

The B-List: Season Finale

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It's the last B-List of the year, as Buff recounts the Indians' sub-glorious run to exactly .500. At least by winning two of the three, we forced the White Sox to have to win today to tie Minnesota to have to play them again for a playoff spot. Anything that makes Chicago's life more miserable is good with Buff, as he compares Zach Jackson in an unlikely manner, outlines the corner outfield play, quotes a surprising team stat, and gets in one last jab at Juan Rincon.



FINAL SCORE

| | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Indians (80-80) | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| White Sox (86-73) | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 |

W: S. Lewis (4-0) L: Danks (11-9) S: J. Lewis (13)

FINAL SCORE

| | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Indians (81-80) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| White Sox (86-74) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

W: Z. Jackson (2-3) L: Vazquez (12-16)

FINAL SCORE

| | | | | |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Indians (81-81) | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| White Sox (87-74) | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 |

W: Buehrle (15-12) L: Bullington (0-2)

I am very surprised that no one asked me about the dead fish in Friday's column.

(It ended up being a red herring.)

1) Gark smash!

At the end of the season, first baseman Ryan Garko ended up hitting .273/.346/.404, which is staggeringly bad for a first baseman. In Garko's first two seasons, he hit .292/.359/.470 in limited time and .289/.359/.483 in a full season (500+ PA). Even those numbers aren't particularly good for a hitter on the far left of the defensive spectrum, but with 50 extra-base hits out of 140 and 21 of those homers, that's a decent enough producer that you can rationalize that level of production, especially from a guy with a long track record of hitting well and who was 26 last season (so ostensibly before his peak and with more power potentially being tapped later). So even by those somewhat modest standards, Garko's 2008 was really pretty bad. His doubles went down from 29 to 21, his homers from 21 to 14, and his polar-bear-meteor-strikes held steady at 1. He got a few more ABs with a few fewer hits and dropped his average, but really, it's the nature of the hits more than their frequency that was most discouraging.

On the other hand, the frequency was quite poor as well, at least for the first two-thirds of the season: as late as August 6th, Garko was hitting a puny .239 (/ .311/.348). Now, there's no arguing that Garko had a much better September (and even much of August) than the rest of his season: Garko came up with 8 XBH in 28 hits in September, including 4 HR. In addition, he posted a fine 9:10 BB:K ratio in September and ended up hitting .384/.442/.616.

(As an aside, I think it helps illustrate how great a player Albert Pujols is in that a completely wild, out-of-character, unsustainable hot streak from Ryan Garko is essentially ... what Albert Pujols does ALL THE TIME.)

Now, Garko is no more a .384 hitter than he is a 30-steal threat, but if you wanted to ask me what I'd need to see from Garko in the last month of the season to make me even CONSIDER putting him on the Opening Day 2009 roster, it would have been:

- a) *drive* the ball to the opposite field
- b) hit the ball over the fence
- c) increase SLG without sacrificing OBP, notably Ks
- d) stop grounding into so many double plays

Realistically, the last item is more a function of his line drive and fly ball percentages: he's not going to get faster. And really, he's "only" grounded into 10, after 12 last season (in 22 more plate appearances), so that's not a big deal-breaker. It just SEEMS like he's grounded into more, y'know? (In contrast, Jhonny Peralta has grounded into an unfathomable 26 DPs this season. That's astonishing.) But he has basically done all of the things laid out above: the question is whether it's "turned the corner" or "too little too late." Frankly, Garko has the track record of a good, solid hitter ... who is pretty replaceable once you find a superior talent at 1B. Note that I would have said the same thing about Casey Blake for several seasons. I have some optimism that Garko won't be a true deadweight anchor around the offense's neck (that role appears to be covered by Travis Hafner) next season.

Anyway, Garko not only whacked a solo shot to left off John Danks Friday, but hit one out to dead center with the bases loaded off the right-handed reliever. He also collected two hits Saturday (including a double) and two more on Sunday for a very strong finish to the season.

2) A little less prescience, please

From last weekend's writeup:

Lewis is not immune to this: he looks like a distinct flyball pitcher, and I'm concerned that some of those high pitches that are missed for Ks today become tomorrow's circuit clouts.

Yeah.

It bears remembering that the ChiSox' field is a bit homer-prone in general: the two teams combined to hit 12 homers over the three-game set, including at least one by each team in each game. The Cell is a box of bands. But without the security of letting long flies be caught, Scott Lewis ended up lasting only 5 innings, giving up 6 runs (4 earned) on 6 hits, 3 of which were homers. Five of the six runs scored that way. And he STILL had a wrong-way 6:8 GO:FO ratio, even after several of the fly balls never actually landing in the field of play.

