

Speed Spoils Flag Day for Nationals

Written by {ga=riverburns}

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When the Cleveland Indians built their outfield of center fielders, most of us were thinking about defense, and how it would benefit the pitching staff. On Friday, at the corner Carnegie and Ontario, a couple of those center fielders did all they could to reward Justin Masterson, Cody Allen, and Joe Smith for their efforts, but not necessarily with their play in the outfield. With Jason Kipnis at the plate, and two runners on in a one-run game, the table was set for a walk-off of a dirtier variety than the long ball.

Facing Fernando Abad, with one out in the bottom of the ninth inning, the former Cincinnati Red, Drew Stubbs went the other way with a 2-1 fastball. Seeing as how it was a tie game in the home half of the final frame, he actually set himself up to be the hero. Stubbs and Michael Bourn executed a perfect hit and run, one that raised more than a few eyebrows when Steve Lombardozzi, the Nationals second baseman broke to take the throw, allowing Bourn's ground ball to roll through the void left on the right side of the infield.

Bourn took second base on the first pitch to Kipnis, which was correctly ruled a stolen base, and not the ridiculous defensive indifference call that we see so often on these late inning base thefts. What Bourn accomplished with one out, it not only took the double play out of the equation, but left the possibility that he could be the winning run, if Stubbs would have been the second out of the inning. Abad had gotten Mike Aviles to lead off the inning with a harmless flyout on an off-speed pitch, but Stubbs and Bourn had seen nothing but fastballs from the Washington lefty.

After being up 3-1 in the count, Kipnis fouled off a 94 mph fastball, which made the count full. With first base open, Abad took a chance with the breaking ball, and Kipnis smacked one right at Adam LaRoche at first base. It was probably exactly what the Nationals wanted, a

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hard hit ball right at someone, but Drew Stubbs was charging down the line at third, while Kipnis made a dash up the infield grass towards first, but not interfering with the play.

Adam LaRoche made the play on the sharply hit ball, and made a decent throw to Kurt Suzuki at home to extend the game. Suzuki caught the throw cleanly, but it was of little consequence, because Stubbs, going on contact, just flat-out beat it. The strategy of the play was simple; the worst case scenario involved a fielder's choice that would leave the winning run at third base with two outs.

Had Stubbs been thrown out, Bourn would have been standing on third base with Raburn at the plate and two outs. Had the runners stayed put, LaRoche retires Kipnis, and the winning run is still 90 feet away, only you didn't attempt to win the game when you had the chance. That is clearly not Terry Francona's M.O.

Joe Smith got the W, throwing a perfect inning of relief, which has been par for the course for the late inning specialist. He took care of the Nationals in the top of the ninth, throwing just ten pitches. The majority of his work came in a 7-pitch at-bat with Jayson Werth, one that ended with Werth swinging at strike 3. With the scoreless inning, Smith's ERA is down to 2.16 on the year.

Masterson continued to pitch well at Progressive Field, where he is 5-1 with a 2.22 ERA. Over the course of 7 innings, he struck out ten and gave up just two hits. In the eighth, it was time for Cody Allen to throw, right around the time that Nats decided swinging and missing was a good idea. Not that it mattered; Allen didn't offer much in the way of Ball 3 on Friday night. Denard Span went down on the sixth pitch of his at-bat, with a 2-2 count. Roger Bernadina, Washington's ___ was done after five, a pitch in the dirt that forced Carlos Santana to throw down to Nick Swisher at first base. Ryan Zimmerman lazily listed one to Bourn in center field to end the eighth, plus putting the ball in play lifted the fascism label one might put on Allen for a 3 K inning.

The visiting team got out in front early, with a sequence of events in the third inning that was sure to have National League snobs, the ones who proudly refer to their faction as the "Senior Circuit", all giddy. Suzuki drew the lead-off walk, one of four bases on balls, from Masterson, then moved to second on a Lombardozzi single. Instead of chasing the big inning, especially without the obstacle of manufacturing runs out around a pitcher's spot in an American League park, Davey Johnson had Span give himself up with a bunt that moved the

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runners over, but also registered a much-needed out for the Tribe. With the base open, Masterson issued Bernadina a free pass, losing him after being up 0-2 in the count.

Masterson struck out Ryan Zimmerman and got LaRoche to ground out to end the inning, but Washington did get on the board when Suzuki scored on a wild pitch with Zimmerman in the batter's box. What was potentially scary, ended up being a single run for the underachieving defending National League East Champs, but starter Gio Gonzalez didn't look like he'd need much in the way of run support, holding the Indians to a run on three hits through 7 innings, while striking out 8. With the way Gonzalez was cruising as the innings went on, it almost felt like that would be enough. I mean, Ryan Raburn was the Designated Hitter, batting clean-up for the Tribe on Friday.

What most of us didn't know when we first saw the lineup card, was Raburn's 6-for-11 success rate against Gio, dating back to 2009. It's amazing how often the masses doubt a manager with two World Series rings to his name, but the doubters may have taken some joy in being temporarily correct when a 1-out Jason Kipnis double was all for not, considering Out #3 came in the form of a swing-and-a-miss, courtesy of Raburn.

The former Detroit Tiger didn't need any base-runners to redeem himself, down 1-0 in the bottom of the 4th inning, with many Indians fans trying to predict when "this" losing streak would end. Raburn belted Gonzalez's 1-1 fastball over the wall in right-center field to even things up at 1 apiece. After that, Gonzalez didn't make any costly mistakes, even pitching around three two-out walks in the sixth, but walking away unscathed.

The Indians and Nationals will be back at it tomorrow, for the second of a three-game set with Washington. Jordan Zimmerman (9-3, 2.00 ERA) will get the start for Davey Johnson, and Terry Francona will counter with Scott Kazmir (3-4, 5.33 ERA). Friday's victory brought the Indians back to even after 66 games, and was the Tribe's third in a row, after a losing streak dropped them below .500. With the Detroit win in Minnesota, the Indians still trail the Tigers by 4 ½ games in the division.