



With interleague play in the rearview mirror, the Indians will head to the Bronx to take on the hated Yankees in a quick three-game set. With the Indians keeping their heads above water and the Yankees winning with high-priced talent like they always do, these three games should provide a pretty good measuring stick for the Tribe. It'll kick off a week of play against the American League East as the Indians will head to Baltimore after Wednesday's getaway day game.

Following a lack of offense in Houston that helped bump the team out of first place, the Indians left handed heavy lineup should be able to have some measure of success with the ridiculously short porch in right field at Yankee Stadium, where pop ups become home runs. The only question is if their pitching staff can hold the Yankees at bay.

The Yankees, with their over \$200M payroll, are second in run differential come in to this series not having won 15 of 20 in the month of June. They're doing it with the long ball and pitching as just one regular, Derek Jeter, has a batting average above .300. Robinson Cano continues to be the American League's premier second baseman, on pace for 35 home runs. The Yankees lead the AL in home runs with 110 and are tied for third in on-base percentage.

It seemed like the Yankees would miss a beat with the pitching staff when Andy Pettitte announced his retirement, Mariano Rivera tore his ACL shagging flies during BP, and David Robertson was placed on the disabled list for a month with an injury. Instead, other guys have stepped up and Pettitte decided to come back for another season. Offseason acquisition Hiroki Kuroda has enjoyed the pressure-packed New York atmosphere. CC Sabathia continues to be the force that he was as a Cleveland Indian. Rafael Soriano has filled in fantastically for Rivera, posting a 1.71 ERA in 28 games.

It'll be a tall task for the Indians as they get back into American League play for good and do so with the offense struggling and a lot of inconsistency from the rotation. Here's a look at the pitching matchups and some keys to the series.



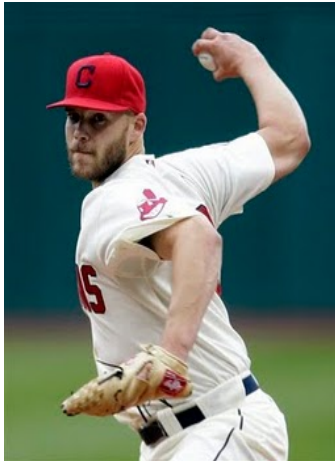
Monday June 25, 7:05 p.m. ET; Josh Tomlin (3-4, 5.12) v. Hiroki Kuroda (6-7, 3.57)

Hiroki Kuroda left Los Angeles and the National League to go to the bright lights of the Big Apple. So far, it's worked out for him as he's done what he did in the National League – pitch well, but have a mediocre record due to lack of run support. Amazingly, with the Yankee lineup, Kuroda's just gotten 3.29 runs of support per game. Kuroda has won three of his last four decisions, posting a 2.06 ERA over those five starts.

As for Josh Tomlin, he's coming off his second-best start of the season as he pitched 6.2 innings and gave up just one run on six hits against the Cincinnati Reds. Tomlin has been plagued by inconsistency this season as he's thrown quality starts in four of his eleven starts. Over his last five starts, it's been a mixed bag of good, bad, and in between since returning from a DL stint for a wrist injury brought about by throwing a wet ball in the second game of the May 7 doubleheader against Chicago. Since his return, Tomlin has gone 1-2 with a 5.65 ERA, but has two strong starts in that span, including his last start.

Tomlin made his Major League debut against the Yankees in 2010 and threw one of the best games of his career, going seven innings allowing just one run on three hits. Tomlin faced the Yanks twice in 2011, allowing eight runs in 12 innings, six of which coming in the start at Yankee Stadium. Kuroda, who came over from Japan in 2008, has never faced the Indians.

We should consider ourselves very lucky because this game is on ESPN2, so we get to hear about how awesome the Yankees are for three or more hours.



Tuesday June 26, 7:05 p.m. ET; Justin Masterson (4-6, 3.98) v. Phil Hughes (7-6, 4.94)

Hughes has had about as much of an “up and down” season as you can have. He pitched downright awful in April, posting a 7.88 ERA in four starts. After another mediocre start in May, he strung together four fantastic starts with a 2.81 ERA before getting bombed in his final May start by Anaheim where he allowed seven runs in just over five innings. In June, Hughes, like Masterson, has pitched significantly better and looks to rebound from his last start where he allowed four home runs in 4.1 innings to the Braves. In his previous three June starts, Hughes had an ERA of 1.69.