Part of the problem was that the White Sox simply wouldn't miss the ball: Lewis only struck out 1 batter in 24 faced, and a 62:29 strike-to-ball ratio isn't that great if the guys hit the strikes you throw (cf. Byrd, P.). True, Asdrubal Cabrera's tremendous Take Your Ineptitude To Work Day didn't help in the second, and Lewis looked good in stretches, but ultimately he may be a lot more ordinary than his first couple of starts made him look.

3) A tale of two lefties

Scott Lewis wasn't the worst lefty on the mound this weekend (in terms of performance, not talent): that would be John Danks. But he certainly wasn't the best, either: in fact, consider these two performances:

Pitcher A: 7 IP, won game

Pitcher B: 7 IP, won game

Pitcher A: 7 baserunners, 2 erased by DP

Pitcher B: 10 baserunners, 4 erased by DP

Pitcher A: gave up 2 runs, both on solo homers (no other XBH)

Pitcher B: gave up 1 run on a solo homer (no other XBH)

Pitcher A: induced 11 ground ball outs

Pitcher B: induced 11 ground ball outs

So, really, if you're looking for a role model to fashion a successful major-league career, you could pick a worse performance to emulate than that of Mark Buehrle (Pitcher B).

Zach Jackson ended up, much like Garko, with season-long numbers that leave a lot to be desired. A 5.55 ERA and a 1.46 WHIP are each too high. He put up 4 Quality Starts in 9 outings, which isn't very good.

And he earned most of his 2-3 record, arguably deserving to lose August 20 and Sept. 16 (but win one of August 25 or Sept. 6). But, like Garko, it is the last performances that leave the final impression, and Jackson posted consecutive Quality Starts allowing 2 runs in each outing (6 IP in the previous start). Does this write Jackson into the 2009 rotation in pen? Of course not. Jackson is still a pretty limited pitcher: his "upside" is that of a decent innings muncher or long man out of the pen. I could be wrong, but he's 25 and simply doesn't throw with great velocity or movement.

Ironically, one of the things that I liked a lot about Jackson when he was posting poor numbers was that he didn't walk anyone (6 starts out of 7 with 1 or zero walk). In these last two starts, with significantly better results, he walked 4 while striking out 4. That's definitely NOT from the Buehrle School of Pitching. The thought that comes to mind is that Jackson made up his mind that he was going to get beaten on HIS pitch, and was willing to put a guy on base if it meant he wasn't getting that call. In other words, "I will not groove that pitch." So maybe the walks, in a perverse way, show a certain improvement in Jackson's command. I don't know for sure.

But here: just as with Jensen Lewis, I will make the same plea to the front office: if you want to go out and get a starting pitcher, that's just fine. But make it a GOOD starting pitcher, not an average innings-eater with low upside. Because, in my opinion, we already have someone that can give you at least nine-tenths of that costing you the minimum salary. Save up your money and buy a few Big Powerful Things, not a whole drawer full of Pretty Decent Things. Zach Jackson is already pretty decent. If you can do significantly better (and I think you can), you absolutely should. If you can't, though, don't bother doing something just to do something.

4) Speaking of mediocre

Brian Bullington gave the team another nice outing, pitching 5 innings of 5-hit, 3-run (2 earned) ball against Buehrle. I like that he put up an 8:5 GO:FO ratio and only walked one guy. The solo shot to Konerko, eh, the cost of doing business. It was pretty good. I appreciate the effort.

I still consider him an NRI.

5) Without getting carried away

Rich Rundles can get major-league hitters out.

Yeah, he was almost exclusively used in low-leverage situations and we lost 7 of the 8 games in which he appeared. That's probably how you SHOULD use a September callup. Yeah, he's 27 and posted a 1.60 WHIP, which is terrible. But he also gave up a run in only one appearance out of eight, posted a 1.80 ERA, gave up a hit an inning (5 H in 5 IP), and stuck out more than a batter an inning (6 K). Now, he did let two of his four inherited runners score, which is obviously a terrible ratio, but not Juan Rincon territory, and the sample size is just really teeny.

But after grinding Raffy Perez into a fine paste as the only lefty in the pen for months at a time, the idea of having a second lefty out there

appeals to me. Whether it is Rundles or Tony Sipp or Craig Breslow's second cousin, I'd kind of like it to be somebody. I'm not a big believer in ultra-orthodox left-right bullpen matchups, but some hitters really do have splits that big.

6) From the Twins' locker room

Damn it, they're bringing in Rincon. That stupid Wedge is TRYING to force an extra playoff game! Rolling over and dying like that! Just for that, I'm ordering a drilling in our first meeting next year.

7) In the interest of fair play

Donnelly sucked, too.

Perez, Betancourt, and Lewis had a mixed bag of good and bad.

Donnelly and Rincon didn't. Their bag was 100% pure Grade Q horsemeat.

8) Iron, stone, and lead

Over the weekend, the iron-handed, lead-footed, brainless troglodyte who must be moved away from shortstop at the earliest possible moment made zero errors.

