

The B-List: 9/5-9/7

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After a horrific showing by the Browns, it's nice to see that someone is still paying attention to the Tribe. In a monstrous B-List, Buff makes several bold pronouncements on a variety of topics, including a few he actually believes to be true. Go print this one off, it takes a while.



FINAL SCORE				
Indians (68-71)	0	2	0	0
Royals (60-80)	0	0	0	0

W: Mujica (2-1) L: Duckworth (2-1))

FINAL SCORE				
Indians (68-72)	0	0	0	0
Royals (61-80)	0	3	0	0

W: Meche (11-10) L: Z. Jackson (0-2) S: Soria (35)

FINAL SCORE				
Indians (69-72)	2	0	0	0
Royals (61-82)	0	0	0	0

W: C. Lee (21-2) L: Greinke (10-10) S: J. Lewis (8)

My family induced me to miss the Browns game Sunday. It is gratifying to be loved so deeply.

This will be the Forceful Statement Edition of the B-List, in which I make bold statements that I believe to some extent, but probably not as forcefully as the number labels suggest.

1) Zach Jackson is better than Jeremy Sowers and should be considered our #3 starter in 2009

Okay, the second part of this is probably going too far, but here is the thought process behind it: Lee is clearly the #1 next season and I'll say that Fausto Carmona's excellent 2007 gives him the benefit of the doubt to be considered the #2 for now. Jake Westbrook is hurt and will not return until after the All-Star break, at which point history (of pitchers returning from UCL replacement) suggests he won't be very good (in 2009). Aaron Laffey has been shut down with elbow pain and was awful before being sent down: the elbow actually concerns me more than the awfulness. Anthony Reyes has looked very promising, if perhaps a bit lucky, but he, too, has been shelved with elbow pain for the time being. Jeremy Sowers is piffle. No other minor-leaguer can be considered to be a clearly lower risk than Jackson, even if I happen to think that David Huff (for example) is a better pitcher. The fact is, he hasn't done it in the bigs yet and so has to be considered an unreliable option. (Not that Huff is unreliable, just that RELYING on a guy who's never pitched in the majors to slot in as a middle-of-the-rotation starter is poor judgement.)

Now, Reyes' elbow pain is, from the SOUND of it, fundamentally different from Real Shutdown Elbow Pain. But elbow pain is still pain, and it's still in the elbow, so I'm going to go into the off-season with the expectation that what I get from Reyes is a bonus.

All of this suggests that with all the talk about depth, we need to acquire another starting pitcher, a major-league-ready starting pitcher, before Opening Day 2009.

As far as the first part of the statement, though, I could not be more confident in its

veracity. There are a lot of factors that suggest I'm overreaching here: Sowers looked good in his first look at the AL (in 2006), too. Their ERA's aren't really dissimilar (5.56 for Jackson, 5.97 for Sowers). Both have kinda lousy WHIPs (1.41, 1.55). Neither one posts a strikeout rate worth writing home about (5.34, 4.68). I've been told that Sowers has better "stuff," by which people mean he throws a little harder, has better command of his fastball, and has better secondary stuff. To me, this sounds like a lot of wishcasting. If these things are true, they certainly don't translate very well. The only possible ray of hope I can take from Sowers' "stuff" is that it is very good in some of his starts through four or five innings. Maybe this indicates a guy who can "break out." Maybe.

In the meantime, here are the reasons I prefer Jackson to Sowers:

HR/9: Jackson 1.19, Sowers 1.56

Actually, Jackson rate isn't very good, but Sowers' is simply execrable. That's preposterulous.

K:BB: Jackson 18:3, Sowers 51:32

I rather doubt Zach Jackson will finish his major-league career with a K:BB ratio of 6.00, but right now, he's doing a much much muchity much better job of limiting free passes and appears, to the layman, to have a better control of the strike zone.

