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Tony La Russa, IMB and the Sweetheart

Dear reader, if you were lucky, you had a high school sweetheart or two.

I had mine...and in my mind's eye, the young lady in question was the prettiest girl in school.

But the prettiest girl in school went away to college. There, she found another gentleman's charms a little (a lot?!) more to her liking than those of yours truly.

On the night we parted, it was obvious her mind was made up because my words and logic were insufficient as far as changing her mind was concerned. What sticks in my mind is that it seemed that the young lass was the umpire, that I had struck out looking, and her last words were 'yer outta here!'.

She was so certain that the new fella was her #1 guy...I don't think the late Johnie Cochran (the lawyer that got OJ off) could've persuaded her otherwise. Her mind was made up and she was certain she was right.

(And now we'll find out which friends and family members read stlsports.com...)

Back to baseball.

But before the main entree...a short story.

One night in the late 1990's, a half-hour or so after an extended mid-September extra-inning game at Busch Stadium II, a game that the Cardinals lost, yours truly was the only media-type in the manager's office...when a couple of 'Friends of Tony' were hustled in through the side door. The couple, who were introduced to me as married to each other, were apparently long-time California-based friends of manager Tony La Russa and his family. They traded stories about the visitors' children...and a bit of chat ensued about the game that had just ended.

La Russa was clearly relaxed in their presence, and took pains to say...'now this is off the record, but our last pitcher...'; and his voice trailed off. It was as if he was apologizing to his visitors for his team's sorry performance. His words were not condescending but simply stated what was obvious.

The implication was clear--the manager did not have significant confidence in the lefthander in question; the team was far out of contention and the pitcher was a late-season call-up who had already failed a couple of times in a season marked with similar failures by other hurlers.

The next day, I asked La Russa about his general thinking pertaining to the way he utilizes his bullpen.

His response? "Look. It is not that complicated. I replace pitcher A with pitcher B if I think B has a better chance of getting the hitter out. It is not that complicated."

I've never forgotten that conversation...one that was punctuated with a sharp hand gesture from the manager aimed in my general direction.

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A good friend of mine (we'll call him IMB) long ago made up his mind regarding the managerial skills and abilities of the current Redbirds' skipper, Tony La Russa.

IMB is the ultimate Cardinals' fan, but not all that unique as far as adult male southern Illinoisans are concerned--Cardinals' baseball is like religion in these parts.

How serious is IMB's jones for the Redbirds? When baseball season ends, he cancels his cable TV subscription, because, in his words, "the only reason I get cable TV is to watch the Cardinals, my beloved Cardinals".

IMB's cable TV comment is an exact quote. As long as his health and employment allow him the time, IMB watches and studies and dissects every pitch of every single Cardinals' game.

The man knows his baseball.

I have discussed the finer points of baseball, and Cardinals baseball, with IMB...for hours.

And over the past couple of months, Tony La Russa's utilization of his pitching staff has been a significant part of that discussion.

Trust me when I say this: like many from these parts, IMB is NOT a fan of Tony La Russa.

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A primary reason, if not THE primary reason, that IMB finds fault with the managerial style of Tony La Russa has to do with his perception of the way La Russa manages his pitching staff.

"My Dad feels the same way I do," IMB told me. "Whenever La Russa, late in the game, heads to the pitching mound, he gets up and TURNS OFF THE TELEVISION." (Emphasis added because IMB was shouting as he uttered these words.)

IMB continued: "La Russa acts like he has to put his stamp on every game he manages. You don't see other managers changing pitchers the way he does. He wears out his relievers. He overuses his bullpen. It has been going on for years, and I am sick and tired of it."

IMB is in good company regarding (part of) his perception of Tony La Russa's handling of his pitching staff.

Within the past 72 hours, MLB Network's Peter Gammons, ESPN's Jayson Stark, and TBS NLCS commentator Ron Darling (who started 130 games for La Russa's Oakland A's in the early 1990's) and more than one Fox Sports Midwest staffer...all supplied their views that La Russa utilizes his bullpen more than any other manager.

