Pitchers and catchers have reported to Winter Haven, and Spring Training is underway. Later this week the position players will report to camp and full squad workouts will commence. Before the position players arrive, SwerbsBlurbs.com kicks off its Spring Training preview with a look at the starting pitching in 2006.

Like in 2005, the starting staff is very deep and should be able to withstand injuries to several starters and relievers. While major injuries will be hard to overcome, the depth the Indians will have ready to be called up from Buffalo should help ease any critical loss. Also, the success and health of last year's staff will be hard to repeat. The Indians had five starters make 30 or more starts in 2005, which is something that happens about as often as Halley's Comet appears.

While Kevin Millwood and Scott Elarton have departed, Indians GM Mark Shapiro brought in free agents Paul Byrd and Jason Johnson to fill their voids. A lot of fans may look at these two acquisitions as a step down from Millwood and Elarton, but after reading this preview you can make a strong case that the staff as a whole in 2006 is right on par with last year's staff.

Here is the proposed starting rotation going into Spring Training, which barring injury, will be the starting rotation going into the season:

The Starting Rotation:
(pitching hand in parentheses)
C.C. Sabathia (LH)
Paul Byrd (RH)
Cliff Lee (LH)
Jake Westbrook (RH)
Jason Johnson (RH)

#1 Starter: CC Sabathia

Sabathia goes into the 2006 season as the ace of the Indians pitching staff. At age 25, he already has completed five full major league seasons in which he has compiled an impressive 69-45 record and 4.10 ERA.

Sabathia has caught the ire of several Indians fans over the years because of his weight and inconsistency. Conditioning has always been a problem with Sabathia, and it has shown in past seasons. In 2004, before the All Star break he had a 3.33 ERA, but after the All-Star break he had a 5.12 ERA. Last year, however, Sabathia reported to Spring Training in his best shape ever. He responded by posting a 4.50 ERA before the All-Star break, and a 3.54 ERA after it. Even more impressive, in his last 10 starts of the season he was 9-1 with a dominating 2.24 ERA. Many people look at those last 10 starts as the turning point in his career and that he finally “gets” it.

In addition to his impressive performance down the stretch, Sabathia performed much better in some of his peripheral statistics than in previous seasons. Sabathia set career lows in walks (62), WHIP (1.26), on-base% (.311), and OPS (.682). Also, he found his fastball and started fooling hitters again as evidenced by his strikeouts per nine innings increase to 7.37, which was a large jump after hovering in the mid 6's the previous three seasons.

Sabathia is still developing, and his career path to date is very similar to former Indians pitcher Bartolo Colon. Like Sabathia, Colon was constantly knocked by fans because of his weight and inconsistency. At the end of Colon's fifth season, his career numbers were almost identical to Sabathia's in that Colon had a career record of 65-41 and an ERA of 4.09 (as noted above, Sabathia is 69-45 with a 4.10 ERA through five seasons). Colon's potential came together in 2002, his 6th season, as he finally had a consistent season and went 20-8 with a 2.93 ERA.

As Sabathia enters his 6th season, he could be poised for a breakout year like Colon in 2002.

#2 Starter: Paul Byrd

Knowing that AL 2005 ERA-champ Kevin Millwood would be hard to resign for reasonable dollars, the Indians signed Byrd early in free agency to a 2 year $14.25M

deal, with a club option for $8M in 2008. After Sabathia, the next three spots in the Indians rotation are pretty much interchangeable. Byrd is listed second since the Indians most likely will breakup the two lefties Sabathia and Cliff Lee, and because he is a productive veteran pitcher.

Last year, as an Angel, Byrd went 12-11 with a 3.74 ERA and .272 BAA, and for his career Byrd has compiled a 72-64 record and 4.23 ERA with a .264 BAA. Byrd is not an over-powering pitcher, but throws strikes and does not hurt himself with walks. For his career, he has only yielded 290 walks in 1112.2 IP, which is about 2.3 walks per 9 innings. More impressively, the last four years his walks per 9 innings have only been 1.5, and he boasts a healthy 3:1 strikeout to walk ratio.

While Byrd does not come with the fanfare that re-signing Kevin Millwood would have brought, the drop-off in expected performance from Millwood to Byrd in 2006 should not be as much as many fans think. In six of Millwood's nine seasons as a starter, he has posted an ERA above 4.00. Prior to last season, the two times he posted a sub-4.00 ERA his ERA jumped significantly the

next season. In 1999 when Millwood posted a career low 2.68 ERA he followed that up with a 4.66 ERA in 2000, and in 2002 when he posted a 3.24 ERA he followed that up with a 4.01 ERA in 2003. One has to wonder how his 2.86 ERA in 2005 will be followed up in 2006.

In addition, Byrd was tied for second in the AL in quality starts last season with 22, two above Millwood's total of 20. And, for the stathead's out there, Byrd's DIPS was 4.10 while Millwood's was 3.88, which shows they aren't as far apart as many think. For the uninitiated, DIPS is Defensive Independent Pitching Stat, a sabermetric which represents a pitcher's stat line without any possible influence from the defense behind them. DIPS arguably is considered much more important than ERA by teams like the Indians since it is known the Indians are big on sabermetrics vs. traditional statistics.

The problem with Byrd is health. Over the course of his 11 year career, Byrd has missed considerable time due to various injuries. Only three times in the last eight years has Byrd pitched in 30 or more games, and in those other five seasons he didn't even pitch more than 19 games. On a positive note, in the last three seasons

he has made 33, 19, and 31 starts respectively. Undoubtedly, there is concern among fans and the Indians themselves he can stay healthy. If he is healthy, he will be productive.

