



The Indians won on Opening Day for just the second time in their last ten tries, as Justin Masterson “outdueled” R.A. Dickey by pitching more or less exactly the same as R.A. Dickey except for one pitch. In today’s B-List, Buff welcomes newcomers, lauds the return of the Ho Hum Bullpen, and generally shakes off the rust of a year and a half of inactivity. He doesn’t sing “O, Canada,” because he doesn’t know the words except “O” and “Canada.”

FINAL

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The B-List: April 2, 2013

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Sunday, March 31 2013 11:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, April 05 2013 8:25 AM

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Indians (1-0)

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Blue Jays (0-1)

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W: Masterson (1-0) L: Dickey (0-1) S: C. Perez (1)

I heartily applaud Geddy Lee throwing out the first pitch instead of singing.

0) Administrative Notes

The dirty little secret of The B-List has always been that I don't have the wherewithal (gumption, drive, what have you) to finish writing the column the night of the game, so I end up doing a fair amount of the writing at work. (I would say "writing and editing," but I do not edit.) So when I was promoted in 2011 to act in a more active supervisory role (rather than the more classical "mushroom" role of being left alone in the dark to produce spores), it became increasingly difficult to write the column to the level I expected. After some time off from the column, I entertained the possibility of returning last summer, until June 29th when my wife suffered a minor stroke. It's been a challenging year and a half all around.

Let's try again.

1) I'm ready to ... wait, what do you mean, "We've already started?"

All through 2011, I kept waiting for Justin Masterson to fall apart because he didn't REALLY seem like a GREAT pitcher. At least, not like a 3.21 ERA 200-inning starter. And all through 2012, I kept waiting for Justin Masterson to stop sucking because he didn't REALLY seem like a PUTRID pitcher. At least, not like a 5 ERA guy who uncorked 14 wild pitches and let guys get on base almost 35% of the time. The sabermetric narrative on Masterson was always that he had a funny arm slot and he was a glorified reliever and certainly nothing like an Ace, and frankly, last year made the sabermetricians look awfully sage.

It was weird, though: it just didn't LOOK like Masterson was a lot worse in 2012 than in 2011, except for control. I realize this is a bit of "other than that, how did you like the play, Mrs. Lincoln," but Masterson struck out MORE guys in FEWER innings and gave up just one more hit in 10 fewer innings in 2012. What the heck happened?

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Well, two things happened: he walked a bunch more guys, and he gave up almost twice as many homers. The first suggests that he couldn't hit the strike zone as well as he did before, and the second suggests kind of the same thing ("I just need to throw a strike and trust my st ... holy cow, he hit that a long way ..."). Masterson's spring was nothing to write home about (I certainly didn't), but look: Spring Training is Spring Training, and not simply in a tautological sense. It means very little. It means a lot to a guy like Scott Kazmir, but isn't a useful evaluative tool for a guy like Justin Masterson unless he tops out at 85 or starts throwing left-handed or grows hair. None of these was likely.

So it was important to establish right off the bat in the opener that Masterson was going to be more like the 2011 version (which I don't think he really is) than the 2012 version (which I don't think he really is, either). Keep the ball moving in the zone. Develop a weapon against left-handers. Above all, throw strikes and keep the ball in the yard.

And then the first batter:

Jose Reyes: Ball, Ball, Ball, Ball, J Reyes walked

No, that isn't it. Well, at least make sure that your 0-2 pitches put people away:

Jose Bautista: Strike (looking), Strike (foul), Foul, single to left

Well, Joey Bats is a very good hitter, at least make a high-quality pitch with a runner on base:

Edwin Encarnacion: hit by pitch

Hum. So, we have that going for us, which makes my teeth itch.

Now, to Masterson's credit, he struck out Adam Lind to end the inning. And, frankly, after scuffling pretty badly with control, walking one in the second and two more in the third, Masterson did retire the last 11 hitters he faced (for 12 total outs). In all, Masterson gave up a mere 3 hits in 6 full innings of work, striking out 5 and keeping the ball in the park. The only run he allowed was when his two walks loaded the bases with no outs in the third and he got Asdrubal Cabrera to channel his inner Vizquel for a 6-4-3 DP.

But so much of Masterson's outcome variance is so simply attributed to commanding the strike zone (his stuff is fine) that none of the following numbers make me feel Actually Good:

4 walks

1 HBP (on the first pitch!)

11 of 24 first-pitch strikes

61 strikes in 103 pitches, under 60%

You know the old saying, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth?" See, that's not the whole saying. What the saying SHOULD be is, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth while the guy who gave it to you is still there." Once he leaves? Check out the horse's mouth. Don't be a sap. Geez. Will I take a 1-run Quality Start Opening Day win? Of course I will! Huzzah! Are there Opening Day jitters and April in Canada and first game out issues? Sure there are! Does this make me feel calm and secure as to what kind of season Justin Masterson is likely to have?

No. It does not.

2) Silver Lining Dept.

Because small samples dictate that I'll likely never be able to write this truthfully again, I should point out that left-handers are now hitting .154/.267/.231 against Justin Masterson for a brisk .497 OPS. So clearly he's figured that part out, at least.

3) Flashing the leather!

I mention Cabrera's double-play ball in the third, but I didn't really do the play justice: go watch the replay on MLB.com or ESPN. Lind's "ground ball" was more of a sinking liner that short-hopped Cabrera, who spun on his posterior and backhand-flipped the ball to Jason Kipnis, who was able to get Lind by a full step at first. It was the kind of reaction play that, had Cabrera's brain been fully-engaged, he probably would not have been able to execute it cleanly.

