

The B-List: 4/4-4/6

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Sunday, April 06 2008 7:00 PM -

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ... Clifton Phifer Lee was Buff's favorite player. Google "Steve Buffum favorite player" and you can see for yourself. While the love affair has subsided (mostly due to Lee's inability to get out of the sixth inning last year), Buff is starting to get those warm feelings back for Cliffie after yesterdays solid start in a crucial game for the Indians. As he does every Monday for us, Buff takes a look back at the weekend series in the Monday B-List. **FINAL SCORE**

Indians (2-2)	1	0	0	1
Athletics (2-3)	0	1	0	3

W: Duchscherer (1-0) L: Byrd (0-1)

FINAL SCORE

Indians (2-3)	0	0	0	0
Athletics (3-3)	0	2	0	0

W: Eveland (1-0) L: Sabathia (0-1)

FINAL SCORE

Indians (3-3) (3	rd	1GB KC/CHW)
Athletics (3-4)	0	0	0	0

W: Lee (1-0) L: Blanton (0-2) S: Borowski (2)



Cliff Lee is not the best pitcher in the league, but he is one of the best offensive players in the league. Do you

1) Requiem for a Favorite Player

I can no longer claim Cliff Lee as my Favorite Player: I was frustrated enough with him over a poor season-and-a-half to fire him, and it would be hypocritical to take him back now that he's strung together one fine start in a row. It would be dishonest, and, truthfully, he did some of the same things that drove me crazy in the first place despite the superior result. As Thomas Wolfe said, "You can't go home again," and in this case it would be a heavily-manufactured Favoritism built on a false façade.

This having been said, Lee's start was a real tonic for the troops: in 6 2/3 innings, Lee fired 71 strikes in 108 pitches, walking only one and giving up an unearned run on a sacrifice fly in the third inning. Lee gave up only 4 singles and racked up four strikeouts, two in each of the fifth and sixth innings. This is rather the opposite of Lee's earlier modus operandus, in which he sails through five innings before turning into a banana and overripening very quickly indeed: instead, it was as if Lee found the proverbial second wind, or at least an offspeed pitch, or something of that ilk. Other than the fact that the first (7) and last (5)

fouled off a total of 12 pitches, 11 of them with two strikes, Lee did a good job of keeping the A's hitters on their heels and hitting the ball without much authority.

I mention the offspeed pitches, though, because this was one of the things that drove me crazy about Lee last season: an unwillingness to throw one. Consider the third inning, in which he gave up his only run:

Hannahan: fastball 90, fastball 90, curve 74, curve 75 (groundout)☐

Suzuki: fastball 89, fastball 89 (single)☐

R. Sweeney: fastball 90, fastball 89 (PB), fastball 88, fastball 90, fastball 89, fastball 90 (single)☐

Buck: fastball 90, fastball 90 (SF)☐

Ellis: changeup 83, fastball 90, fastball 90, fastball 89, fastball 89, fastball 91 (flyout)

That meant that after getting Hannahan to ground out on a curve, Lee threw one more offspeed pitch ... and it wasn't his curve. Every other pitch was a fastball in the very narrow range between 88 and 91 mph: of the 20 pitches he threw, 17 were fastballs ... and nine traveled the exact same speed! As the villager in "Holy Grail" once said, "You're not fooling anyone, you know."

Now, I'm not saying the Lee's curveball is Uncle Charlie or Sir Charles or even Chuck E. Cheese, but it is an effective pitch when he commands it, and is rather crucial to extending any run of success. It's part of the reason he was my Favorite Player in the first place! Throw more curveballs!

Anyway, Lee had a typical 6:10 GO:FO ratio, but look: he gave up four singles and a walk and one unearned run in nearly seven full innings. He threw almost 2/3 of his pitches for strikes. He didn't turn into a banana. And he won the damned game. That's Really Good Stuff from your fifth starter.

2) It may seem like nitpicking, but ...

The reason that Lee's run was unearned was that Kelly Shoppach gave up his THIRD passed ball in the young season. His second passed ball was Friday night on a Paul Byrd offering which actually gave up Oakland's first run. Admittedly, with Byrd, you are fighting off ennui waiting for the ball to eventually arrive, but still: you are a professional *catcher*:
catch
the
ball
!

