

The B-List: 8/20

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It's too little too late, but it's still nice to see. The Indians have won four of their last five, nine of their last twelve, and as I post this column ... are currently spanking the Royals in the businessman's special down at The Prog this afternoon. In today's B-List, Buff hits on last night's win, gives us his thoughts on Zach Jackson, and talks about the Indians bullpen, which has pitched very well as of late.



FINAL SCORE				
Royals (55-71)	1	0	0	0
Indians (58-67)	2	1	0	0

W: Rincon (3-3) L: Soria (1-3) S: J. Lewis (4)

Consider this: we won because Juan Rincon pitched better than Joakim Soria. If you ran that simulation fifty bajillion times, calculations show Cleveland wins exactly six.

1) Belated welcome

Poor Zach Jackson: I totally stiffed him in his Indians debut, when he held the Orioles to 3 runs in 5 innings and generally pitched acceptibly, and now all anyone wants to talk about is him hitting a guy in the face.

Look, I gotta be honest: I'm a sizable baseball fan, but I'd literally never heard of Zach Jackson before we traded for him. I may have seen his name in a prospect list and totally bleeped right over it, or I may not. I could not distinguish Zach Jackson from Chuck Lofgren, Robert Downey, Jr., or a Lippy the Lion. Like Lippy, Jackson plies his trade while wearing a hat (battered old hat for Lippy, baseball cap for Zach) with a dour, unsmiling sidekick (Hardy Har Har and Eric Wedge respectively). Of course, Lippy is significantly older than Zach, who was born in 1983. I will now go to the store to buy Geritol and Maypo and apply for Social Security.

As in the last outing, Jackson started slowly, giving up a run on three hits. However, in both instances, Jackson put a runners on the corners with one out after giving up a run (two in Baltimore's case), and got out of the inning because he induced a ground ball to a middle infielder. In last night's case, it was the first of two double plays Jackson was able to induce. And, ironically enough, the only other run-scoring inning for the opponent was the fifth, in which the run-scoring blow was a double.

But whereas Jackson gave up 8 hits including 3 doubles against Baltimore, his night against K.C. was quite good in spurts: he gave up three singles in the first, and he gave up a pair of singles and a double in the fifth. Other than that, his other five innings featured two baserunners total, a single and a walk, and he struck out 4 guys overall. He made it through seven innings in an efficient 91 pitches (58 strikes), and when he could have fallen apart after giving up the bases-clearing double to Mike Aviles (on the first pitch after hitting Mitch Maier), he instead battled Esteban German to fly out on a 3-2 count, struck out David DeJesus swinging on three pitches, and got Jose Guillen to strike out looking. His next two innings were perfect with another K, so he retired the last nine hitters he faced after what was probably a tough mental situation.

To be explicit, hitting a guy in the face is certainly not good, but we were always taught that the toughest pitch to bunt was a fastball up and in, and it looked to me like Jackson overthrew it and it sailed on him. You can usually tell when a pitcher is throwing at a guy:

- a) he doesn't move as if to check to see if the batter's okay
- b) he stares the hitter down
- c) he turns his back on the hitter
- d) he is Roger Clemens

Jackson didn't fit any of these criteria.

I guess the way I'm looking at Jackson is, "How would I have reacted had Jeremy Sowers (Aaron Laffey, etc.) made this start?" I would have been a little disappointed at such a slow start, especially a second such start in a row. I would certainly have liked to see a better pitch to Aviles, but Aviles is hitting .326 on the Mephistopheles Plan and the double was probably more Aviles being good than Jackson being bad. (It was a hittable pitch, though.) I would have been encouraged by a 4:1 K:BB ratio, and liked the way he finished strong. Obviously Laffey is more of a groundball pitcher, but this is sort of a "average start with good undertones" that you get from young pitchers with some promise.

At this point, I have no way to tell anyone with confidence that Jackson is or is not a better prospect for the 2009 rotation than Sowers is. He's better than Matt Ginter, though.

2) I gotta ask

Let me get this straight: you had Mike Aviles in your system, and you gave Tony Pena, Jr. over 200 plate appearances to hit .162/.181/.207? Are you collectively insane?

3) Department of Efficiency Dept.