Over and over, on national radio shows and on local radio shows...for several years, from people who should know better--the same sentiments have been expressed by literally dozens of broadcasters, writers, and baseball fans: **Tony La Russa changes pitchers more than any other manager.**

So is this sentiment...this perception...*is it real?*

What statistical evidence is available regarding how Tony La Russa, while serving as Cardinals manager for sixteen seasons, has utilized his bullpen?

Three sets of season-long stats, and three related questions, come to mind (for the 1996-2011 Cardinals regular

seasons, all managed by La Russa):

*total number of complete games per season for Cardinals starting pitchers (STL CG)

DO LA RUSSA'S STARTING PITCHERS COMPLETE FEWER GAMES THAN OTHER NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS?

*average number of innings that the Cardinals' starting pitcher completes per start, before he is removed for a reliever (STL IP/S)

DO LA RUSSA'S STARTERS PITCH FEWER INNINGS PER START THAN OTHER NATIONAL LEAGUE TEAMS?

*total number of relief pitchers used, per season, for the entire Cardinals season (STL RP)

DOES TONY LA RUSSA USE MORE RELIEVERS THAN OTHER NATIONAL LEAGUE MANAGERS?

Let's go to the videotape.

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In the Table below, **STL CG** and **NL team CG (avg)** are the number of complete games for the Cardinals and for the entire National League (per team, average), respectively, and **STL rank in NL** is how the Cardinals ranked that season, in the National League, in complete games.

(discussion continues below table)

year	Wins	Losses	STL CG	NL team CG (avg)	STL rank in NL
2011	90	72	7	5	T2
2010	86	76	7	5	3
2009	91	71	8	5	T2
2008	86	76	2	4	T11
2007	78	84	2	3	T9
2006	83	78	6	5	T5
2005	100	62	15	7	1
2004	105	57	4	4	T7
2003	85	77	9	6	T3
2002	97	65	4	6	T10
2001	93	69	8	6	T2
2000	95	67	10	8	T3
1999	75	86	5	8	T13
1998	83	79	6	10	T12
1997	73	89	5	10	T11
1996	88	74	13	9	T2
averages	88	74	7	6	---

For example, in the Cards' 2004 105-win regular season (in yellow above), their starting pitchers completed four (!) games...a total that matched the average number of complete games by the other fifteen NL squads that year. Four complete games placed the Cards in a tie for 7th place for the year.

For La Russa's entire sixteen-year run as the STL manager, his teams average seven complete games per season...while, during those sixteen years, the other NL teams averaged six complete games. In other words, Tony La Russa's starting pitchers complete slightly more games than other NL hurlers.

No evidence of Captain Hook here.

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Do La Russa's starters pitch fewer innings (per start) than other NL starters?

In the Table below, **STL IP/S** and **NL team IP/S (avg)** are the innings pitched per start, for the Cardinals and for the entire National League (per team, average), respectively, and **STL rank in NL** is how the Cardinals ranked that season, in innings pitched per start.

(discussion continues below table)

year	Wins	Losses	STL IP/S	NL team IP/S (avg)	STL rank in NL
2011	90	72	6.2	6.0	T2
2010	86	76	6.1	5.9	3
2009	91	71	6.2	5.8	1
2008	86	76	5.9	5.8	T5
2007	78	84	5.5	5.7	14
2006	83	78	5.8	5.8	8
2005	100	62	6.5	6.0	1
2004	105	57	6.2	5.8	T1
2003	85	77	6.0	5.9	T5
2002	97	65	5.7	5.9	T11
2001	93	69	6.0	5.9	T8
2000	95	67	6.2	6.0	T3
1999	75	86	5.8	6.0	T11
1998	83	79	5.7	6.1	T14
1997	73	89	6.2	6.0	4
1996	88	74	6.3	6.0	T1
averages	88	74	6.1	6.0	---

For example, in the Cards' 1997 73-win regular season (in green above), their starting pitchers averaged 6.2 innings pitched...a total that was two-tenths of an inning greater than the average number of innings pitched by the starting pitchers for the other thirteen NL squads that year. The 6.2 innings pitched per start, in 1997, placed the Cards fourth-highest for the year in that category.