#3 Starter: Cliff Lee

Lee is one of the Indians top young pitchers, and should be a fixture in the rotation for the next several years. In his first full season in 2004, he posted good numbers as he went 14-8 with a 5.43 ERA and .268 BAA. He followed that up in 2005 by going 18-5 with a 3.79 ERA and .251 BAA.

Unlike in 2004, Lee remained consistent throughout the 2005 season. In 2004, Lee suffered from the growing pains that usually come along with a young pitcher. He had an outstanding first half of the season where he went 9-1 with a 3.77 ERA and .244 BAA, but had a completely opposite second half to his season in which he went 5-7 with a 7.91 ERA and .300 BAA. In 2005, Lee was 9-4 with a 3.89 ERA and .257 BAA, and was better after the

break going 9-1 with a 3.66 ERA and .243 BAA.

Two of the biggest improvements Lee made from 2004 to 2005 was reducing walks and home runs. From 2004 to 2005, his home runs went from 30 to 22, and his walks went from 81 to 52, even though he pitched 23 more innings in 2005. Eliminating the free passes and the big blows helped drop his ERA considerably.
Another area of big improvement for Lee was in his handling of right-handed hitters. In 2004, he was battered giving up 28 HRs and had a .277 BAA and .855 OPS, but in 2005 he improved dramatically only giving up 16 HRs and had a .237 BAA and .666 OPS against right-handed batters.

Lee goes into 2006 as a core player for the Indians going forward. With Sabathia, he provides a nice 1-2 lefty punch in the starting rotation many teams only dream of having. The Indians have him under their control for at least four more seasons, and he will most definitely be approached with a long-term contract (maybe as early as this April) to carry him through his upcoming arbitration years.

#4 Starter: Jake Westbrook

Westbrook is quality pitcher, as pitchers who stay healthy and can consistently throw 200 innings in a season do not grow on trees. In 2004, Westbrook went 14-9 with a 3.38 ERA and .255 BAA, and in 2005 regressed somewhat going 15-15 with a 4.49 ERA and .265 BAA.

So what contributed to the spike in ERA from 3.38 in 2004 to 4.49 in 2005? Stats-wise, 2005 was pretty much a carbon copy of 2004. His walks (61 to 56), strikeouts (116 to 119), innings pitched (216.2 to 211.2), WHIP (1.24 to 1.29), HRs (19 to 19), and even his DIPS (4.19 to 4.11) were all about the same when comparing 2004 to 2005.

Where Jake went wrong, and where he excelled in 2004, was in situational pitching. In 2004, Westbrook only allowed a .233 BAA with Runners In Scoring Position (RISP), and was even more stingy with RISP with two outs by posting a .200 BAA. In 2005, he allowed a .300 BAA with RISP, and a .333 BAA with RISP with two

outs. This is the only place you need to look when trying to find out what went wrong for Jake in 2005.

Fans upset with the loss of Millwood should take note of Westbrook's slide from 2004 to 2005. Ironically, Westbrook was 3rd in ERA in 2004. In 2005, the peripheral numbers stayed the same, but the ERA changed because of a drop in performance in key situations (which Millwood thrived in throughout 2005). Also, note Westbrook's ERA/DIPS in 2004 of 3.38/4.19, and his ERA/DIPS in 2005 of 4.49/4.11.

The season that Westbrook had in 2004 is the potential Tribe brass envisioned when they traded David Justice for him in 2000. Unfortunately, it took almost four years for that potential to be realized. While the Indians were elated with his 2004 performance, and maybe a little disappointed with his 2005 performance in key situations, going forward the Indians would be happy with an improvement in his situational pitching resulting in numbers somewhere in-between his 2004 and 2005 seasons.

##5 Starter: Jason Johnson

The Indians signed Johnson this offseason to a 1 year $4M deal, with an incentive laden mutual option for 2007. As a Detroit Tiger in 2005, Johnson posted an 8-13 record with a 4.54 ERA and .255 BAA. In his nine year career, he is 52-86 with a 4.88 ERA and .278 BAA. The person he is replacing, Scott Elarton, was 11-9 with a 4.61 ERA and .267 BAA in 2005, and for his career is 50-47 with a 5.10 ERA and .264 BAA.

Elarton received a 2-year $8M contract this past offseason from the Kansas City Royals, while Johnson signed his one year $4M pact with the Indians. This despite Johnson having comparable career and recent numbers to Elarton, and Johnson also having thrown 190 or more innings in four of the last five years while Elarton has only topped 180 innings pitched once in the last five years. This is just another example of Shapiro getting good

value with much less risk for his dollar.

Johnson's signing is also more proof that the Indians do listen to the sabermaticians. All five of the Indians starting pitchers for 2006 were in the top 25 in the AL in DIPS in 2005: Sabathia was 5th at 3.83, Lee 10th at 3.93, Byrd 16th at 4.10, Westbrook 17th at 4.11, and Johnson 25th at 4.48. As a sidenote, Millwood was 7th at 3.88 and Elarton was 43rd at 5.12.

The Indians could have gone to their talented

stable of young pitching in the minors to fill the 5th starter void left by Elarton, but instead chose to sign a veteran to fill the role. The Indians want reliability and quality innings from the 5th starter, and Johnson provides that. He is a workhorse as he has averaged 185 IP the last five seasons, and was 18th in the AL in quality starts last year with 19 (Elarton was 33rd with 16). In the end, he should be an improvement over Elarton.

Buffalo Bound:

Jason Davis, Jason Stanford, Fausto

Carmona, Jeremy Sowers, Jeremy Guthrie, Ben Howard, Jake Dittler

Up Next: The Bullpen

Coming Soon: The position players, and in-depth previews of the Indians minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.