G/F: Jackson 57:35 (1.63), 5 GIDP in 30 1/3 IP, Sowers 139:112 (1.24), 8 GIDP in 98 IP

I was actually a little surprised that Sower's ratio was on the positive side of the ledger. Good for him. Maybe that will take some of the helium out of the ball. But Jackson is clearly much better at inducing ground balls.

Here's the problem: Sowers 2008 looks an awful lot like Sowers' 2007. He allowed hitters to hit .308/.360/.498 in 2007 ... and .301/.354/.499 in 2008. Jackson's SLG allowed is .452 despite allowing a slightly higher AVG (.306). Hey, that's still not good. But it's sub-execrable. And Sowers' other stats walk the thick line of badness as well, without wavering much from 2007 to 2008. These are not large samples, but they certainly are crummy samples.

As far as Saturday's start goes, consider this blow-by-blow comparison with Cliff Lee's "great start to win his 21st game," where Zn is Jackson's nth inning and Cn is Lee's:

Z1: 1B, **C1:** 1B
Z3: perfect, **C3:** perfect
Z4: perfect, **C7:** perfect
Z5: 1B, DP, **C2:** BB
Z6: 2 x 1B, DP, **C4:** 2 x 1B
Z7: 2B, **C5:** 2B
Z2: 4 x 1B, 3R, **C6:** HBP, 2 x 1B, 1 R

So, the difference between Jackson's start and Lee's was, for all practical purposes, one single and the fact that Miguel Olivo is slow while Jose Guillen is not. Let me explain: with Olivo on first and one out, Mark Teahen singled. Because Olivo is slow, he stopped at second. Then when Esteban German singled with two outs, Olivo tried to score, and Ben Francisco's throw to the plate wasn't in time to get him. Because Francisco threw home, Teahen went to third and

German went to second. And because of this, David DeJesus' single scored two runs instead of one. In contrast, Lee gave up his run-scoring single with runners on 1st and 3rd, meaning that no throw tried to get Guillen at home and the runners stopped at 1

st

and 2

nd

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Now, I'm not trying to tell you that Lee is really only mediocre or that Jackson is great. Lee threw more strikes, struck out more hitters (5 to 2), and more importantly, this represented Jackson's Very Best Start, while for Lee this was an average start. Lee's great season is defined by its *sustained* excellence, not by one game. But I thought it was striking to see that in this case, the difference between "just another great game for Lee" and "just another mediocre start from Jackson" was, arguably, *one single*

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2) Cliff Lee is having the best season by a Cleveland starting pitcher in my baseball-sentient life

I welcome any and all readers to point out that I missed the 1978 season of Oog Groont or whomever I've forgotten, and I

will say that in the Year of the Pitcher, 1968, I was 4 years old and a much bigger Captain Kangaroo fan than Cleveland Indians fan. Consider my "baseball-sentient" life to have begun in 1970.

Cliff Lee's season is better than that.

I hasten to add "starting" to the qualifier because I think Jose Mesa's 1995 still remains the most-remarkable pitching season I've seen by a Cleveland pitcher. Whatever you think of Mesa's career or Mesa the human being, his 1995 was simply startling. But in terms of starters, I can't think of any season that even really comes close to Lee's. C.C. Sabathia won the Cy Young last season with a 3.21 ERA, 209 strikeouts in 241 innings, and a sickening 209:37 K:BB ratio. Cliff Lee's K:BB is not as good at 154:28, because $5.65 > 5.5$, but his ERA is almost ONE FULL RUN LOWER. I don't think the extra strikeouts make up for A WHOLE EXTRA RUN. (By the way, Lee has only given up 3 unearned runs this season.) I know scoring is down a bit, but ... IT'S A WHOLE F#\$ING RUN! (By the way, Sabathia's WHIP of 1.14 is higher than Lee's 1.05.)

