

The B-List: 4/9

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}
Wednesday, April 09 2008 7:00 PM -

The Tribe slunk out of Anaheim after losing its second straight series, and Buff has seen enough bad pitching to last him for a while. He has helpful suggestions for Jhonny Peralta and Masa Kobayashi, but more importantly, Paul Byrd. Because the B-List cares.



FINAL SCORE		rd		2.5 GB KC)	
Indians (4-5)	(T3				0
Angels (6-4)	0	4		2	0

W: Moseley (1-1) L: Byrd (0-2)

Well, I was going to stay up until 6 PM anyway.

1) A Modest Proposal

Let me preface this by saying that I like Paul Byrd. I understand that some are frustrated by his subpar stuff and others find his explanation of his appearance in the Mitchell Report to be lacking credibility, but this is a guy who is willing to be accountable for his performance, tries to

deflect blame from others onto himself, credits his teammates, cracks wise, and has generally pasted together a viable career after many other pitchers would have given up after the road back became too difficult. He is still capable of putting together an impressive outing now and again, like a complete game shutout, and did win his two playoff games, something no other Cleveland starter could say.

However ...

The concept of deterrence is an interesting one. The modern application of this has evolved through Social Contract Theory to include elements of social stigma and other consequences other than being eaten by a large animal, but the principle is pretty basic: if an action has a probability of a negative consequence, a person has to perform a sort of mental calculus to determine whether it is worth taking the action. Some deterrents are very effective: a scorched Earth seems like an unacceptably-high price to pay for flattening Moscow. Some deterrents are less effective: I've kept a movie an extra day to watch it before returning it to Blockbuster and simply paid the late charge. Some deterrents work well because of their high chance of being enacted: the security cameras at the bank make walking out with cash seem like something I'd get caught doing and get punished for. Some deterrents work poorly because of their lax enforcement: I speed roughly 10 out of every 10 times I drive on the Interstate.

There is an entire discipline devoted to this "mental calculus" called Risk Assessment. It can be rather a cold and calculating discipline, as when Ford determined that it was cheaper to reimburse blown-up Pinto drivers than it was to fix the design flaw. But basically, it's a more complex treatment of the concept of

"expected value" in statistics: you weigh the likelihood and magnitude of the positive gain from an action against the likelihood of a negative consequence multiplied by the graveness. If the chances of getting caught are very low, the magnitude of the consequence can still be so great as to dissuade you from an attempt: if the punishment is low, the chance of getting caught is almost irrelevant. Much of criminal law is an effort to correctly weigh these factors in order to induce the aggregate social behavior the society deems desirable.

A lot of people misunderstand the principle of "civil disobedience," only focusing on the "disobedience" part. Henry David Thoreau did limit his message, as some seem to interpret, to the sentiment that it is okay to ignore an unjust law because it is unjust. The part many people miss is that Thoreau was willing to accept society's punishment for breaking this law, figuring that if enough people did this, eventually the law would be stricken out of an understanding that people believed it unjust. Thoreau did not pay his taxes, and for this was sent to prison on a more or less annual basis: benefactors would bail him out and pay his taxes on his behalf, but he was willing to accept the ramifications of his actions.

With these principles in mind, I want Paul Byrd to use steroids.

You see, at this point, it appears relatively obvious that Paul Byrd cannot win a baseball game for the Cleveland Indians. His velocity is bad, and his command, previously the strongest part of his game, has deserted him. Jim Palmer once said (and I am likely paraphrasing here), "Velocity, location, movement: pick at least two, and you can be successful." One is not so good. Zero is pretty much Right Out. So in the current state, Paul Byrd will pitch in N games and

win 0 of them.

If Byrd begins a steroid regimen, there is a possibility that the 0 in the statement above will rise to non-zero levels. The Cleveland Indians will win more ballgames, let's say 3. Until, of course, Byrd tests positive for steroids, at which point he will be suspended for 50 games.

So, let us do the Risk Assessment calculations here: the positive gain is 3 games in the standings. The chance of being caught is hard to determine with real accuracy: I don't know how frequently players are tested, and I don't know the access to so-called "designer steroids" that are harder to detect. Let's say the chance is 5% in April and increases by 10% each month. The punishment, though, is laughable: if Paul Byrd is suspended for 50 games, he will win the exact same number of games while suspended as he would pitching without steroids. The deterrent is absent.

You see, if a forward-thinking club were willing to strike unwritten agreements with their marginal players, saying that they would continue to pay the player's salary while suspended, but not put it in writing (the so-called Joe Smith Rule named for the Minnesota Timberwolves forward), they could squeeze positive benefit from players who would otherwise not contribute, using the civil disobedience model of simply accepting the punishment. "50 games? For three wins? Fine, we accept." In a game in which players are paid many millions of dollars to perform very poorly indeed, this sort of calculus seems utterly obvious to a team with actual designs on a playoff berth. (For example, this course makes no sense to, say, the San Francisco Giants: what good are three wins? Certainly not worth the potential negative press.) And I am thinking that Paul Byrd's continued career and Hall of Fame

aspirations are chimerical at best. His personal risk would be low indeed.

It could be argued that the same result could be garnered by simply releasing Byrd and promoting, for example, Jeremy Sowers. I am not sure about this. Of course, in the model above, Sowers would be needed during the suspension: the real complexity of the calculation is whether an enhanced Paul Byrd is more likely to succeed than a normal Jeremy Sowers. I admit, this calculation is more difficult. Still, I have seen a Byrd capable of throwing 88+ be more successful than Sowers to this point in their respective careers, and would be willing to take that chance.