Gil Meche's pitching line looks like a typo: he gave up three runs on 2 hits and a walk. And, oddly enough, the walk was erased on a double play by the second hitter Meche faced.

Of course, the reason for this is that while Meche only gave up two hits, both were home runs, the first of which followed an error by Alex Gordon. Jhonny Peralta staked the Indians to a 2-1 lead in the first, and Kelly Shoppach lengthened it to 3-1 in the second with a solo shot off Meche.

Meche then retired the next SEVENTEEN Indians in a row.

If this bothered the Indians at a soul-searching level, it wasn't readily apparent: Shoppach drove the second pitch he saw from reliever Ramon Ramirez over the left-field wall for his second homer, and pinch-hitter Shin-Soo Choo worked (fouling off a 3-2 pitch before walking counts as "working") a walk. Asdrubal Cabrera sacrificed Choo to second (in a 5-4 game in the 8th, this seems appropriate), and Grady Sizemore walked on five pitches. When the right fielder blasted a ball over the wall for a 3-run homer, the Indians had the lead again, scoring seven runs on four hits because all four hits were home runs.

Ryan Garko ruined the string by hitting an RBI single after a walk and an HBP, but any time you post a run-to-hit ratio over 1.5, you gotta think that's pretty unusual.

4) By the way

The three-run homer came off All-Star Joakim Soria, who really is preposterously good under most circumstances. Soria also allowed two

walks, the HBP, and the single to Garko. Not a good night for the Formerly Invincible One.

5) Ducks largely absent

When Shin-Soo Choo grounded out to end the 8th with the bases loaded, he left three runners on base with two in scoring position.

The Cleveland Indians as a team left three runners on base with two in scoring position.

6) A job well done, and the meaningfulness of the "Win" stat for evaluating pitchers

Juan Rincon wore pants.

He won his third game of the season.

Woody Allen once said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Applying this to Juan Rincon is an exercise left to the reader.

7) Is it time to take Jensen Lewis seriously?

No.

8) This brushstroke seems out of place, Mr. da Vinci

It would be crass to complain about Kelly Shoppach on a night on which he clubbed a pair of homer runs and kept us in the game until we could break it open, especially seeing as though this gives him 14 homers on the year and a .508 slugging percentage. He's hitting a homer about once every 20 plate appearances, which is pretty good for a catcher. By the measure of VORP at Baseball Prospectus, Shoppach is the 8th-most productive catcher in the major leagues and the 3rd

-most productive in the American League (behind Mauer and Pierzynski): since VORP counts playing time (it's not a "rate stat"), this is awfully impressive.

However, the Royals' fifth run scored because Shoppach threw the ball into left field instead of to Andy Marte when Aviles stole third. Aviles then wafted home.

Look, Victor Martinez was quite good defensively in 2007 after being pretty poor in 2006, and Shoppach comes with both reputation and performance to suggest that he has the skill necessary to be a good defensive catcher. This year, though, he's been pretty lousy, with 7 passed balls, 6 errors, and a putrid 13.8% rate catching basestealers. (He was at 36.7% and 36.1% in the previous two seasons with limited playing time.) It may be that Shoppach's been asked to absorb an awful lot all at once as a big-league regular for the first time, but ... well, he has to do better than this next year to be truly *good*.

9) But Lewis got his fourth save in a perfect inning!

Consider the stretch of games between August 19, 2006 and September 1, 2006: in six outings, Tom Mastny gave up a total of 3 hits, 2 walks, and struck out 8 batters in 7 innings of work, earning himself 4 saves in 4 opportunities. On Sept. 2nd, he earned his 5th save despite giving up a run on 3 hits and having a second run erroneously called out at the plate by a very, very bad umpiring call. After one more scoreless outing, Mastny

did not throw another scoreless inning again that year, blowing two saves in four outings and generally looking like Danny Graves' little brother.

Now, is Jensen Lewis' stuff better than Tom Mastny's was? I can't tell. Does he have more composure from his experience as a closer in college at Vanderbilt? Debateable. Does he have that bulldog mentality, excellent entrance music, a trick knee, dual citizenship, intestinal parasites, an expensive watch, or a copy of the Zapruder film? I have no bloody clue. I do not know. But I will tell you this: it will take a lot more than four saves to convince me. And it would be nice if he didn't go to three balls on two of the three hitters he faced.