While much of the hand-wringing in recent days has been reserved for the periphery of the roster (Kearns, Hannahan, Durbin, etc.), there is a very real issue emerging in the starting rotation – and it has nothing to do with Fausto Carmona's inability to pitch out of the stretch or even with belly flop over 1st base in Cincinnati. Rather, with the Indians still in 1st place after the 4th of July (and I'm going to keep writing that just as a not-so-subtle reminder amidst the dark clouds that people seem to enjoy pointing out), the continued struggles of Mitch Talbot could be leading to a permanent change in the starting rotational mix in the very near future.

Though so much attention has been paid to the struggles of Carmona and as fantastic as the front-end-of-the-rotation has been (with Masterson DOMINATING the LH-laden Yankee lineup, Carrasco getting the star treatment at MLB.com, just prior to his non-DP induced trainwreck, and Tomlin being compared favorably to Mark Buehrle) the Indians need the back of the cars on the rotational roller coaster to stop jostling around so much if the Indians are going to remain in contention for the AL Central for the 2nd half of the season. With the offense still...ahem, struggling most nights and with the continuity of a lineup being a pipe dream at this point as the injuries mount, the starting pitching is going to dictate the success or failure of the 2011 Indians and, to this point, the Tribe's back end of the rotation has muddled through the 1st half of the season...and worse.

Certainly it seems as if the Indians caught a "lucky break" with Carmona apparently unable to run 90 feet without injuring himself as he can now be moved away from the mound in an Indians' uniform. To that end, color me confused as to why Acta seems so pleased that he'll "only" miss one start when this is the perfect opportunity for Carmona to head off on some

rehab starts to work on his issues, both mental and mechanical. When Carmona faceplanted in the Cincinnati dirt, my first thought was that this was the option that didn't seem to exist for Carmona (to get him out of the rotation for a while to right himself), though the Indians' public statements don't seem to acknowledge that he would benefit from some time in Akron or Columbus to work on his approach.

With Carmona, that is the most frustrating aspect of his 2011 season as his stuff seems to be there, but his approach (both mental and mechanical) is not and the result is a pitcher who can't help but watch the avalanche build strength and envelop him on the mound. Why the Indians would rush him back into the rotation as he currently exists is beyond me, but it will be worth watching as to whether their statements that he'll miss "one" start are backed up by their actions in returning him to action as it would almost seem as if this injury could constitute a "found" option for Carmona to allow him to hopefully improve his consistency.

If we're on the topic of "options", it's going to lead us to the crux of the issue at hand as Talbot, despite having a couple of good outings, has been largely disappointing and actually currently qualifies as one of the worst starters currently toeing the rubber on a regular basis in the AL and even in all of MLB. Lest you think that sounds overly harsh, realize that there are 63 AL starting pitchers who have thrown 50 or more IP on the season, and here is where Talbot ranks in some pretty important categories:

ERA – 5.60 (60th of 63)

WHIP – 1.74 (62nd of 63)

FIP – 5.32 (62nd of 63)

K/BB – 1.50 (56th of 63)

BB/9 – 3.74 (56th of 63)

HR/9 – 1.53 (62nd of 63)

Line Drive % - 23.5% (60th of 63)

So, here's a guy at the bottom of the list for ERA, WHIP, and FIP with bottom-of-the-barrel peripherals who gives up a lot of home runs and, not to forget this, a lot of hard hit line drives. You can pull the cord on the small sample size siren if you'd like but the only AL starting pitcher that comes in BELOW Talbot in FIP and WHIP is the now-in-AAA Kyle Drabek, meaning that Talbot is perhaps the worst starter in the AL currently in a rotation by a couple of varied statistics.

In the interest of full disclosure, Carmona is below Talbot in both ERA and HR/9 and maybe Talbot's been unlucky (his BABIP is the highest among AL starters at .353), but there's a certain time when Talbot's spot in the rotation becomes untenable because his underwhelming numbers go further back than simply Opening Day of 2011:

Talbot's last 12 starts of 2010

5.40 ERA, 1.73 WHIP with 28 BB and 38 K in 56 2/3 IP

Talbot's first 10 starts of 2011

5.60 ERA, 1.73 WHIP with 22 BB and 33 K in 53 IP

What does that tell us?