Now, I'm sure there's a Gaylord Perry or Bert Blyleven or Luis Tiant or Sam McDowell or Rick Waits or Jeff Mutis season I'm missing somewhere (in the case of Mutis, I **wish** I had missed it), but this season has simply been remarkable. And with all

due respect to Mr. Halladay, Cliff Lee would basically have to give up thirty-eight runs in the first inning of his next start while pitching in a Nazi jacket and no pants to not be considered the best pitcher in the American League.

Anyway, his start is pretty much described above: he wasn't brilliant in that he gave up a hit an inning, but 1 run in 7 1/3 is going to win a lot of ballgames. Somewhere in the neighborhood or twenty-one, I'd imagine.

3) The Cleveland Indians should trade for Gil Meche in the off-season

When I was looking at the Indians' starting pitching a couple years ago, I decided that I would like to target a strikeout pitcher because the Cleveland defense at the time was simply dreadful at turning batted balls into outs. Whether it was a lack of range or iron hands or a lack of depth perception, it was just not any good at getting people out. The defense has improved a bit since then (we're middle-of-the-pack, 18th in MLB and 7th in the AL at 69.8% of balls in play turning into outs: the range is Tampa's 71.7% to Cincinnati's 67.9%), but that was my thought process two years ago. I didn't think we had the juice to go after someone Truly Special, so I augured in on two lesser-known guys, Gil Meche, who had just posted a fine 7.52 K/9 rate for Seattle, and Aaron Harang, who had just posted an

8.30 for Cincinnati. Harang ended up signing an extension with the Reds, and Meche signed the widely-ridiculed 5-year, \$55M deal with the Royals that has come to represent desperation.

The Royals made some noise about how they wanted Meche to be their "Ivan Rodriguez signing," the signing of a big-name player (well, biggish-name: Meche was more known for his name bearing a resemblance to [a Sumerian hero](#) and getting hurt every year than any great pitching) that signalled to its fan base and to other free agents that Kansas City was Going To Turn It Around Any Minute Now Yes Sir And By Golly You'd Better Hop On The Bus Boy Howdy Yes. It worked for the Tigers, as they went to the World Series in 2006. For the Royals ... eh, not so much.

Now, Gil Meche doesn't really resemble what you'd think of as an \$11M (per year) pitcher. He's just not that good. He's pretty good, sure, better than average, certainly, but an Ace? Nah. He's not. He's overpaid. This gives him something in common with pretty much every pitcher who's signed a free agent contract since Oog Groont. But he's pretty good. Consider: even after moving from the spacious Seattle home park to Kansas City's more

neutral one, he cut his home run rate, cut his walk rate, and lowered his ERA by nearly a run (4.48 his last season in Seattle, 3.67 last season). He still walks guys at a Sowerian rate, but he's struck out 156, 156, and 158 (so far in 2008) in the past three seasons, posting 32 (186 2/3), 34 (216), and 30 (186 1/3) starts (innings). Guys slug .393 off Gil Meche, and slugged .397 last season. He's holding left-handed hitters to a .653 OPS this season (.774 against righties): last season, it was .681 (.737), so this looks like it might be a real reverse split.

But more importantly, think about this: you would never sign Gil Meche to a 5-year \$55M contract: that's too much risk. But would you sign him to a 3-year \$33M contract? Before you answer, consider that we just got finished paying Paul Byrd \$22M for 3 years. Paul Byrd! Think about what pitching costs these days. Yes, he'd still be overpaid ... but not by oodles and oodles. That's what experienced above-average pitching costs. You can either grow your own, fleece someone else, or you pay Gil Meche. Or Paul Byrd. Your choice.

What would it take? Well, first, it would take convincing

the Royals that they're not actually close to being good. If you're good, you keep Meche and roll forward. (Meche is arguably the second-best pitcher in his rotation behind Zack Greinke, but I can't find even a wildly implausible reason why the Royals would deal Greinke in 2008.) If you're not, he is an expensive luxury. Makes no sense. Cash him in. There is no really good reason to expect that the Royals have reached this conclusion, but ... they really should. That's not a good team, and it's not going to be good next year, either. It isn't. The farm system blows at the higher levels. It's a bad team.

