

The B-List: 4/24

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Tuesday, April 24 2007 7:00 PM -

Beating Johan Santana is right up there with bank errors in your favor and free beer. And that's exactly what the Indians did last night. In today's B-List, Buff hits on the big win ... noting Fausto's exceptional performance, Josh Barfield's superb defense, the resurgence of Joe Borowski, and the Indians improved approach at the plate. Enjoy.



FINAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R	H	E
Indians (10-7)					1							0

Twins (11-9)				0							0	0
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W: Carmona (1-1) L: J. Santana (3-2) S: Borowski (8)

Hundreds (nay, *thousands*) of imaginary readers asked me, “Steve, you were wrong about Borowski being an effective closer and wrong about the team not being able to play good baseball: how does it feel to be so wrong?”

How does it feel? You may consider checking the standings at this point. It feels @#\$*ing *fantastic*, that’s how it feels.

1) ¡Fausto!

Imagine this dialogue:

Fausto Carmona: I would really like to win a game and break my losing streak.

Team: Don’t worry, you’ll get your chance right away.

Carmona: Who is the opponent?

Team: Minnesota.

Carmona: Oh, a very good team. A playoff team.

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Team: In the Metrodome.

Carmona: Oh. A very good team with a significant home field advantage, with artificial turf that neutralizes my best weapon, inducing ground balls.

Team: Against Johan Santana.

Carmona: Oh, my.

Team: I guarantee you will win if Casey Blake and Mike Rouse produce two-out run-scoring hits!

Carmona: What time does the next bus to Buffalo leave?

Well, screw that dialogue, because this is not your father's Fausto Carmona! (Admittedly, my father did not have a lot of Fausto Carmoni in my youth.) Whether it's Carmona having Exceptional Mental Toughness or him having his "A" stuff or the Twins' offense being pretty lame or a combination of the three, Fausto Carmona was tremendous last night. In 7 2/3 innings, Carmona allowed 6 hits (2 doubles, no homers) and two walks en route to giving up 2 runs and outdueling the aforementioned Santana. More importantly, he was in control of the game, and used his sinker to induce 13 ground ball outs. Although he only struck out 2 (remember, Fausto's never missed a lot of bats), his only real misstep was in the 4th inning when he walked Mike Cuddyer on five pitches. Before that, Joe Mauer had doubled, but Joe Mauer is very good. After that, Justin Morneau drove in a run with a single, but Justin Morneau drives in a lot of runs. For me, the only real problem was the walk to Cuddyer, which smacked of focus drift, because then he scored on a fly ball by Torii Hunter.

I bring up this sequence because, really, it is the four-man sequence that is important when playing the Twins. It's not totally dissimilar to facing the current Indians offense, really.

But Carmona was great. Huzzah!

2) Snappiness at the Ball Yard

Johan Santana is a very fine pitcher, possibly the best in the majors. And truthfully, he was pretty good last night, also giving up 6 hits, only 1 walk, but recording 7 strikeouts.

Santana really only had two problems last night:

a) Travis Hafner is really, really strong

b) Ryan Garko got a timely hit

However, it was the response to item (a) that raised my eyebrows: Santana “missed inside” on the next pitch after Hafner homered in the first and hit Victor Martinez. Okay, you know what, I don’t have a problem with that. Before you try to tell me that he missed, let me point out that Santana has exceptional control, a low walk total, and hit like 5 guys in his previous 450+ innings. He hit Martinez. Be serious.

But as I say, you know what, that’s Old School, I can handle that. He didn’t throw at Victor’s head and Vic’s okay, take your base, we move on.

However, after giving up a run-scoring double to Casey Blake ...

... let us pause here. Breathe in, breathe out. Phew.

Okay, after a run-scoring double to Casey Blake, Santana threw Hafner a strike, then hit him, too. Whether this was a lingering effect of the first-inning bomb (and it was not a cheap home run: I don't believe Travis Hafner could hit a cheap home run if you took away his bat and gave him a handball glove), or the humiliation of a run-scoring double to Casey Blake ...

... that still gets me. All right, I'm okay now.

Whatever the factor, Santana hit Travis Hafner, and it was not a "pitch that got away from him." The umpire warned Santana without officially warning him, which appears to be Baseball Code for "Okay, Cleveland can hit a Minnesota batter before I start ejecting people," although Indians pitchers focused more on winning than Getting Even. But I thought it a little extreme that Santana would go to the extra effort of hitting a second guy.

As C.C. Sabathia once said, "I hate those guys." And although he didn't mean "hate" in a physical assault sense, there is a real rivalry between the two clubs.

3) The Alex Cole Era

Anyone else remember Alex Cole? The smallish, ostensibly-fast outfielder who we moved the fences back for to usher in a new era of speed-n-defense who was going to be the leadoff firestarter? The guy who could steal some bases, except he wasn't on them frequently enough

to make a tinker's dam worth of difference? After leaving the Indians, he went to Minnesota.

He's still there.

