mark Prior, 22, Kerry Wood, 26, and Carlos Zambrano, 22, combined for 45 wins and 636 1/3 innings for a team that came within five outs of the World Series. Prior and Wood began breaking down the next year and the franchise hasn't won a postseason game since.*
- *The DVD Rotation of the 2006 Texas Rangers system. John Danks, Edinson Volquez and Thomas Diamond won three games combined for the franchise (two of the pitchers -- Danks and Volquez -- were traded).*

That's not meant to scare anyone (although the White finger injury was/has been scary enough), but if anything positive can be taken from the first two months of the season and even the last two weeks, it's that Masterson and Carrasco have the potential to slot into the rotation and anchor that rotation, awaiting either the arrivals of White or Pomeranz, or to supply some top-to-middle-of-the-rotation stability for the rest of the arms in the system to slot around.

And don't get me wrong...those "rest of the arms" have some potential to fill out a rotation nicely. While Tomlin and Talbot have shown what is possible for pitchers who know HOW to

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pitch this year – in that they can keep teams in games – the Indians would seem to have a number of “ancillary” arms that are as close as Columbus that have the potential to fill out the rotation around Masterson and Carrasco and maybe White and Pomz going forward. Past Tomlin and Talbot, there is Zach McAllister (who admittedly has fallen on hard times recently) and Scott Barnes (featured in [Adam Van Arsdale’s “Farm Fresh”](#)), and about who [Al writes](#) “has not given up more than 2 ER in a start since May 8. In his 6 starts since then, he’s thrown 29 2/3 innings and given up just 9 ER while striking out 40 and walking 12.”

What’s even more interesting about McAllister and Barnes is that each is 23 and in AAA (just like Jeanmar Gomez, who has thrived since returning to Columbus), so if the pair of 22-year-old 1st Round Picks – White and Pomz – go the way of Atom Miller or Joba or any of those other cautionary tales (and this is me knocking wood furiously), the Indians have some in-house options that could fill the Tomlin/Talbot role...just as well as Tomlin (still just 26) and Talbot (still just 27) have this year.



That said, it all starts – and has started – with Masterson and Carrasco starting to show the potential as legitimate pillars of a rotation and (this is important) seeing that “potential” actually turn into production, something that has started to materialize this year. While the Indians’ are currently an absolute mess on offense and as the likelihood that Carmona is a member of the team next year (remember those club options) decreases with each start, the Indians are going to have to start relying on the right arms that they acquired at their lowest point in July of 2009.

How the right arms perform in the coming weeks and months will play a role in whether the Tribe is able to pull themselves out of this tailspin and whether they can assert themselves once again as an AL Central contender. Obviously, they’re going to need some help (and here is where the word “offense” finally appears again), but if Masterson and Carrasco can begin to show a glimpse of their bright future for the next few months, perhaps their two bright stars in a largely dark sky can start to shed some light on the North Coast.

Right now, things are looking awfully dark...