As for the game, Byrd gave up 5 hits and two walks in three innings of work: because three of the hits were a grand slam and a pair of solo shots, Byrd's record today is 0-2 with a brisk 11.05 ERA. Byrd's "Game Score" of 25 is approximately 25 higher than I thought he deserved.

2) A Less Modest Proposal

Let's eat Paul Byrd.

3) Questionable timing

Jhonny Peralta had a fine night at the plate yesterday, banging out three hits and scoring twice. He came up a triple short of a cycle, singling with one out and nobody on in the 4th, homering with one out and nobody on in the 6th, and doubling to deep center off Scot Shields to lead off the 8th.

However, he made the last out of the first and ninth innings with runners on first and second each time. The out in the ninth was particularly galling, swinging at an unreachable high fastball on a 2-0 count when it looked like Justin Speier was willing to pitch around him to face David Dellucci. You're down four runs! Your run is meaningless! Get on base!

More to the point, although the sample sizes are laughably small, Peralta is batting .368/.368/.789 with no one on base, and .200/.200/.267 with someone on. With runners in scoring position, he has a single hit in 9 trips to the plate; with two outs and RISP, he is 0-for-5.

Fully half of Peralta's 10 hits are for extra bases, and his 6 strikeouts are actually low for Peralta. However, he has drawn nary a walk on the young season, and appears to be taking the wrong lessons from seasoned veteran Casey Blake. Admire the beard, Jhonny. Hustle like your hero. But stop buttering

your hands, and for the love of God, don't emulate the RISP hitting.

(Odd small-sample split of the week: Peralta is hitting .348/.348/.609 against right-handers, but .182/.182/.455 against lefties. This means exactly bupkis.)

4) Positive signs

After being largely throttled in innings 1-8 for almost an entire week, the Cleveland offense showed some encouraging signs of life yesterday. Although 5 runs is not a lot of runs (and, for sake of comparison, is significantly fewer than, say, 9 runs), the Indians banged out 12 hits, including three doubles and a pair of homers. Kelly Shoppach's two-run blast in the 6th came with two outs, and although the team left 9 on base, it only left 4 of them in scoring position.

Look, after a loss like last Thursday, in which the offense simply looked inept, or Monday, in which the offense simply looked inept until the very end, at which point the ineptitude transferred to the bullpen, it's hard to feel much in the way of encouragement. What is it about a game

like that that makes you look forward to the next one? Everyone hits like a schmoe and the game is both excruciating and dull. But a game like this, well, you get a bounce here, you get a decent start there, and suddenly this is a team that can win some ballgames. With a day off before starting a series at home, I fully expect better things from the home stand than we got on the 2-4 road trip, and a more-sustainable offense is a big part of that.

5) They're not booing, they're saying, "Daaaave!"

David Dellucci continued his surgence with a pair of hits including a double to the wall. It was his second double on the young season, although, ironically, only his first single. The hits raise Dellucci over the Mendoza line and give him an oddball .231/.474/.385 line on the season: I have no illusions of Dellucci posting a .470 OBP over an entire season, but seeing a couple extra-base hits allows me to entertain notions of a .400+ SLG, which for a Cleveland left fielder would be something special.

Dellucci's average is higher than Jason Michaels' OPS; his OBP is almost as high as Franklin Gutierrez' OPS. Yes, **OPS**.

6) Okay, they're booing

Jason Michaels drove in his first run of the season with a sac fly. He did not get a hit and prefers dark, moist areas like the floor of a rain forest or your basement.

7) I think we've found something

This is the section in which I do not doom Jorge Julio as I have other relievers in the past by saying encouraging things about early outings, only to watch them self-immolate their ways off the roster soon thereafter. Instead, without comment, I simply note his 2 innings of 1-hit, 1-walk, 1-K scoreless ball in relief of Paul Byrd.

8) No such problem here

This is the section in which I have no problem pointing out that Masa Kobayashi's habit of putting a pair of baserunners on every inning is wearing thin. He had a K, Blake made an error, blah blah blah. Pitch better!

9) One bad pitch revisited

I thought Jake Westbrook established pretty handily that throwing a wretched quality-free pitch to Vlad Guerrero was Bad Strategy. Jen Lewis' pitch was of higher quality, but not of actual high quality, and Guerrero punished it for a three-run homer to take the steam out of the Cleveland comeback.

However, Lewis retired the next six batters in a row, throwing 16 strikes in 24 pitches and generally looking like a valuable reliever. I like him a lot more than Kobayashi at this point. (A comprehensive list would be prohibitively long.)

10) Credit where credit is due dept.

Grady Sizemore rapped two singles and stole his second base of the season.

Casey Blake offset his error with a double and an RBI.

11) Managerial Head-Scratchers

Victor Martinez glued to the bench in the 8th with runners on base and weaklings on deck?

12) Department of Corrections Dept.

Alert reader Mickey Ferguson pointed out that when I opined that the Angels might have brought in Scot Shields to face a right-handed pinch-hitter Tuesday

night, I was full of piffle in that Shields cannot pitch back-to-back nights and was not available. Not only was I unaware of this, I was thinking of Justin Speier when I wrote it anyway.