So, what ASSETS would it take? Again, I'm not well-versed on the Royals' needs except insofar as I read [Joe Posnanski](#) and [Rany Jazayerli](#). It might be that Kelly Shoppach would be the centerpiece of that deal, insofar as John Buck can't hit and Miguel Olivo seems to clash with Trey Hillman. Maybe they can be convinced that Franklin Gutierrez is turning it on and can be their everyday center fielder. Maybe they want Jon Meloan and one of the young lefties and a basket of fruit. I don't know how these things work. But if we're going to contend in 2009, we need at least one starting pitcher that isn't currently on the Cleveland roster. Why not Meche?

(For the archives: Meche struck out 10 and gave up 3 hits and 1 run in 7 innings to beat Jackson Saturday, lowering his ERA to 3.96 on the season.)

4) Shin-Soo Choo should be the everyday right fielder in 2009

Shin-Soo Choo has and 11-game hitting streak and has reached base at least once in each of his last 27 games. Not only does Choo post an OBP that is nearly 100 points over his AVG, but he's slugging as well, with 7 extra-base hits out of the 18 he's gotten in his past 10 games. His triple off Meche turned into Cleveland's only run after a sacrifice fly. He is hitting .300/.395/.532 on the season, meaning that he actually posts the highest "slash stat" on the team for ALL THREE STATS. He has the highest average. He has the highest on-base percentage. And he leads the team in slugging.

Now, the gigantic caveat here is that Choo has 250 AB (a little under 300 PA), while a guy like Grady Sizemore has 548 (650). Choo doesn't qualify, and he's been

heavily-platooned. Given everyday plate appearances against tough lefties, or even just given a chance to regress to the mean, and he's probably not objectively a .927 OPS outfielder. But listen: we're all excited and gaga over the prospect of Ben Francisco seizing the everyday left fielder job ... and his OPS is .789. Sure, it might improve, but that's pretty pedestrian stuff. Let's say Choo's OPS is 100 points inflated. He's still an .827 corner outfielder. Do you know how long it's been since we had a legitimate .827 corner outfielder? Well, two years, it hasn't really been that long (Blake, Broussard, depending on your definition of "corner outfielder"). Okay. It sure SEEMS like a long time. Doesn't it? Or is that just because I'm crisped? I dunno.

Anyway, Choo can hit. He's got a military commitment looming and might be playing over his head and still appears to be using some mechanism other than reflected light rays to track fly balls in the outfield, but the man looks like he should get a shot. Unless he's traded for Meche, I guess.

5) Given the job without qualifications or injury, Jensen Lewis would finish in the top half of MLB in

raw save count

People tend to build straw men when it comes to the importance of the closer. People who think closers are crucial tend to characterize any opposing viewpoint to be saying that "anyone can do it." I think that statement is pretty obviously false. Not only that, but its adjusted counterpart, "any good relief pitcher can be a good closer" is untrue as well. One need only look at past cases like David Riske, Eric Plunk, and Paul Shuey. Heck, I'm not crazy about Raffy Betancourt as a closer. All those guys were damned good late-inning relievers ... but boy howdy, they sure weren't closers.

People who tend to think in terms of maximizing the concept of "leverage" or using an old-skool "fireman" role, in which your best reliever is used when he'd be most valuable, even if that's not the ninth inning, tend to characterize any opposing viewpoint as saying that closers much only be used in knee-jerk fashion to start the 9th inning with a lead of 1, 2, or 3 runs, and never in any other circumstance. And yeah, there are some times when it looks an awful lot like that kind of thinking pervades some managers. But there are

plenty of cases of closers like Mariano Rivera being brought in in the 8th innings, or other guys being matched up in the 9th, or what have you.