For La Russa's entire sixteen-year run as the STL manager, his team's starters average 6.1 innings per start, while, during those same sixteen years, the other NL teams' starters average 6.0 innings per start.

In other words, Tony La Russa's starting pitchers remain in the game slightly longer than other NL teams' starters.

No evidence of Captain Hook here, either.

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Does Tony La Russa replace pitchers more often than other NL managers?

In the Table below, **STL REL** and **NL team REL (avg)** are the total number of relief pitchers used, per season, for the Cardinals, and for the entire National League (per team, average), respectively, and **STL rank in NL** is how the Cardinals ranked that season, in total number of relief pitchers used..

(discussion continues below table)

year	Wins	Losses	STL REL	NL team REL (avg)	STL rank in NL
2011	90	72	468	487	14
2010	86	76	451	486	14
2009	91	71	481	494	11
2008	86	76	506	492	6
2007	78	84	516	507	6
2006	83	78	469	481	11
2005	100	62	436	453	13
2004	105	57	469	467	8
2003	85	77	460	454	8
2002	97	65	472	450	3
2001	93	69	484	442	3
2000	95	67	386	416	13
1999	75	86	454	419	1
1998	83	79	428	395	4
1997	73	89	399	412	12
1996	88	74	413	418	8
averages	88	74	456	455	---

For example, in the Cards' 2011 90-win regular season (in blue above), 468 relief pitchers made appearances. Relievers for the other fifteen NL staffs were utilized (on average, per team) 487 times. Restating, the average NL manager, in 2011, changed pitchers 21 more times than Tony La Russa.

In the 2011 season, the Cardinals placed fourteenth in the National League in the number of relief pitchers used. Only two NL teams (Philadelphia and Arizona) utilized relief pitchers fewer times than the Cardinals.

For La Russa's entire sixteen-year run as the STL manager, his team's relievers averaged 456 appearances per year, while, during those same sixteen years, managers for the other NL teams used 455 relievers per year.

In other words, Tony La Russa, over the course of sixteen NL seasons, used EXACTLY ONE more relief pitcher, per season, than his fellow NL managers.

Still no evidence of Captain Hook here, as well.

[Side Note #1: The original Captain Hook was Sparky Anderson, who, in the 1975 and 1976 seasons, did the left-right-left-right relief pitcher shuffle years before Tony La Russa made his managerial debut with the Chicago White Sox in 1979.]

[Side Note #2: Sixteen years in STL...averaging 88 wins with multiple post-season appearances; Tony La Russa's managerial career in St. Louis alone puts him in the conversation for Hall of Fame consideration. Think about it. One more World Series title and a couple of more seasons in STL would solidify that very argument.]

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So back to sweethearts and IMB.

IMB has demonstrated, time after time, that he just does not like Tony La Russa. It is likely that no amount of logic and facts are going to change his mind. At this point he has too much invested to look at things in a different way. Nevertheless...

For the past sixteen years, Cardinals' starting pitchers completed one more game than starters on other NL teams (per season).

For the past sixteen years, Cardinals' starting pitchers pitched slightly more innings, per game, than the starters on other NL teams.

And for the past sixteen years, Cardinals' relievers have made one more appearance, per season, than relievers on other NL teams.

But hey...about all those folks, like IMB, 'hating on' Tony La Russa?

Something tells me that the Cardinals manager would revel in all of the criticism, and take on twice as much of it...if in return he could collect one more World Series championship as manager of the St. Louis Cardinals.

IMB won't change his mind, though.

And that high school sweetheart? Well, Miss Amy...she didn't change her mind, either.

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