Victor Martinez is slated to return from his hamstring tweak to start against the Angels. I don't know for sure whether this means behind the plate or at first base, but I want you to think about this for a moment: it can be argued that if *Victor Martinez* replaces *Kelly Shoppach* as the *catcher*, it will improve our *defense*.

A time traveler from 2006 just swallowed his tongue.

3) Not wholly unexpected

Paul Byrd's first start of the season was not entirely an auspicious affair: the 4th inning in which he gave up one single was his first inning in which only *one* Oakland hitter reached base. Although he'd only given up one run to that point (and that on the passed ball by Shoppach), it would be hard to argue that Byrd was something approximating "sharp"; with a pair of four-pitch walks and a hit batsman, Byrd's "Sharpness Rating" was somewhere around "citrus fruit";

The wheels fully separated themselves in the fifth when Byrd gave up four more runs, although he had a lot of help: Jhonny Peralta dropped a ball off the bat of Mike Sweeney for an error, and Bobby Crosby's ground ball to second was turned into only one out by Asdrubal Cabrera: as the next batter hit a sacrifice fly, this might have ended the inning with minimal damage. With both plays in pocket, it might have been a scoreless inning entirely, although this may have resulted in the unfortunate consequence of allowing Byrd to pitch more.

After the wheels had rolled down the street and into an open sewer, Byrd gave up a pair of run-scoring singles and the game was all but over at 5-0: the final tally for Byrd was a wretched 8

hits, two walks, a HBP, and zero strikeouts to yield the 5 runs (3 earned). His accuracy was uncharacteristically poor, with 49 strikes in 82 pitches: for Byrd to be successful, he has to throw lots of strikes. Still, all eight hits were mere singles, and with some middle infield defense behind him, he could have recorded the Gentleman's No-Decision, as the Indians did manage to score three runs later in the game.

(These three runs would represent the Indians' best offensive outburst of the weekend.)

4) Pretty bloody *unexpected*

Rafael Betancourt entered Saturday's game to start the 8th inning of a 4-1 game. He threw 12 strikes in 16 pitches, which is hardly unexpected. However, he allowed four of the five hitters he faced to single, resulting in two runs in 1/3 of an inning, which is pretty unexpected indeed.

The damage could have been worse, but he was bailed out by ... Craig Breslow, who couldn't have identified the strike zone with Mapquest and a sextant. Throwing a mere 4 strikes in 11 pitches, Breslow sandwiched a pair

of flyouts around a 5-pitch walk to escape the bases-loaded (by him) jam unscathed. Breslow added 1 1/3 innings of scoreless relief on Friday in a pointless cause, meaning that on the young season, the left-handed relievers have given up exactly zero runs. From Raffy Perez, I expect this. From Craig Breslow ... not so much.

Look, I am going to admit that I don't truly know Craig Breslow from a Florida Marlin (team motto: "Come meet Hanley Ramirez! You're starting Thursday!""): I know he pitched for the Red Sox, that's he's left-handed, and that he was expendable. But he's already pitched better with the bases loaded than Aaron Fultz did at any point last season, and although I have low expectations out of my 11th or 12th pitcher and fully expect long-term mediocrity from Breslow on the season, it's nice to see him chip in effectively thus far.

(Betancourt did chip in a perfect 1/3 of an inning in Sunday's win.)

5) Of varying degrees of solidity

The rest of the bullpen was a net plus this weekend, as Jorge Julio gave up a run on a hit and a walk in 2 1/3 innings of relief of Byrd (including finishing off the 5th without allowing an inherited runner to score, Jen Lewis needed but six pitches to record a pair of outs with runners on first and second, Masa Kobayashi continued to show himself a worthy eventual successor to Joe Borowski by not throwing strikes and not keeping men off base but ultimately not giving up runs, either, Raffy Perez recorded three outs with 8 strikes in 9 pitches, including a whiff of nemesis Jack Cust, and Joe Borowski picked up his second save with a K and a walk in a scoreless inning of work. In nine appearances spanning 8 2/3 innings, only Betancourt was truly ineffective, and Julio was the only other reliever to yield a run. More importantly, the three starters were relieved with a total of 5 runners on base, and nary a one of them were allowed to score.

This is not necessarily a lights-out warm fuzzies kind of bullpen, but it's pitching acceptably well (brilliantly in spots), and sure beats the collection of mooks up north.