Masterson has been as good as any pitcher in baseball during June. It’s downright unfair that Masterson is just 2-2 as he’s turned his season around and posted a 1.24 ERA in June. Perhaps more importantly, Masterson has a 27/6 K/BB in those four starts. Masterson is still searching for it on the road and has a 7.07 ERA compared to a 2.73 ERA at home.

Both pitchers have had success in their careers against these opposing lineups. Masterson has made eight appearances, four starts, and is 2-2 with a 2.76 ERA. With the Indians, Masterson has faced the Yankees just once, throwing eight shutout innings on July 6, 2011. Hughes has faced the Indians four times, going 2-1 with a 3.52 ERA. Hughes also faced the Indians twice in relief during the 2007 ALCS allowing one run over 5.2 innings.



Wednesday June 27, 1:05 p.m. ET; Ubaldo Jimenez (7-5, 4.59) v. Andy Pettitte (3-3, 3.29)

Pettitte wasn't expected to pitch for the Yankees this season, but he couldn't stay away from the game and renounced his retirement during Spring Training. Pettitte continues to make a living on his devastating changeup and tremendous pitching IQ. Pettitte is averaging nearly a strikeout per inning this season and has gone at least six innings in all eight of his starts. Lefties are hitting just .190 off Pettitte in 60 trips to the plate.

Jimenez's terrific month of June has Indians fans wondering if he might be back. He's allowed just six runs in four starts this month and has struck out 25 batters against just seven walks. Like Lowe and Masterson, Jimenez has struggled mightily away from Cleveland where he has a 5.28 ERA in eight starts. Jimenez will try to build off 6.2 shutout innings against the Astros in his last start and the Yankees are sure to provide a litmus test for him.

It feels like Andy Pettitte has owned the Indians in his career, but he is just 8-8 with a 4.23 in 20 career starts. He started ALDS Game 2 in 2007 and matched Fausto Carmona pitch-for-pitch until the bullpen blew the game for him. As for Jimenez, he has faced the Yanks once in his career, a 4-2 win at Yankee Stadium last June as a member of the Colorado Rockies.

Keys to the Series:

1. Throw strikes – The Yankees rely on the walk and the home run. With the exceptions of Jeter and Cano, the majority of the Yankees are hitting in the .260s or below. They rely on intimidation and plate discipline to set up innings and get guys on to hit multi-run homers. If the Indians make them hit their way on, they should be able to limit damage.

2. Pull the ball – Good things happen for hitters in Yankee Stadium when they pull the ball, especially lefties. Center field and the gaps are pretty big, but down both lines, the wall is short and the ball carries well. Usually, Indians hitters make a conscious effort to use the middle of the field but it would be beneficial for them to cheat a little bit to get out in front when making contact.

3. Get unexpected contributions – The Indians are going to need some guys to step up. The Yankees definitely work pitch counts and starters usually don't go deep into the game. Outside of Pestano and Perez, the Indians relievers have struggled at times this season, some more than others. The Yankees have some very good left handed hitters and the lefties in the pen will have to be equal to the task.

Player to Watch:

This player to watch for this series is Jason Kipnis. Kipnis snapped an 0-for-11 with a three-hit game on Saturday, but the Indians will need Kipnis in a place where high scoring games happen rather frequently. With how much the Indians offense struggled against Houston, they need to score some runs in this series and feel better about themselves offensively. Kipnis is the guy to help with that.

Wishful Thinking:

The best case scenario for the Indians would be to beat Kuroda and Hughes in the first two because Pettitte is an assassin against left handed batters.

Central Focus:

The White Sox and Twins will meet up in Minnesota for a three-game set. The Tigers will head to Texas to take on the Rangers. The Royals will head to the Trop and take on the Tampa Bay Rays.

One Last Thing...:

Baseball-Reference lists the Indians payroll at \$68.2M while the Yankees check in at \$207.2M. Think baseball needs a salary cap? Yeah, me too.