In 2011, Justin Masterson was crowned a savior. Three years after CC Sabathia was traded to Milwaukee and four years after Fausto Carmona's one year in the spotlight, the Indians were desperate for a starting pitcher that could be a fixture at the top of the rotation. That season, Masterson was that guy, posting a 3.21 ERA, the best walk rate of his career, and a 12-10 record that was one of the most misleading stats on the team.

To start the 2012 season, Masterson looked like that same guy. On a brisk, but sunny, Opening Day in Cleveland, Masterson mowed down the Blue Jays, throwing eight outstanding innings, with 10 strikeouts and a 4-1 lead to show for his efforts. Chris Perez blew the save and Masterson would not win any of his five starts in April.

As we all know, the 2012 version of Masterson rarely looked like the frontline starter we all thought he had become. A year after going at least six innings in 27 of 31 starts, Masterson went at least six innings just 23 of 34 starts in 2012. He gave up six or more runs on nine different occasions, something he did just twice in 2011.

A safe assumption to make is that Masterson's ability is somewhere between 2011 and 2012. All of the projection models put Masterson about in the middle of the ERA discrepancy and the spike in walks. There are a couple of interesting statistics that could seriously impact Masterson's final 2013 numbers.

In 2011, Masterson, who will always have trouble with lefties, did a serviceable job. Left handed batters posted a .286/.331/.415/.746 slash line. ("Slash line" is batting/on-base percentage/slugging percentage/on-base plus slugging) The keys for Masterson against lefties in 2011 were that he didn't issue a lot of walks and kept the ball in the ballpark. Masterson had a 2.52 strikeout-to-walk ratio against left handed hitters.

In 2012, lefties destroyed Masterson. They posted a .288/.376/.450/.826 slash line. His strikeout-to-walk ratio dropped to 1.29. In terms of batting average on balls in play (BABip), the difference between 2011 and 2012 was negligible. Masterson went from a .319 BABip against lefties in 2011 to a .318 BABip against lefties in 2012. The big problems were a spike in walks and a spike in home runs.

To compound problems, Masterson struggled more with right handed batters in 2012. After posting a .209/.300/.259/.559 slash line in 2011, righties had more success in 2012 with a .229/.308/.304/.612 slash. It was not a large jump, but it was enough to hurt Masterson given the decline in his numbers against lefties.

Another area where Masterson had a noticeable drop-off was with runners in scoring position. After batters posted a .224/.302/.308/.610 slash line in 2011, those numbers ballooned to .269/.342/.417/.762 in 2012.

What's particularly interesting about a side-by-side comparison of Masterson's 2011 and 2012 seasons is that a lot of numbers are strikingly similar. His strike percentage in 2011 was 63.2 percent. In 2012, that number dipped slightly to 62.2 percent. Yet, even with throwing slightly fewer strikes, Masterson's K/9 rate jumped from 6.58 to 6.94. He induced more ground balls in 2012 than in 2011 by 0.6 percent. Pitch f/x velocity data indicated a very minor 0.3 mph average drop in fastball velocity. Masterson threw more first-pitch strikes in 2012 and also had a higher swinging strike percentage. He even induced eight more double plays in 2012.

Perhaps the most random and surprising split between Masterson's 2011 and 2012 is a real head scratcher. In 2011, the #1 and #2 hitters in the lineup hit .294/.368/.401/.769 over 224 plate appearances against Masterson. In 2012, the #1 and #2 hitters in the lineup hit .254/.321/.340/.661, again over 224 plate appearances. To offset this big improvement from 2011, the #9 hitter had a slash line of .320/.381/.547/.928. For comparison purposes, the #9 hitter posted a .195/.228/.220/.478 in 2011.

Are these events random? Not really. Masterson's career BB/9 as a starter is 3.68. Lefties have career numbers against Masterson that fall in between 2011 and 2012. The one year splits of the various parts of the lineup may be nothing more than coincidence. Last season, starting pitchers, as a whole, posted a .244/.339/.400/.739 slash line against with runners in scoring position, which would insinuate that 2011 was a major outlier for Masterson in that situation, but he could improve on that number for 2012.

There's also a psychological component to Masterson that we cannot really quantify, although a sharp decline in his performance with runners in scoring position may be an indicator. Countless times in 2012, Masterson was hung out to dry by former manager Manny Acta. There were several games where Masterson clearly didn't have it and was left on the mound to take his punishment to spare the bullpen. After Acta's firing, a lot of people, players included, felt there was not a whole lot of respect for Acta in the Indians clubhouse. Masterson, by all accounts an excellent teammate, had to be affected by how he was treated. It had to be a difficult year for Masterson and his confidence on the mound had to suffer as a result.

Overall, there's reason to expect improvement from Masterson. In a stat simply labeled "E-F", which stands for the difference between ERA and FIP (fielder independent pitching), Masterson had the fifth-highest discrepancy. His 4.93 ERA and 4.16 FIP would normally indicate improvement, but the Indians have not really upgraded their infield defense. With Masterson so reliant on infield defense with the very high number of ground balls he induces, it's nearly impossible for him to post a really good ERA, making 2011 even more unexplainable. The outfield upgrades won't help Masterson unless the home runs he allowed last season become deep fly balls this season.

For better or worse, Masterson is currently the "ace" of the staff. He's the Opening Day starter and #1 in the rotation, although, a lot of baseball people will tell you that rotation order doesn't matter after the first week of the season and the first week coming out of the All-Star break. If you're expecting a return of 2011, at any point during Masterson's career, you're probably going to be disappointed. Non-ERA pitching metrics generally have Masterson in the average to above average group, which is what we're going to have to settle for.