Personally, I tend to fall on the latter side of the ledger: using a really, truly superior pitcher to do nothing more than protect leads in the 9th inning is a waste of resources. That's why I actually liked the way the 2007 bullpen worked out: Joe Borowski was nothing like our Very Best Reliever, and so in the really tough situations in the 7th

and 8th

, guys like Betancourt and Raffy Perez plied their wares, and they really WERE the best guys doing the best job. Borowski did a lower-leverage job reasonably well (by most measures, like save percentage, Joe Borowski did a good job last season), and he had the requisite mindset to play that role all season long.

So here we are: closerless and rudderless, finding out that Eric Wedge believes that the bullpen must be anchored around a dependable closer. Whether this is true or not is sort of immaterial: it's what this team is going to do, so there's no sense in arguing the point. But after a series of open auditions through Masa Kobayashi and Raffies of various widths and Toms Mastny, we end up at Jensen Lewis. Now, I don't think Jensen Lewis is a truly superior relief pitcher. I just don't think he has the stuff or command to ever duplicate a season like 2007 Raffy Betancourt. THAT'S a superior relief pitcher, and I don't think Lewis is capable of that.

However, I think he's good enough to be an EFFECTIVE relief pitcher, and from what I've been able to glean, he has the requisite mindset to do this under the pressure of the ninth inning in a close (ish) game, over and

over, without getting too beat up if he fails. And in that sense, I think closing WOULD be maximizing the value of Jensen Lewis. Would I rather have Joe Nathan? Sure, I'd rather have Joe Nathan. Joe Nathan is not walking through that door. Francisco Rodriguez is not walking through that door. Mariano Rivera could not even identify that door. There might be better options out there, but let me ask you this: unless you're talking about one of the really, truly top-notch guys like these (Papelbon, Lidge, healthy Wagner), whom Cleveland is not not not not going to get, how big is the difference between Lewis and Other Guy, really? Two saves? Negative one save? I feel like this number hovers around zero or one.

I don't spend resources for one save. I give Jensen Lewis the job.

6) Distanced from expectations, the new contract, and a bad start, Raffy Betancourt will be a very good relief pitcher in 2009

In 13 outings spanning 13 2/3 innings, Raffy Betancourt has given up one run, 0 homers, 11 Ks, 4 BB, and 6 hits.

Look, there's no way to spin Betancourt's 2008 into anything but "bad." His ERA is finally under FIVE. He was bad for FOUR MONTHS (April through July monthly ERAs: 6.52, 5.25, 7.43, 4.50), so it wasn't just a small-sample fluke. He was bad. But something appears to have clicked, whether it is the release from expectations after the Sabathia trade or some release point shift or he finally unblocked his colon, and Betancourt has looked much much muchity much better over

the past three or four weeks.

I think he can do it again.

7) Eddie Mujica is a major-league relief pitcher

Trust me, this is a bold statement.

8) Ryan Garko will not be a Cleveland Indian in 2009

Augmenting his pair of GDP's Friday (each of which scored a run, but you don't get an RBI for

that) with a strikeout, I am aware that Garko had an RBI single Friday, drove in the only run Saturday (SF), and got a single Sunday, I just don't think this season is a hole he can dig out of.

I really liked rooting for Ryan Garko over the years, and the Indians cost him at least 400 plate appearances through bad management techniques, but great googly moogly, I hate watching Ryan Garko in 2008.

9) The merry-go-round

Cleveland scored 6 runs in the 5th inning Friday on seven consecutive singles and a double play from Ryan Garko. You don't see that very often.

10) Welcome back for real this time

Victor Martinez went 2-for-3 with 2 walks Friday, then drove in all three of Cleveland's runs Sunday by going 2-for-3 with a walk.

11) Sotto voce

Grady Sizemore's last two games featured a combined 0-for-9 collar with 4 whiffs. We might be watching fumes here.

David Dellucci is still getting plate appearances. This irks me.

Tom Mastny is a potted plant.