While the Indians' season passes over the real half-way point and draws closer to the "Midsummer Classic" with their best three offensive players coming into the season on the DL and with the extended auditions continuing in earnest around the diamond, the opinion that the starting staff has been the most pleasant surprise of the 2010 season isn't really an opinion at all – it has become a fact.

While the overall 4.49 ERA of the starters remains underwhelming, as it ranks the team 11th of the 14 MLB teams, the perception coming into the season that the rotation would not only be the team's undoing, but also the weak link well past this season has to be amended to a degree. Though the Indians' current rotation isn't going to remind anyone of the 1954 staff of Garcia, Lemon, Wynn, and Feller, coming into the season, the thought was pervasive that the Indians' rotation would be a constantly-evolving, consistently nauseating group of arms either attempting to re-establish themselves in MLB or gaining a toehold in a Big League rotation.

With Carmona headed off to the All-Star team, Justin Masterson riding a 7-game "mini-wave" in which he's posted a 3.59 ERA and a 1.25 WHIP, and Mitch Talbot sitting on a 3.86 ERA after more than 100 MLB IP, the Indians may have essentially identified three pitchers that whose names they can write in pen into the rotation, for 2011 at least. While those three still may represent middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation arms for a perennial contender, the renaissance of Fausto and the recent adjustments of Masterson in particular project some optimism for the future from the rubber.

While looking at those two players in particular (Carmona and Masterson) an interesting statistical trend jumps out at you and looking into it further, a bona fide trend is emerging in the Indians' organization. Once you look past the fact that the Indians' rotation strikes out the fewest batters (5.22 K/9) in the AL and have the second highest WHIP (1.45) in the AL, you start to realize that the fact that the Indians seem to be loading up on big, power, groundball-inducing arms starts to take shape. However, the trend isn't just applying to the likes of Carmona and Masterson as it goes up and down the organization.

Before delving into that, consider for a moment how the Indians' starters this year rank in Ground Ball Percentage, Fly Ball Percentage, and Ratio of Ground Balls to Fly Balls:

GB% - 52.5% (highest in MLB for starters)
FB% - 30.6% (lowest in MLB for starters)
GB/FB – 1.72 (highest in MLB for starters)

It bears mentioning that no team's rotation has topped the 52% GB rate since the 2005 Cardinals and those Cardinals' starters are, in fact, the only rotation to top that number in the last 10 years in MLB...yet that's where the Tribe's rotation sits more than half-way through the season.

Realizing that the average GB% for MLB pitchers is about 45%, take a look at the Indians' rotation and their GB% in the context of all qualified MLB Starting Pitchers:
Masterson – 64.2 GB% (2nd in MLB)
Carmona – 58.1 GB% (4th in MLB)
Westbrook – 52.8 GB% (12th in MLB)
Talbot – 49.7 GB% (26th in MLB)

How about those same players' GB/FB and rank among all qualified MLB Starting Pitchers:
Masterson – 3.11 GB/FB (2nd in MLB)
Carmona – 2.01 GB/FB (7th in MLB)
Westbrook – 1.90 GB/FB (9th in MLB)
Talbot – 1.49 GB/FB (31st in MLB)

Talbot's ratios certainly pale in comparison to the numbers of the other three bona-fide sinkerballers, but consider that Talbot's GB% in his MiLB career was 53.9% and was over 54% for both the 2007 and 2008 seasons in AAA, which (unlike his 2009) were uninterrupted by injury.

Going further, while Westbrook does not necessarily figure into the mix for 2011 and beyond, let's not forget that The Babyfaced Bulldog just re-joined the rotation – Aaron Laffey, he of the 61.3 GB% in his MiLB career. Although, as an aside here on Laffey, it is interesting to note that the GB% for Laffey has continuously dropped, both in the Minors and in MLB:
2006 (Kinston/Akron) – 62.5 GB%
2007 (Akron/Buffalo) – 62.2 GB%
2007 (Cleveland) – 62.4 GB%
2008 (Buffalo) – 54.4 GB%
2008 (Cleveland) – 51.1 GB%
2009 (Akron/Columbus) – 45.5 GB%
2009 (Cleveland) – 48.9 GB%
2010 (Columbus) – 45.1 GB%
2010 (Cleveland) – 49.3 GB%

Laffey's GB/FB has remained pretty consistently in the 1.6 range in MLB (still way down from his career MiLB GB/FB of 2.49), but his GB% has plummeted over the last three years in partcular, something that certainly bears watching...and something that maybe even provides an answer as to why Laffey seems to have flat-lined in the past three years.

But I digress...
Back to this high GB% that the Indians' two most promising arms going forward (Carmona and Masterson) share as, after reading the phenomenal write-up by my Beyond the Boxscore colleague Satchel Price (and it really is worth a read), I was struck by him writing that last year's #1 pick Alex White has been inducing groundballs at a rapid rate on the farm this year.

Look a little deeper into the Layer Cake of arms and there's Alex White and his 57.8 GB% in Kinston and Akron this year (his GB% is 55.5% in his MiLB career) perhaps projecting as a rotational option in 2011 or 2012 with the Indians' next logical promotion to the rotation, Carlos Carrasco, posting the highest GB% of his MiLB career since low-A ball in Columbus.

No seriously, Carrasco's 47.8 GB% in Columbus, while not reaching Mastersonian levels, is an uptick from the 40.6% last year and represents a healthy increase over his career 43.8 GB% that he's compiled in his MiLB career. While these high GB% numbers certainly aren't universal among all Indians' starters up and down the system, it is worth mentioning that the 3rd Round Pick from last year's draft, Joe Gardner, is sitting an on almost incomprehensible 70.8 GB% in Lake County and Kinston this year as he has rocketed into relevance (he's also struck out 99 hitters in 88 1/3 IP this year) on the prospect map. Just to put what Gardner has done in his first professional season, he has faced 345 batters, has struck out 97 of them (28.1%) and has induced groundballs from 138 of the hitters (40%), meaning that nearly 70% of the hitters that he's faced have either whiffed or hit grounders.

It has to be asked about all these groundball pitchers then…what gives here – is this merely a statistical anomaly, or maybe simply a matter of finding and analyzing the pitchers most likely to induce grounders in the organization?

Given the fact that Masterson, Talbot, White, and Gardner all joined the organization last year and that Carrasco's GB% number has jumped significantly this year in AAA, I think that something is larger at play here. While I'm not going to jump to the "groundball pitchers are the new market inefficiency" card, it represents more than just a mere coincidence that the Indians suddenly find themselves with pitchers whose GB% project to be higher than the MLB average, sometimes MUCH higher.

Whether 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 can certainly be debated. It is possible that, given that the team could be looking for angles to stockpile as many arms as possible to overcome attrition and injury rates, it certainly represents an interesting strategy.

One would think that the movement toward more GB pitchers would prompt some acquisitions to improve the infield defense (how does everyone like Sonny Nix?) and the trade of Branyan and the coming trade of Peralta will likely improve the infield defense, if even by virtue of addition by subtraction. However, the sudden predilection that the Indians have for groundball-inducing pitchers (and a lot of them) is too obvious and top-heavy in the organization to ignore.

While watching Carmona and Masterson (and maybe Talbot and Laffey) serve up those pitches that quickly find their way into the ground for the rest of the year, realize that there could be more of that on the way to the pitching mound in the coming years as the infield grass and dirt at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario could become well-worn.