This is it...this seems to be Mitch Talbot, and while there may be a longer leash for a pitcher who simply figures in as a 5th starter, over his last 22 starts and 110 IP for the Indians, he has a 5.48 ERA and a 1.73 WHIP with a 5.8 K/9 and a 4.1 BB/9. Even for a 5th starter in AL, that's not good enough to merit his being handed the ball every 5th game, particularly for a team that's in the pennant race in July.

In this new "Age of the Pitcher", he's now a guy that has an ERA+ of 82 over the last two seasons as an Indian and, just for some perspective on that, there have been 81 pitchers that have thrown 200 innings or more in the last two years exclusively as a starter. Using ERA+ as a comparative tool, Talbot is the 3rd worst pitcher among that group , with Zach Duke and the historically bad Kyle Davies being the only starting pitchers logging more than 200 innings combined to underperform Talbot over the last 2 years.

It is true that Talbot has "only" a cumulative 4.70 ERA and a cumulative 1.55 WHIP in 212 1/3 IP over the last two seasons, but after Talbot came out of the gate quickly in 2010, he's devolved into a subpar pitcher, even by 5th starter standards. With pitchers in Columbus thriving, the question becomes how long the Indians are willing to keep Talbot in the rotation to see if he can fight his way back to respectability. Certainly, it's not clear that McAllister or Gomez or Huff represent immediate upgrades over what Talbot's ceiling is as both Gomez and Huff have thrown MLB innings and have failed to take full advantage of their opportunities the way that Josh Tomlin has.

However, with McAllister about to get his 1st start tomorrow in place of Carmona and with Gomez and Huff (and Scott Barnes, though I think he's further down the list of options) outpitching McAllister recently in Columbus, you have to wonder if these guys are going to start jockeying for position for a spot in the Indians' rotation with the spot up for grabs not being Carmona's, but Talbot's.

It is true that Talbot does not have any options and that the Indians would risk losing him if they attempted to sneak him through waivers or whether he would have that much more success in the bullpen than Chad Durbin (I know...I'm setting the bar low there) or Frank Herrmann is up for debate, but with the Indians in a pennant race and with compelling arms in Columbus that are about to see some innings topside, you have to wonder if Talbot's starts are going to start to take on the urgency of a man pitching for his job and his life in the organization.

Despite his obvious struggles recently, particularly in the context of what the rest of the league is doing on the mound, I do find it odd that Talbot largely goes unnoticed as a major concern going forward. While Kearns and Phelps (who apparently has become the whipping boy due to his defensive miscues...despite the fact that he's played only intermittently and is still cutting his teeth in MLB) have targets on their backs and Chad Durbin is burned in effigy (OK, maybe he's not burned in effigy) and cries persist that the Indians can't carry Kearns or Phelps or Duncan on this roster because the Tribe is in 1st place, those guys represent bench players (the way Acta is using them) who are going to have a limited bearing as to whether the Indians stick around in the AL Central or not.

Meanwhile, Talbot represents 20% of the rotation and has a 5.48 ERA over his last 110 IP. That type of performance may have been acceptable for a non-contending team attempting to develop players, as the Indians were in 2009 and 2010, but for a team that needs to be maximizing every spot on their roster, the idea that 27-year-old Talbot's recent output on the mound is something that the Indians should endure (5th starter or not) is hard to digest.

With the top of the rotation cruising along to carry the team and with McAllister arriving to get his 1st chance to perhaps lay claim to Talbot's spot in the rotation (and does anyone doubt that Talbot would have already found his way to the bullpen if Alex White's finger didn't go "SPROING"?), with more AAA pitchers lined up behind McAllister to attempt to pitch themselves into the Indians' plans, the way that Josh Tomlin already has this year. Where that leaves Mitch Talbot remains to be seen as he can certainly "save" his spot in the rotation by pitching at a sustained level that he hasn't for over a year, but his leash has to be getting shorter with each bad outing.

As we saw when Carmona went airborne in the Queen City, these things have a way of working themselves out in baseball as players separate on their own. That being said, I'm just not going to be surprised if things "work themselves out" in the Indians' rotation with Talbot left on the outside looking in...and at a moment not too far from now.