

The B-List: 3/31

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Monday, March 31 2008 7:00 PM -

The B-List triumphantly returns! Or, at least, it returns, and the Indians were triumphant. In recapping the Tribe's 10-8 victory over the Chicago Evil Sox, Buff touches on strange casting decisions by the Baseball Gods, including C.C. Sabathia as Not Ace, Jhonny Peralta as Not Shortstop, and Casey Blake as ... Not Casey Blake?

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W: Betancourt (1-0) | L: Dotel (0-1) | S: Borowski (1)



Okay, look: I happen to know that a couple of readers live in the Chicago area. I would like to believe that at some point this column will be read by fans of other teams as well, so perhaps a White Sox fan is reading this.

Now, I grew up listening to Joe Tait, who was quite a bit of a homer, and Herb Score, who was studiously not.

I understand the appeal of having announcers who are happy with the fortunes of the team they are covering.

I am not going to tell you that there is only one way to broadcast a game, and that This Way is The Way, or anything so grandiose as that.

I just have one simple question:

How on earth do you put up with Hawk Harrelson as your announcer? Send me email at buff@theclevelandfan.com with either:

- a) rationalizations as to why Harrelson's incessant whining about calls and shrewish one-sidedness are tolerable
- b) coping mechanisms you use during White Sox broadcasts

162 games of *that* and I might lose my ability to cognate.

1) Establishing a lack of precedent

Normally item (1) talks at length about the performance of the Cleveland starter, in that generally speaking it is the single greatest factor in explaining what happened in any given game. This standard will likely carry through for most of the rest of the columns this season, as it's served me well to this point.

However, yesterday's game provides me with an opportunity to address a different subject, one near and dear to my spleen. After going down meekly in the first in order on seven pitches to former nemesis Mark Buehrle, the Indians batted around in a seven-run second inning: two of the three outs were made on the basepaths, and every batter reached base (albeit Asdrubal Cabrera only did so by beating out a double-play relay throw). Except one: Casey Blake.

In fact, Franklin Gutierrez has a spectacular day at the plate, reaching base all four times he came to the plate and hitting a three-run homer to score himself in the 2nd, but because he is followed in the order by Blake, scored only two runs.

In each of the 4

th

and 6

th

innings, Blake heroically made outs with Gutierrez on first.

In the 8th, he did not.

Given the choice of facing a white-hot Gutierrez with two outs and runners on first and second, formerly-talented reliever Octavio Dotel decided that discretion, or at least inaccuracy, was the better part of valor and walked Gutierrez on four pitches in order to face Blake. This was not only prudent, but expected.

After all, Gutierrez was 3-for-3 at that point, including the 3 RBI, and Blake was, well, Blake. Blake came into the game hitting negative-oh-forty-three with runners in scoring position for his career, and a potentially imaginary number (.063i) with said runners and two outs.

In a tie game with two outs and the bases loaded, it is hard to imagine a hitter in the Indians' lineup that you'd rather face than Casey Blake.

The good news for Dotel is that Blake's drive to left was not hit well enough to be the back-breaking grand slam it could have been. The bad news is that when the ball hits the wall four feet short of said grand slam, your vertebrae still have cracks.

I don't expect either to ride Blake all year for this, nor do I expect him to remain free from criticism. After all, when all was said and done, he still made a questionable play on a "single" under his glove and was 0-for-3 up to that point, but it needs to be said explicitly: we won the game because Casey Blake got a Big Hit with RISP and Two Out.

Huzzah!

2) Large and abdicating charge

C.C. Sabathia is our Staff Ace and his position as Opening Day starter is well-established. He won the Cy Young last year, so it could be argued that he was the best starter in the majors last season.

He wasn't very good yesterday.

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Look, there are elements of success here: after giving up a two-run shot to Jim Thome in the first, he struck out Paul Konerko and Jermaine Dye swinging at 1-2 pitches: of the eight pitches thrown, only Konerko so much as made contact with one (fouling it off). He collected another swinging K in the second, two more in the third, and one in each of the fourth and fifth.

The 4th

th

and 5th

th

innings were

1-2-3

affairs, and he finished with 66 strikes in 100 pitches.

However, if one of those strikes was anything but a fastball, I must have been getting coffee at that point. I think that, 500-some HRs later, we have established that Jim Thome can hit a fastball, pretty much independently of arm angle or side or velocity. Jim Thome can hit. And he can

reasonably be described as "moderately strong," having approximately nine hundred pounds of muscle mass on his torso alone.

Don't throw him a two-strike fastball.

It's not a good plan.

Which, of course, was kind of the problem: Sabathia couldn't throw anything else for a consistent strike. He got some help from a weird Escherian strike zone and some free swings from the White Sox (notably Alexei Ramirez), but with a 0-2 count against Thome in the 3rd

, Sabathia proceeded to throw three straight balls before giving in and Thome's second two-run jack of the day ascended into the partly clouds.

Finally, in the 6th, Sabathia walked Dye on five pitches (four straight balls) and walked Ramirez, which borders on the inconceivable, in that Alexei Ramirez can no more hit a baseball than digest one. One run-scoring single later, Sabathia's day ended with an

unsightly 8.44 ERA, a 1.69 WHIP, and a opposing SLG of A Lot. (O

f the six hits Sabathia allowed, fully 4 of them were for extra bases.)

He didn't necessarily deserve not to win the game as his bullpen coughed up the lead, but he didn't objectively "deserve" to win it, either.

3) Everybody hits!