6) Who replaced my Ace with a lawn sprinkler?

One of the things that made C.C. Sabathia such a feared pitcher was that he was always pounding the strike zone. At one point last season, it made sense to talk about Sabathia potentially walking fewer than twice as many batters as he collected wins. At the very least, it made sense to laud his tremendous K:BB ratio.

On Saturday, Sabathia continued his string of

poor performances in his hometown with 5 1/3 innings of 6-hit, 4-walk, 2-K ball, giving up 4 runs and looking rather fortunate to escape with that low a tally. Not only did he give up more than a hit an inning, but three of the six were for extra bases, including a solo shot to .136-hitting Mark Ellis, a triple to Speedy Daric Barton, and a double to the world's most left-handed hitter Jack Cust.

Now, Sabathia did settle down noticeably after the three-run first, with hitless second through fourth innings, including a perfect third and a minimum-faced fourth because of a double play after a leadoff walk. But after yielding three more hits in the fifth, Sabathia walked a pair in the sixth, and his afternoon ended prematurely.

It's obviously much too early to make any global

judgments on Sabathia, but it's equally obvious that these two games have been ... well, pretty crappy.

7) The bright spots

Grady Sizemore collected four singles and two walks, getting at least one hit in each of the three games. This had the net effect of *lowerin*
g his
batting average to .348. As encouraging as the hits (which were kind of hard to come by: Sizemore represented more than 22% of Cleveland's hit total all weekend), Grady drew the pair of walks in the win, the first of which loaded the bases in the pivotal 7

th

. The count was full when he drew the walk: Cleveland's first run then scored on a fielder's

choice and its second scored on another pair of walks.

The first of these was intentional by the right-handed Joe Blanton to the left-handed Travis Hafner, a more-or-less obvious tactical maneuver. However, this brought up the only other actual bright spot in the lineup in the form of Ryan Garko. Although Garko didn't have a hit Sunday, he had collected a pair of hits in each of the previous two games, including a double and a homer Friday. With two walks Sunday, Garko was the only player to reach base twice in each of the games. The walk he drew from Blanton was as impressive as walks get, in that it not only drove in a run, but involved Garko watching not one but TWO Peralta Strikeouts (sliders down and

away) go by with two strikes.

Travis Hafner did strike out twice in each of Friday's and Saturday's games, but he was the only Cleveland player besides Sizemore to have a hit in each game, including a solo shot and a two-out RBI on a double. He did strand 3 men in scoring position and is hitting a mere .261, so not all is copasetic, but hitting is hitting.

8) Null, void, and Jason Michaels

On the other hand, Jason Michaels' double off Joe Blanton represents the only hit by a Cleveland left fielder this season. David

Dellucci drew a walk Friday while striking out once; Michaels managed the same trick while striking out twice Saturday. Amusingly enough, Dellucci pinch-hit for Michaels, and responded with great professionalism by getting plunked.

After a sparkling three-hit debut, Franklin Gutierrez has responded with Nothing Whatsoever, going 0-for-9 over the weekend with 3 Ks. He leads all Cleveland corner outfielders with a .167 batting average, dwarfing those of Michaels (.077) and Dellucci (.000).

Casey Blake was only able to manage a 7-PA collar over the weekend, although he

was able to come through with the same 3 whiffs. Even with the big blow on Opening Day, he is still hitting .118.

With the bases empty Sunday, Jhonny Peralta drilled two singles. With runners on first and second in the first, and the bases loaded in the sixth, Peralta was able to make the last out of each inning. Although the stats will say Peralta went 3-for-12 with a double over the weekend, the authors of articles like this one will tell you he was a worthless schmoe with a bat in his hands.

Asdrubal Cabrera is a yoot who got a pair of hits Saturday. Although he doesn't truly belong in this section, he did go 0-for-8 with

a walk on the other two nights and is hitting .208, which really isn't very good for your #2 hitter.

9) Andy Marte sighting!

One for three! Not only that, but that hit started the two-run 7th on Sunday.

I am no real Marte fan, but he could play more often. I think he can hit .118. Heck put Blake in left. They CAN'T hit .118.

10) Schadenfreude revisited

Although generally wishing ill on the White Sox, their sweep of Detroit leaves me giddy. Hee hee!