

The B-List: 7/3

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Buff puts it best in his open to today's Independence Day B-List when he says "Man, that's just a good old-fashioned excellent ballgame." And was it ever. The Tribe defeated the Tigers by a score of 5-4 in 11 innings thanks to late home runs by Ben Francisco and Casey Blake. Find me a better Indians column than The B-List! I dare you! It's the 4th of July! The Tribe is 51-32 with a three game lead! It's all good! **FINAL**

Indians (51-32)	1	0	2
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Tigers (47-34)	0	2	1
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W: Mastny (6-2) L: Capellan (0-1) S: Borowski (25)

Man, that's just a good old-fashioned excellent ballgame.

1) Just what the doctor ordered (although not any *more*, either)

After Paul Byrd threw two straight clunkers in mid-June that raised his ERA by a full run and featured at least as many runs as innings pitched, the natural response was to panic. This is already a pitcher not known for dominating stuff, injured in the past, and on the wrong side of 35 (for a pitcher: for a columnist, he is on the right side of 35): to add Generic Cleveland Sports Angst to the mix seemed needlessly cruel. It's never been all that clear how Paul Byrd ends up being a pretty good pitcher at the end of the year: he throws gunk, they hit the gunk, they just don't seem to score enough runs to beat the gunk, which sounds vaguely like a game show from the '70s.

One of the other problems with having Byrd in the rotation was that after May 20th he hadn't completed the seventh inning, and had only gotten into the 7th

once. For a team that prides itself on wearing out the opposing staff and getting to the middle relievers, the reverse prospect is just a frightening to Cleveland as it is for their opponents.

After the second clunker, though, Byrd went 6 2/3 at Washington (3 ER) and 7 at home against Oakland (3 ER) before starting last night's game in Detroit. Although he did give up his first unintentional walk in over 8 1/2 full games worth of innings (although walking the .369-hitting Magglio Ordonez is not entirely an act without merit), Byrd scattered 6 hits over 7 full innings of work, giving up 3 ER once again (albeit with an unearned one as well). This was actually only the third time this season Byrd has given up fewer hits than innings pitched. Although one hit was a solo homer to Gary Sheffield and another was a double to Carlos Guillen, for the most part, Byrd was effective, although he was bailed out of more trouble in the fifth by a combination of poor decision-making by Sheffield, a nice throw by Jason Michaels, and a very bad call by the home-plate umpire. Still, his 6th and 7th innings, innings in which we might have exposed a scary pitcher to the powerful Detroit lineup had he not recovered, were hitless and walkless, allowing only one baserunner on an HBP. This included a 7-pitch 7th

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Byrd was a little more willing to work outside the zone against the free-swinging Tigers than he was the patient A's, throwing 68 strikes in 104 pitches. The bottom line is that he got a

Quality Start, his third straight, against one of the top offenses in the American League, in their ballpark with over 40,000 fans (it's listed as "99.2% full," so I assume it was a sellout). If you asked me right now if Paul Byrd was in my playoff rotation, I'd have to say no, but he's sure in my regular-season rotation. Quality innings are good.

2) Get me a rewrite, this script is too far-fetched

In the past four games, Ben Francisco clubbed a game-winning home run in the bottom of the ninth of a 2-1 win, went 3-for-3 including a second home run and two other RBI hits, did not play once, and merely doubled and scored in the other game. So when Francisco was called on to pinch-hit for Jason Michaels in the top of the 8th with the Tribe down 4-3, it was too much to ask for him to shoulder the hero's mantle once again.

On paper, it may have looked like an odd move: Michaels had gotten the start against the left-hander Nate Robertson, who bears an unfortunate resemblance to the meek cuckold in "Dodgeball," so with the righty Chad Durbin called in, it wasn't unreasonable for Michaels to

yield to another hitter. It just seemed very non-Wedgian for that batter to be the right-handed Francisco instead of the left-handed Trot Nixon.

Francisco drove the first pitch he saw over the left field wall to tie the game.

In the video freely available on mlb.com, the Detroit home announcers seem to have a hard time believing this was actually happening. There's a simple explanation for this: it was pretty unbelievable. Had someone submitted this script, it would likely have been rejected as a fantasy, or the role of Francisco would be given to a miraculous eight-year-old boy with an invisible extraterrestrial friend. In the latter case, I would eventually end up seeing the movie with my son.

So it was nice to see the "advance screening" real time.

(To prove he is human, Francisco struck out in the tenth. Rumors that he is “holding back” in order to avoid suspicion are hereby squelched.)

