



Excuse me, pardon me, dang is it crowded in here or what?

Five teams, three games... The American League Wild Card is officially a mess, as if it wasn't already. The Indians lost, the Orioles lost, the Rangers lost. The only teams that won were the teams that faced those teams, and they just happened to be behind the trio of Cleveland, Baltimore, and Texas. Everyone is within three games of the wild card race.

So..... They talk about the season being a marathon and that is definitely true. But if you ever were to categorize September as the final sprint, you would definitely look at this situation and call it more than a sprint. It's going to be a mad-dash.

ROYALS - 6 | INDIANS - 2

W: James Shields (11-9)

L: Scott Kazmir (8-8)

S: Greg Holland (42)

[\[BOXSCORE\]](#)

Scott Kazmir is clearly a pitcher who needs rest at this point in the season. One week he's going out there and pitching like he's never pitched before, the next, well, he's only giving you four innings. He isn't pitching horribly, yes he gave up four runs off nine hits. But he's simply pitching like a pitcher who is running on fumes.

At least in my opinion.

Kazmir [couldn't get the job done yesterday afternoon](#) . He ran into a team that isn't exactly lighting the world on fire, but a team that seems to be in a bit of a groove. He also faced a team that can fare pretty well against the left-handed pitcher.

"They are a good offensive team," Kazmir said. "Definitely, I give them a lot of credit. At the same time, we're facing a lot of teams that are stacked like that, so it's really no excuse. We've got to go out there and get the job done. We didn't today."

The Indians just need solid innings at this point. Kazmir gave them a few, but he threw a bad one in there in the process and it just happened to be in the first. But Scott Kazmir's outing is not why this team lost that game.

And their offense isn't either.

Make no mistake about this one. James Shields is the reason that the Tribe lost. James Shields is a really good pitcher. The way this team has been swinging, they've simply been searching for a big hit. They haven't been in a rut or a slump, they just need a hit to open it up.

They got him in the first, and then Shields went into work-horse mode.

"James comes off his arguably worst start of the year," Royals manager Ned Yost said, "and has arguably his best start of the year. He just literally put us on his back today and carried us."

And that's what he can be for the Royals at times, a work-horse. A guy who does put the team on his back and carries them through a game like the one they had against the Indians on Wednesday. Two hits in the first, none until Shields came out for the ninth inning and gave up back-to-back singles before getting pulled? You can't really kill the offense for this game. It is frustrating and maddening, but sometimes you run into a good pitcher.

As tough as it is to do in a race like this one right now, you just have to tip your cap and move on. The Indians were in a position where they had to beat the Royals' ace because their offense couldn't get it done against Jeremy Guthrie. They need to hold themselves accountable for Tuesday's loss and lament on that, because THAT is where you were going to win the series, not in a game that James Shields was simply too good to handle.

Tito probably put it perfectly though. This team is neck and neck with the Indians. They are pretty much equal. But as Michael Bourn said, it isn't hard because they're in it, it is hard because the Indians are in it. Tito knows that it isn't about beating the Royals, it is about winning games, regardless of who, and that now the focus is on Chicago.

"They're a good team. They're right where we are," Francona said of the Royals. "They're fighting like crazy like we are. They're a real good team. We hung on in the first game, and then they beat us twice. So now we've got to go play well tomorrow [in Chicago]."

Here's the way I look at it. The Indians are sitting at 77 wins, as are most of the other teams in the race. If not 77, then 78 Tampa sits with a few less losses because they've got a few less games played. There's 17 games left, at least for the Indians. 14 of those games are against the bottom three teams in the American League, four of which are against a team that is going to lose 100 games, mark it down. Of course the Indians need to help account for some of those 100.

But when you look at last year's wild card teams, 93 wins was the number. Tampa Bay missed the cut at 90 and Los Angeles at 89, everyone else was way outside the race to matter. This year, it's different. 93-95 is probably going to win the AL Central and AL West. The Rays and Orioles and Yankees are all playing each other. The Orioles, Rays and Yankees are all also playing the Red Sox. And while the Indians are playing the bottom three in the AL, the Royals still have six games against Detroit and Texas.

The cards are stacked in the Indians favor. If they can win 13 out of these final 17 games, they can probably sleep safely that they'll be in the playoffs as a Wild Card. That puts them at 90 wins. That's unlikely. If they can win 10 out of 17? I still think they'd have as good chance as any, even with 87 wins. The Rangers and Rays play four games against each other. If one team takes control, that's cool, but that means the other one is faltering. If they ride even, that means neither is making significant progress.

It is no lose situation for the Indians, as long as they treat these next 17 games as if they must win all of them. They won't win all of them, you can guarantee that.

Random Notes...

Don't look now but Jason Kipnis is nearing 30 steals with his team leading 27th homer yesterday. Kipnis had one of the four hits in the game, coming in the ninth.

