"It's an honor to be out there, to set the tone out there for the team, for the game and for the season -- to really push things and make it go well," Masterson said. "It should be fun. Usually it's a packed house in Cleveland, too. Who doesn't like playing in that type of situation?"

There used to be questions about where Justin Masterson belonged within a pitching staff. Within his own mind, he firmly believed he could take on the leadership role and responsibility that goes along with being an ace.

Masterson does not want anyone to confuse his faith in his ability for arrogance. The Indians sinkerballer simply felt that his god-given talent to throw a baseball, and make it bend through the air seemingly at will, would one day help him rise to the top of a starting rotation.

On Friday, Cleveland made it clear that it feels Masterson is ready for that type of job by naming him the team's Opening Day starter for the coming season. The Indians believe they are in a prime position to contend for the postseason, and the ballclub wants Masterson to lead the charge.

Indians manager Manny Acta joked recently that he has known his choice for the April 5 home opener against the Blue Jays since Christmas. He wanted, however, to wait to reveal his pick

until after the Tribe's pitchers completed the early stages of their respective Spring Training throwing programs.

In Masterson's case, the starter is coming back from offseason surgery to clean up his left (non-throwing) shoulder. When Masterson arrived in camp in great shape and passed all the necessary tests in an assortment of mound sessions, Acta informed him -- along with No. 2 starter Ubaldo Jimenez -- that he would start on Opening Day.

Jimenez, who started on Opening Day for the Rockies in each of the past three years, was thrilled for his teammate.

"He deserved Opening Day," Jimenez said. "He earned that spot. I told him he has to enjoy it. That's his first one. Thank God I had the opportunity to open three times already. It's exciting."

Acta was happy to be in a situation where he had a choice for Opening Day, adding that Jimenez was fine with being behind Masterson in the pecking order.

"He understands that, hey, his job is to be a No. 1 pitching out of the No. 2 spot," Acta said.

Masterson's breakout showing last season, when he helped the Indians to a second-place finish in the American League Central, sealed his ascension to Opening Day starter status. The hulk of a pitcher -- listed at 6-foot-6 and 250 pounds -- began a transition from reliever to starter in 2009 and emerged as one of the league's top talents last year.

"Coming into the season last year, we all knew he had the stuff," Acta said. "He earned it by being the guy that we wanted to see out there every five days and the guy that, whenever you roll into town, every team is wondering if they're going to see him or not. That's what a No. 1 means in this league."

Last season, the 27-year-old Masterson went 12-10 with a 3.21 ERA in 34 outings, though he

might have notched a few more victories had it not been for a considerable lack of run support in stretches. He logged 216 innings, struck out 158 and induced 364 grounders (third in the AL) with his signature two-seam sinker.

Dating back to 2010, Masterson has gone 14-10 with a 3.05 ERA in his last 37 starts.

It was a stepping-stone process for Masterson to reach last season's heights.

After coming to Cleveland from Boston in 2009 -- the pitcher was part of the deal that sent Victor Martinez to the Red Sox -- Masterson went 1-7 with a 4.55 ERA in 11 appearances down the stretch. A year later, he began the season 0-5 en route to a 6-13 finish to go along with a 4.70 ERA in 34 games.

What changed last season?

"A lot of it was pounding the strike zone -- throwing strikes," Masterson said. "I think that's [key] for any pitcher -- being able to throw the strikes and get ahead [in the count]. For me, with the amount of sink that I can get on the ball, when I get ahead, guys will swing at it. If you get behind, they'll ... take the chance that it's going to be a ball."

Masterson threw 63 percent of his pitches for strikes last season and he leaned on his fastball more than any other year in his career. He logged the highest percentage of fastballs (84.4) in the Major Leagues in 2011, according to fangraphs.com. As a result, Masterson induced contact 82 percent of the time, creating a stream of grounders.

It was a simplified approach combined with refined mechanics that overpowered hitters at times. Consider that on July 19, Masterson fired 104 pitches in 7 2/3 innings during a road start against the Twins. He threw 103 fastballs -- a mix of four-seamers and sinkers -- and only one slider and blanked Minnesota in the process.

"He was able to maintain his mechanics throughout the year," Acta said, "which was something that he struggled with in the past. ... Actually, he never had any type of streak where he was wild. He was tough from Day 1 until the end."

This is not to say Masterson's showing did not include any rough patches.

After beginning the season 5-0 with a 2.18 ERA in his first five starts in April, Masterson did not find the win column again until late June. In between, he endured an 11-start stretch in which he received only 22 runs of support, leading to an 0-6 record in that span despite a respectable 3.34 ERA.

It was an exercise in mental toughness.

"Sometimes more of the mental toughness exercise was talking to the media afterwards," Masterson joked. "'Hey, you didn't get a win. You stink now, huh?' I thought I pitched pretty good, but maybe I didn't."

Kidding aside, Masterson said he never got too worked up over the problem.

As for the left shoulder injury, Masterson said that did not really bother him substantially until his final outing on Sept. 23, when he walked six and threw 106 pitches in only 4 2/3 innings against the Twins. It was a labrum issue that originally came up in 2007, and the pitcher knew it would have to be fixed at some point.

That time came in October, and Masterson is recovered and ready for a normal spring.

"My shoulder juice was leaking out," Masterson joked. "That's technical terms for you guys. It was one of those things where you've got to repair the leak at some time, and when are we going to do that? It became time to repair that leak.

"It feels great -- definitely better than it did last year. It's still probably not 100 percent, but more than enough for what we need to be successful."

After all, the Indians' investment involves Masterson's right arm.

Masterson sounded more than ready to tackle Opening Day.

"It's an honor to be out there, to set the tone out there for the team, for the game and for the season -- to really push things and make it go well," Masterson said. "It should be fun. Usually it's a packed house in Cleveland, too. Who doesn't like playing in that type of situation?"