3) Casey in the Clutch

When Grady Sizemore led off the ninth with a walk, Casey Blake sacrificed him to second. This is a sensible move: regardless of your opinions of the sacrifice, Blake certainly did his job, and I'd be surprised if there weren't a few Tribe fans out there saying to themselves, “Well, I like the bunt because it isn't Casey grounding into a another double play or painfully watching strike three while Sizemore languishes on first.” Peralta and Hafner were made to look moderately ridiculous to make the point excessively moot, but the point remains that as valuable as Blake has been, his name is not synonymous in Indians Lore with rising to the occasion, fairly or not. (*Sotto voce: “Fairly.”*)

So in the 11th, there were probably a few fans looking ahead towards Peralta or Martinez having a shot at reliever Jose Capellan, who had more been cast aside by the Brewers than actually failing. On Capellan's second pitch, Blake followed the Francisco Method and homered to left, and not on a cheap fly, either: that ball was *bombed*

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Of course, it bears mentioning that Byrd's single unearned run came as a result of Blake's ninth error of the season ... but I'd say he made up for that. (Blake also had a second hit and scored on Peralta's double in the third after working a walk from an 0-2 count, so it was a nice night for Blake at the plate all around.)

4) Anything you can do, I can do more awkwardly

Inspired by Rafael Perez' wondrous escape from a bases-loaded no-out jam the night before, Tom Mastny pitched the tenth with a certain lack of aplomb that was disarming, as well as being extremely stressful. Curtis Granderson came with a couple feet of ending the game on Mastny's second pitch, the unfortunate victim of Franklin Gutierrez playing deep and being athletic. After a pair of singles, Mastny wild-pitched both runners into scoring position before prudently walking Magglio Ordonez.

However, Mastny induced Carlos Guillen to pop out to third on a 2-1 count, then got Ivan Rodriguez to ground back to Mastny, whose catch was less athletic than Perez' the night before, but whose throw was similarly bloopy and inaccurate. (It got the job done: more positive things cannot be said about it.) The groundout followed a series of foul balls, one of which was so deep into the right field seats that it would have been a grand slam with a bit more Coriolis force.

Tom Mastny now sports a 6-2 record, giving him the 4th-most on the team. To help illustrate exactly how worthless a measure of relief pitchers a “win” is, consider that Mastny has 6 wins, and Oldberto Hernandez had 3. Mastny has almost lowered his ERA to 5, while Hernandez’ remains frozen for all time at 6.23. Win-loss records are already dodgy for starters, but for relievers, the stat might as well not exist.

5) Ho Hum Dept.

Rafael Betancourt threw 21 strikes in 28 pitches to complete 2 perfect innings of relief. Yawn. He didn’t even strike anyone out. What a schmoe.

6) Best use of an egg-timer by an umpire

There was some drama with Betancourt on the mound: Raffy's a notoriously slow and deliberate worker. If Betancourt were to start, games of 4 hours would be commonplace. He's That Slow. Well, there is a rule that says that once a pitcher gets the ball, he has 12 seconds to make the next delivery. It's a rarely-enforced rule, sort of like stepping out of the box excessively or being forced to stand inside the back line of the batter's box, but it is a rule, and Jim Leyland called the umpires on it. Betancourt was actually determined to be out of compliance at least once, getting a ball called without throwing a pitch.

If this bothered Betancourt, it was hard to tell. Raffy's face is about as expressive as a freshly-Botoxed starlet. However, Eric Wedge has certainly had no Botox treatments, as it was pretty easy to tell he was upset by Leyland's gamesmanship.

Frankly, if Betancourt can remain effective while pitching an inning in which I'd miss something if I made ramen during the inning, I'm all for it. I can't blame Leyland for trying ... but that's largely because it didn't actually work.

7) A radical approach to souvenirs

I would not object to Kelly Shoppach handing out baseball cards. I would love for him to sign some autographs. If he wants to get creative, he can hand out Dust Busters before the game as a play on his nickname, "Shop Vac."

But please stop throwing the bat into the stands. Please. Use a batting glove. Use some pine tar. Superglue the bat to your hands. But stop throwing the bat into the crowd. You're going to hurt somebody. Sheesh.

8) Sit down and shut up

After Mastny's adventurous 10th, Joe Borowski decided that he would take a radically different approach. He threw two strikes to Sean Casey that he watched and one more that he missed. He then threw one past a statuesque Craig Monroe, got him to foul one off, and threw one by him for strike three. He did miss twice to Brandon Inge, but then threw a pitch that Inge popped weakly to short right to end the game.

Two three-pitch strikeouts and a popup later, Borowski had his 25th save. Not just a 25th save, but a brutal, mean-spirited, blow-away save. No, he didn't suddenly transform himself into Joe Nathan, but ... well, that's a nice save.

9) Nice hose!

Jason Michaels threw Gary Sheffield out at home to end the fifth after Sheffield tried to score from second on a two-out single with the bases loaded. This prevented a big inning from swallowing the Tribe before they could mount a Franciscan comeback. It was also utter nonsense, as Sheffield was actually safe. Still, it was a nice throw.

10) A word about the umpire

Had home plate umpire Derryl Cousins had his back turned to the game and called the game by virtue of a set of tarot cards, the results would hardly have been distinguishable. The only truly reliable method of telling whether a pitch would be called a strike is if a pitch in the exact same location had been called a ball the previous time. It was ... weird.