Michael Brantley continues to deliver with two outs as he did it again for the Indians lone runs in the first inning. He's a .356 hitter with runners in scoring position and a .290 hitter with two outs. Those numbers are unconscious. He's .339 with two outs and runners in scoring position. There's only a few guys who are better among the players who have 25 or more RBI in that situation and most of them are All-Star players.

That being said, the team RISP was 1-for-7, not that they had many opportunities between the first and ninth innings.

Excellent save from Bryan Shaw, who did what he could to save the game and keep it as close as it was for a few innings. He came in and took care of the fifth inning, despite Kazmir putting some guys on to start out the frame. He struck out three and went an inning and a third more. Then Rich Hill came in and did what he does best, give up runs.

Oh and Clay Rapada pitched a scoreless inning, so that happened....?

One walk by Carlos Santana. Lack of patience is a little frustrating, since Shields only threw 108 pitches in the eight innings he completed. But, hey, they swung early on in the first and had results.

[RANDOM RUNDOWN]

So we're wondering what is wrong with **Zach McAllister** right? Have been wondering since he returned from that finger injury that has pretty much derailed the great season that he was having before the injury. Z-Mac has not been the same, and it has been noticeable, at least to me. Not the same pitcher, not fair to down him really. Because something isn't right.

[Mickey Callaway says it is the mechanics](#)

"Mechanically, he was kind of spinning off a little bit," Callaway said on Wednesday morning. "The last few outings, I don't think he's had a great feel for his mechanics. His changeup hasn't been very good, he's been kind of peeling off toward first base and leaving balls up, and it's kind of cost him. It's just a bad three starts mechanically."

Changeup eh? Not the fastball? The fastball you just throw right? The changeup and the offspeed pitches, you gotta adjust the fingers right?

Sounds like a head issue. He could be favoring things. He could be not sure how to handle how to throw his secondary pitches because he doesn't want to injure his finger again. Maybe he is a little tentative to pitch as effectively as he was early on because of it. None of that would be a shock to me. Callaway suggested he could be over-throwing, but to me, that doesn't seem to be the issue if he isn't having major issues with his fastball.

Either way, he isn't the same pitcher, even when things are going right, even before he breaks down like he did against the Royals on Tuesday. Something isn't quite right and him and Callaway need to start to get to work to figure it out.

The Indians have Blake Wood on their roster and on Tuesday [he got a shot to pitch against his former team](#). Wood says he feels good and it would be hard to not believe him after he hit 100 mph a few times on the radar gun.

"You feel stronger," Wood said, "because you've had more time than you've ever had to work out, get stronger and work on the stuff you wanted to work on that you didn't have time to do during the season, to feel right mechanically. It's that, plus the new ligament."

Josh Tomlin jokingly wondered why his new ligament hasn't resulted him throwing more than his normal 88 mph. Wood though, has always been a hard thrower, just not THIS hard. The problem though is his wildness. He's going to have to harness that stuff and dial back his velocity to get a better handle on his pitches, because that's still an issue. Wood knows that though and he's ready to start focusing on those aspects of the game because he knows his stuff is ready to go.

"You want to get physically where you want to be first, get your stuff back," Wood said. "And then you can work from there. Right now, I feel like, 'All right, my stuff is where I want it to be.' Now I need to start doing other things better, like controlling the running game, working on command. That's going to happen with getting to pitch more."

Wood is going to factor into this bullpen equation next year. I'm not saying he's a serious

contender by any means, but he's on the 40-man, had been by virtue of his 60-day disabled list status, and the Indians have brought him all the way back. They didn't do that for him to pitch in a few games during September.

They did it for 2014. And Wood is going to be a part of the competition for a spot. With a blazing fastball, he's going to definitely factor into it. For him to be a player in it though, he's going to have to find some control.

Another guy who may factor into the 2014 plans is **Jose Ramirez**, as [he's leaving quite the impression on the club right now](#) with his energy and high-motor style of play. You can almost bet he'll factor into the battle, even if the Indians don't end up dealing Asdrubal Cabrera.

"It's always fun to watch someone who plays with a lot of confidence," he said, "and plays almost as if they're playing in their backyard. It's certainly not something that you teach, but he doesn't view this level to be really significantly better than anywhere else he's ever played."

That came from Ross Atkins, who said he plays as if he doesn't fear making a mistake. It isn't recklessness, as he isn't playing as if he doesn't care about making mistakes, but that he doesn't think he will. The poise is definitely awesome and his speed is a huge tool right now for this team to have. But he's gotta fine-tune the glove depending on the position he's playing and he really is still just very young. The two hits on Monday were nice, but we need to not get ahead of ourselves. He's still young and very unproven and has already skipped a huge level in the development of a player.

It's hard not to get excited to see a guy like that being trusted so much to not only jump a level, but to do so when the team is in the middle of a race for the postseason. You can find a guy who has some speed, if you wanted, you would have Zeke Carrera back on the roster.

But the Indians see something in him and obviously feel strongly about what he brings to the club, and that's why he's here and getting an opportunity to make an impact.

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