Kipnis himself had a fine diving stop of his own later in the game, showing good range and composure to save a hit.

Oddly enough, Masterson only induced five ground ball outs, so there weren't a lot of opportunities for the guys in the middle.

4) Speaking of perception

I remember expressing some skepticism in Baseball Prospectus' original defensive metrics back in the day when they declared that Jhonny Peralta was an above-average defensive shortstop. Now look: I rode the Jholtin' Jhonny bandwagon longer than most and FAR longer than just about any sensibility dictated (was 2005 really that long ago? Yeah. Yeah, it was.). I was one of Peralta's biggest supporters, and I still maintain he wasn't nearly the tire fire many made him out to be. But look: numbers are numbers, and eyeballs are eyeballs, and the fact is, Jhonny Peralta was not, is not, and will never be a good defensive shortstop. He has a strong arm. He is more athletic than you or me. He is not a good defensive shortstop.

It's with a similar but opposite skepticism that I read that Asdrubal Cabrera is a below-average defensive shortstop. Maybe I'm missing something that comes with watching every play of every game (I don't do that). Maybe I'm overweighting the flashy plays and ignoring balls that good shortstops get to that Cabrera doesn't (otherwise known as the Jeter Value). Maybe his arm is more scattershot than I believe, and maybe his concentration lapses.

I'll just say this: when I watch Asdrubal Cabrera play shortstop, I am satisfied that he plays for the Cleveland Indians.

5) Drooby Doo!

And at the plate, well, I'll take that. With the notable exception of the Jhonny Peralta Broke My Arm season in 2010, Cabrera has put up OPS' of .799, .792, and .761 since 2009. Would I like an OBP over .340? Of course I would. So would Cabrera, I would imagine. Last year he hit significantly better from the right side than the left, which neither of us is very happy with, either. He needs a significant haircut. If he weighs 180, so do I.

But Asdrubal Cabrera can hit. He's not the very best-hitting shortstop in the majors, or the AL, and is probably only the third-best-hitting Cabrera, but he's a good hitter for a middle infielder.

Cabrera took a fast knuckleball from R.A. Dickey that didn't really drop quite enough and lifted it over the right field wall for a two-run homer that essentially put the game away. He is slugging 1.000 on the season.

6) Welcome to the club!

We all knew that Shin-Soo Choo would no longer patrol right field for the Tribe this season as soon as we learned that Scott Boras was his agent. (It didn't help that he played right field in the manner of a maced honey badger last season, posting a negative value according to most reputable defensive metrics.) We didn't realize that would lead to us completely overhauling the outfield, including receiving Drew Stubbs from Cincinnati in the deal for Choo, signing Michael Bourn, and inking ostensible outfielder Nick Swisher away from the Yankees, for whom he is simultaneously too young and too healthy.

Swisher actually played first base last night instead of the outfield, allowing Mike Brantley's Noodle Arm to roam left field. The much-vaunted "three center fielder" outfield took a bit of a shot to the eye socket when Stubbs flarbled a single into a two-base affair, but generally speaking, it's a better outfield than we've put out there since ... well ... not Trot Nixon, I'll tell you that.

Having Swisher on the roster actually serves multiple purposes: he provides a power boost, positional flexibility, and an uncanny ability to be Not Casey Kotchman. I'm sure you all will agree that this is a valuable skill, at least in regards to comparing this team to the 2012 version. Moreover, Swisher almost never looks like he's not having the most fun of anyone out on the field. Since Mark Reynolds can be pretty dour and Lonnie Chisenhall has a personality best described as "theoretical," I'm hoping this will aid the team in the months to come.

Anyway, Bourn smacked a pair of singles, Stubbs drove in a run with one of the two hits the Indians actually got with a runner in scoring position, and Reynolds scored a run. Swisher actually accomplished nothing whatsoever, but did appear to have fun.

7) Small Sample Size Theater

Your team leader in AVG and OBP this season: Mike Brantley, with a single and a pair of walks. He hits fifth.

8) Ducks on the Pond!

The Indians went two-for-nine with runners in scoring position. One hit was by Chisenhall, but Carlos Santana remains a catcher and did not score. Stubbs drove in a run. You are not going to believe this, but Mark Reynolds struck out.

Cabrera was picked off first by a guy whose name may be misspelled on his birth certificate.

9) Ho Hum Dept.

You know who throws strikes? Joe Smiff throws strikes. He threw six of them in eight pitches, recording three outs and generally looking a lot like Joe Smiff when I like watching him.

You know who else throws strikes? Chris Perez throws strikes. Well, not all the time. And not as often as I'd like. 12 strikes in 19 pitches is good but not great. Still, he started all four hitters he faced with a strike and K'd Colby Rasmus with a guy in scoring position to end the game. That's a nice outing.

You know who throws the highest-quality strikes? Vinnie Pestano. In 103 pitches, Justin Masterson induced five swings-and-misses. Five! Yu Darvish had like a thousand last night, although he had the advantage of facing the Lastros. Pestano only threw 14 pitches, and he got THREE swings-and-misses. You know how many people fouled a pitch off Vinnie Pestano last night? Zero. I was hoping he'd be a little more effective in the Classic, but last night, he was Vintage.

In all, the 'pen put up three scoreless innings with three Ks and one baserunner.

10) GM Steve's continued retirement

Remember when I lamented that the Indians hadn't tried harder to acquire Colby Rasmus from the Cardinals back when he fell out of favor with Tony LaGenius? Yeah, I was an idiot. Colby Rasmus is terrible.