The utility player whose selling point was an above-average glove at three positions made two errors, one of which resulted in an unearned run.

The super excellent future-Gold-Glover who must be moved to shortstop post bloody haste in order to maximize his incredible defensive wizardry made two errors, one of which resulted in an unearned run.

I am not going to stand here and tell you that Jhonny Peralta is a better defensive shortstop than Asdrubal Cabrera, mostly because I'm sitting, but I will say this: Cabrera and Jamey Carroll played some seriously inept defense this weekend. Not good at all.

9) Tales from the corner outfield

Shin-Soo Choo pounded his 14th home run on the season and set a major-league record for hits by a native South Korean with 98. He went 2-for-5 Saturday and 1-for-5 Friday, scored two runs in each game, and drove in two in each game as well. (He also drew a walk.) Choo finishes the season hitting .309/.397/.549 on the season, scoring a fairly amazing 68 runs in 370 plate appearances and driving in an also-wonderful 66 runs. Pro-rated to 600 PAs, each of these values is

over 100. He ended up hitting .286/.345/.455 against left-handed pitching, suggesting that going into the season with the idea that Choo is the everyday right fielder is a defensible position. That's the easy part.

Franklin Gutierrez had a nice weekend, getting two of the 10 hits the Tribe collected off Buehrle, walking and scoring a run Friday, and coming through with a nice pinch-hit two-run single on Saturday to make the suddenly-close 8-6 game into a comfortable 12-6 laugh. Gutierrez' season numbers were pathetic, but he posted .800+ OPSs in each of the last two months and showed flashes of being a major-league hitter. (Unfortunately, he was under the Tyner Line with a .310/.423/.397 September.) I still say he's someone else's center fielder.

Ben Francisco is enjoying his life in a terrarium. He is given fresh, live crickets and mealworms on a regular basis, and the heat lamp makes for a comfortable temperature regulation system in the absence of a warm-blooded metabolism. His .200/.324/.350 September is actually one of the better splits posted by a newt in recent memory. Post-All Star break, Francisco's .241/.314/.409 line was awful enough that considering him an important cog for the 2009 season seems misguided.

David Dellucci worked hard on converting wood into fuel, using enzymes and a complex root-like structure to convert the dead plant matter's energy into spores. His post-All Star splits of .252/.315/.417 really are barely distinguishable from his pre-All Star numbers of .231/.302/.398. He is a fungus. In his last game of the season, hopefully his last in a Cleveland uniform, he went 0-for-3. Way to go, Dave! We'll miss you! Watch out for pigs! They can find guys like you, you know.

In short, we got the equivalent of about 1 good season of corner outfield play this season, with partial good-season stretches from Choo, Francisco, and Gutierrez. That's pretty bad.

10) Strange things afoot at the Circle K

And yet, consider: Gutierrez was execrable for over half a season. Francisco has turned into a newt. Garko was bloody awful for at least four months. Cabrera was so bad as to be sent to Beefalo: he hit better after he returned, but there are two months of just truly wretched performance there. Victor Martinez was by turns powerlessly bad, simply absent, and encouraging (.278/.355/.463 in September after the long DL stint). Travis Hafner was a sucking wound. Andy Marte was as feeble as a player can be while still having a notocord. Dellucci has been addressed.

And with all these things, the Indians scored 805 runs this season: more than the Yankees, more than the Rays, more than the Angels, even more than the White Sox (pending the outcome of today's game with Detroit). They finished 5th in the American League in runs scored. With all that badness, that wasn't just simple underachieving but truly mind-boggling ineptitude ... they finished 5th

in the AL with over 800 runs. We had one corner outfielder, half a third baseman, one-third of a first baseman, less than a whole second baseman, and no actual DH ... and still scored.

Now, some of this is probably unsustainable. I don't think Kelly Shoppach is really a .261/.348/.517 hitter ... but he's a legit .260/.330/.480 kind of guy, which isn't that far off. Casey Blake had an uncharacteristic (and completely fluky) AVG with runners on base, like 100 points higher than he normally does. Choo might be more of an .875 OPS guy than a .946 OPS guy. But really, that's about it. Grady Sizemore really is that good. Jhonny Peralta didn't do anything completely out of character at the plate. Cabrera is probably at least the guy he ended up being (.259/.346/.366), and probably significantly more.

We need a real third baseman to replace what Blake

gave us, and a bat at corner OF/1B/DH seems like a must as well, but ... this team can put a contending offense on the field next season. It really can.

So, as always, it comes down to pitching. I like our chances because it's an odd-numbered year.

11) Administrative Wrap

Thanks to everyone who wrote in this season: it was not always a fun thing to do, but I appreciate the feedback and am glad the column is enjoyed. I am unlikely to make the effort to collect the columns into a book this year, because who wants to read about this season? If I get enough requests, I'll look into it.

Fire Juan Rincon.