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And pretty much in the second inning: every Cleveland hitter, including Kelly Shoppach, who replaced Victor Martinez in the third, got a hit, except Jason Michaels (who walked and scored in the second) and Asdrubal Cabrera (who beat out the relay to keep the inning going and scored on Gutierrez' homer). Martinez actually singled twice in the second: although he may miss time with an injured hamstring, his hits-per-inning-played pace puts him in line to shatter the all-time hits record with 1458, eclipsing Ichiro Suzuki by approximately one career.

In all, the Indians had 15 baserunners, ten of whom scored and one of whom crumpled in a heap, leaving only 4 on base, only one of whom was in scoring position. In contrast, the Sox left 9 on base, 5 in scoring position.

4) Brought to you by Federal Express

When it absolutely, positively has to be somewhere other than where you intended it to go.

Seriously, what the hell is going on with Jhonny Peralta? Was he intoxicated? Did he change his own oil before the game and forget to use the soap with the pumice in it?

Has he developed a knuckleball?

Great googly moogly, that's some pretty flippin' bad shortstop that young man was playing.

In the 7th inning with two men on, Peralta made a nice, rangy play behind second base to scoop up A.J. Pierzynski's grounder. All right! Then he proceeded to throw it so far from first baseman Ryan Garko that Garko looked like Will Ferrell in "Blades of Glory"; trying to catch the damned thing. He did, and huzzahs

all around, but that was awful.

In the 8th inning with the bases loaded, Peralta scooped up Orlando Cabrera's routine hopper, threw it home, and completely bamboozled the umpire into calling Joe Crede out when he was no such thing. Although I'm totally in favor of umpire bamboozling in our favor, that was a wretched throw.

Finally, on the ersatz double play grounder that ended that inning, Peralta was no more likely to

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throw out Jim Thome (Jim Thome! With the speed of an ice sculpture!) at first that he was to ... well, shoot, I can't think of anything less likely than Jhonny Peralta making a quick, accurate throw yesterday. Split an atom with his earlobe? Turn lead into gold?
Not swing at a slider six inches out of the strike zone?
I'm at a loss here.

Bad day at Black Rock.

5) The check's in the mail

I would say that the home plate umpire was clearly biased in favor of the Indians, except I watched Travis Hafner get struck out on three pitches in the first inning, one of which MIGHT have caught the corner. Some of the strikes called yesterday were ... "unorthodox." Occam suggests that Gerry Davis simply had a Peraltan day behind the plate.

6) It came from the bullpen!

With two runners on and only one out, Jensen Lewis was summoned a couple batters too late to face right-handers Joe Crede and Juan Uribe. He proceeded to throw scattershot balls in random directions that so flummoxed the hitters that they swung at balls eight, nine, and ten to each strike out swinging. I am not certain what Lewis throws, but it certainly wasn't anything hittable, and he did a very fine job.

In *that* inning.

Thus endeth the "good" portion of the relief pitching.

After this, Lewis gave up two singles and ceded to Raffy Perez, who got Jim Thome to Not Homer, which was a big improvement for the Indians Monday. Instead, Jason Michaels bailed

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out Perez with an excellent catch and brought right-handed Paul Konerko (and Jermaine Dye to follow) to the plate.

7) We interrupt this terror for a Managerial Head-Scratcher

Raffy Betancourt, yes?

8) We now return you to the terrifying bullpen already in progress

Perez gave up an opposite-field double to Konerko to tie the score, yielded to Betancourt, and the Indians escaped the inning with no further damage (one single, but no runs).

Betancourt immediately came out in the 8th and began sucking large igneous formations.

A first-pitch double to Crede put him at second, where Uribe's 0-2 double advanced him all the way to ... third. (We'll touch on this later.) After intentionally walking Nick Swisher (representing 4 of the 7 balls Betancourt threw, compared to 20 strikes: I am a fan of Raffy Betancourt), Betancourt induced the two ground balls mentioned above to escape the 8th

.

Then Joe Borowski came in gave up a homer, walked Pierzynski on 5 pitches, and went 3-2 to the tying run at the plate before notching his first save. Which, with Joe Borowski, qualifies as relatively stress-free.

9) Unsung hero

Jason Michaels isn't a very good hitter, and generally speaking isn't a great left fielder, either,

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but he made two plays that saved a multitude of runs. His catch on Thome's shot to left in the 7th

was very good, but just as impressive was his reaction to Uribe's double, which fooled Crede to such an extent that Crede advanced from second to third on a double to the wall.

I'm not sure a lot of guys make that play.

Nice one, Jason.

10) Pronk quasi-smash!

Well, it was a double off the wall, but it was off a left-hander, albeit one who throws like Paul Byrd. Seriously, did Buehrle hit 90 on the gun yesterday?

Hafner is on pace for 364 strikeouts this season. Admittedly, so is Ryan Garko.

11) Schadenfreude meets Reality

Once Justin Verlander ended his no-hitter bid in the 5th against Kansas City and was knocked out of the game in the 6th

th

after his bullpen gave up his two inherited runs,

Cleveland

fans licked their chops at the prospect of the thin Tiger bullpen having to win the game.

They almost did.

Pooh-pooh the Grillis, Seays, and Lopezes of the world all you want: the fact is, the bullpen pitched 4 scoreless innings until Bautista gave up a run in his second inning of work. I'm not saying that I expect

Detroit

's bullpen to be a net strength this season, but I will say this: they sure pitched better than OUR vaunted 'pen did yesterday.

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However, multiple huzzahs to the Royals, who look like a better team under Trey Hillman, and got some pretty fine relief pitching of their own. Could be a fun season.