No, not the literal Alex Cole (shoot, given his extracurricular activities, I can't tell you Alex Cole is definitely still ALIVE), but many figurative Alex Coles, running around and being scrappy and not actually generating offense because of that pesky requirement that you have to get on base to do so. Seriously, I gave you the 3-6 above, which is, admittedly, a pretty nice little stretch, depending on how seriously you take Mike Cuddyer as a cleanup hitter or Torii Hunter as legitimate .300 hitter. And Jason Kubel, the #7 hitter, is a stathead favorite (who had a nice 3-for-4 performance last night).

However, the first two "table setters" are Jason Tyner, a man who, a thousand bats into his career, is considering hitting a home run (power is not crucial to leading off, but he's not a very good hitter, either) and Nick Punto, who may be a pirhana, but is also a fungus. He is a pirhungus. Jason Bartlett may hit someday, but that day is not today. Alexi Casilla aspires to be fraudulent. And the Twins' answer to Mike Rouse is Luis Rodriguez.

This means that you have a four-man consecutive stretch of Virtually No Offense. Every night. Not good.

By the way, the five players above combined to go 1-for-14 with a walk. Although it is true that Carmona was very good, it is also true that for stretches of the game, it was not possible to evaluate this accurately.

4) Plate approach revisited

Last time I broached this topic, my kindly old editor (which I do not have) glanced at the item and wrote in the intro teaser that I was questioning the approach the Indians' batters were using in taking the first pitch a lot. In actuality, I'm a hard-core, knee-jerk, stat-head, OBP-is-life disciple. I love plate discipline. I covet plate discipline. I ridicule a lack thereof. Plate Discipline Uber Alles!

To this end, it is with GREAT JOY that I report that this same approach was used against the Mightiest Pitcher Alive. In the first six innings, the Indians swung at three first pitches, and one was a run-scoring groundout by Trot Nixon. (This doesn't count the first-pitch plunking of Martinez: I'm not considering that something Martinez was controlling.) We got a little trigger-happy in the seventh, but making Santana work (109 pitches in 7 innings) and getting to see a lot of his pitch action is a great approach. Sure, it brings in the Evil Minnesota Bullpen instead, but I'll take my chances.

5) Dee-fense!

Josh Barfield pretty much advertised last night why he was acquired. Although he took an 0-for-4 collar and is still getting used to American League pitching, Barfield made two sparkling defensive plays last night. The easy one to identify was the shot off Joe Mauer's bat in the 8th with a runner on first. Barfield teleported to his right, backhanded the ball, materialized on his knee, and threw to first for the out. Read this aloud: "What a play!" That's how long the play took.

He made another nice play in the first, though, also off the bat of Mauer: instead of trying to whirl and create a lot of moving parts, Barfield was able to tag Nick Punto on his way by, then throw to first for the double play. It wasn't SPECTACULAR!!!, but it was a good play. Beats having Ron Belliard standing in short right field.

Jason Michaels also threw out Torii Hunter trying to stretch a single into a double in the

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second: I had forgotten he had arms.

6) Mighty Rouse!

A nod to [Paul Cousineau](#) for that one, but congratulations to Mike Rouse for ending his season-long hitless streak with an RBI single in the 8th.

In case you were wondering, the left-handed Rouse started at shortstop against Johan Santana because Santana not only owns Jhonny Peralta, he owns his children, grandchildren, and all their collective pets. Seriously, Peralta has struck out approximately 75% of his plate appearances against Santana. Oy.

7) Ho Hum Dept.

Travis Hafner hit a home run.

Aaron Fultz pitched a perfect third of an inning.

Joe Borowski recorded his league-leading 8th save while making me sweat by giving up a (meaningless, but I have a weak closer-watching constitution) run in the ninth. (He did, however, get both Justin Morneau and Torii Hunter to whiff swinging, so his ball does **something**, although that something is not “go fast.”)

8) The gleam, men

By the way, a tip of the cap to Eric Wedge for pinch-running Shin-Soo Choo for Trot Nixon in the 8th: I'm not sure Nixon would have scored on Rouse's hit, and may have been tossed out at second on Michaels' groundout. Also, kudos for insisting that Choo NOT TRY TO STEAL.

And here's the thing: last season, a rotten loss tended to linger into a crummy stretch. The bullpen would blow a game and the whole thing would snowball into a ten-game stretch of sub-.500 baseball. We'd still make the same mental errors, we'd still throw the same bad pitches, we'd still run ourselves out of innings. And by golly, things aren't perfect here, what with Hafner's baserunning and a series of preposterous throws from both catchers over the weekend. The team still does some things consistently poorly, or at least well inconsistently.

But you know what? After the incredible loss to the Yankees Thursday, Borowski showed what a Veteran Closer does. The bullpen yawned and collectively threw a million shutout innings. The defense has looked sharper (perhaps facing Santana and knowing two runs might be all you get has something to do with that). This team ... does ... not ... *feel* ... like last year's.

9) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

I cannot be deterred by a stretch of solid play. Mark Shapiro was seen touring office buildings in the Cleveland area, clandestinely replacing all the regular coffee with decaf. Of course, you would have noticed this already, so you know it is false. And thank God. Fire Eric Wedge.