

## The B-List: 4/15

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}  
Wednesday, April 15 2009 7:00 PM -

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Behind the arms of Aaron Laffey and Kerry Wood, the Indians got a much needed win yesterday afternoon in Kansas City, defeating the Royals 5-4. In today's B-List, Buff calls Laffey's start the best we've seen so far by an Indians pitcher, and marvels at the fact that it is possible for your team's closer to come into the game, throw very hard, and retire every batter he faces. Buff also hits on the struggles of Jensen Lewis, the return of Pronk, and Shin Soo-Choo's throwing arm. Bring on the Yanks. ☐☐☐

**FINAL**

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Indians (2-7) (3 GB)

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Royals (5-4)

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*W: J. Lewis (1-0) □ L: Farnsworth (0-2) □ S: K. Wood (1)*

You really *ought* to win when your opponent follows Sidney Ponson with Kyle Farnsworth, but it feels good nonetheless.

### **1) The best performance by a Cleveland starter to date, and it should have been better**

After pitching better than Jeremy Sowers for the bulk of last season, it probably seemed to Aaron Laffey that the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> starter's spot was basically his. Sowers wasn't likely to grow a Clemens Ear in the off-season, and end-season pan flash Scott Lewis lived on a tightrope high in the zone with sub-90 stuff: surely he couldn't sustain that sort of success, and Mark DeRosa was going to make the infield defense tilt the balance back to Laffey's groundball stuff anyway. Really, as long as he didn't hurt himself again or dent a bunch of batting helmets in the spring, Laffey must've figured that he was all but written in pen into the rotation.

Of course, this is practicing a fair amount of attribution projection onto Laffey, and I don't have any direct quotes to these effects, but the statements by Eric Wedge about how Laffey reacted poorly to his demotion to Columbus suggest there's something to this interpretation. Had Laffey been more mature and less visceral, he would probably have realized that sitting as Sixth Man in AAA behind a rotation that includes Carl Pavano (injured 2007, injured 2008), Anthony Reyes (injured 2007, injured 2008), AND Scott Lewis (injured in every year since his birth in 1998) is probably not THAT long-term a gig. If it's mostly a maxim that no team makes it through a whole season with 5 starters, on the 2009 Cleveland Indians, it was a virtual goddam *guarantee*.

(Frankly, if there are fewer than 25 starts made by players other than these three plus Carmona and Lee, I'd be awfully surprised.)

In any event, Laffey may not have taken his demotion well, but at least he handled it poorly. In his last start against Louisville, he didn't make it through a 4<sup>th</sup> inning. He is not going to be found on the IL League Leader board any time soon. However, called up to make the spot start yesterday afternoon, Laffey produced something unheard of in Cleveland: a start in which the starting pitcher gave up fewer than 4 runs.

Actually, it was considerably better than that: Laffey spun the kind of start that made him look so promising at previous points in his young career. In fact, it looked a LOT like a couple of those starts: Laffey kept the Royals off-balance and largely off the basepaths altogether: after giving up a pair of singles and a walk in the first, Laffey retired the next two hitters to escape the first and only allowed one more baserunner (on a walk) through

the next 4 innings. With 5 scoreless innings, Laffey got through the Lee/Carmona Zone in only 73 pitches, yielding two singles and two walks total.

The 6<sup>th</sup> inning was also Vintage Laffey: the version that got bitten by multiple snakes in New York and elsewhere. After a leadoff walk, Laffey gave up a single to right to Willie Bloomquist that Shin-Soo Choo made an INCREDIBLY bad decision on, throwing to third to try to get the lead runner and instead ceding second base to Willie the Q. This would prove damaging with a 2-0 lead, because the next hitter grounded to second in what would probably been a double play, but instead advanced the Q to third with one out. With that, Laffey's day was over, as righty-thwarter Joe Smiff was called on to vanquish John Buck's Evil Doppelganger, which he did with a K.

This should have been the end of the inning and wrapped up Laffey's day at 5 2/3 IP, 3 H, 3 BB, 5 K, 1 R, and the win. Instead, because of the combination of umpire squeezing and severe blunderbussery, the Q was able to score and Laffey ended with 5 1/3 IP, 2 R, and a no-decision instead.

Which is still WAY better than ANY other Cleveland starter to date. Interestingly, Laffey had only a 6:5 GO:FO ratio, but look, the man gave up 3 singles in 5-plus innings and struck out 5 guys. I'll take Laffey's singles-n-walks combo over Pavano's wall-peppering exercise most times out of 10.

## **2) Hindsight and its limitations**

Now, I don't know if Laffey would have had this start out of the box. He really DIDN'T pitch very well in Spring Training, and Lewis beat him out. At least it was defensible. And frankly, Lewis matched Laffey's performance until he cratered in his last inning, and who knows if that cratering occurred before or after he strained his forearm?

But Laffey sure did make the decision to leave him off the roster look pretty misguided.

## **3) The attack of the yips**

Joe Smiff has value as a low-slot right-handed reliever: after going 3-0 to Buck, he was able to pour three straight strikes past him (the last swinging) to get a big K with one out and a runner on third. However, he wasn't exactly the best candidate to face lefty Mark Teahen, the probable left-handed pinch-hitter Mike Jacobs (who did, in fact, pinch-hit for Billy Butler), and left-handed power threat Alex Gordon, so he was lifted for Jensen Lewis.

Now, if Raffy Perez hadn't newtified at such a frightening clip, he would have been the natural candidate to face this stretch. But he had just pitched the night before, and was awful to boot, so forget that idea. And Zach Jackson is ostensibly being saved to bail out either Cliff Lee or Fausto Carmona, or perhaps is being bronzed. I don't really know what Zach Jackson's point is at this juncture. But it was Lewis who got the call, and he led off Teahen with two quick strikes.

His next pitch was a ball.

His next pitch was a ball.

His next pitch was a ball.

His next pitch was a ball.

Admittedly, I would not have called all four pitches balls. The umpire's strike zone did not extend very far above the belt, if it got there at all. But the fact remains: Teahen stood on first base after his walk.

Until he was pushed to second after a walk to Jacobs, also on a 3-2 pitch.

Until he was pushed to third after a walk to Gordon, also on a 3-2 pitch.

In fact, Jacobs swung at two pitches and touched neither one. Gordon swung at THREE pitches and fouled two of them off. Teahen had missed one and fouled one off. This means that every time Jensen Lewis threw a pitch in

the strike zone, a Kansas City Royals batter swung at it, and not ONCE did they hit the ball into fair territory. So this is pretty good stuff ...

... except for the stuff that sucked raw eggs. Those they let go by. And ended up on base.

And thusly did Willie the Q score the Royals' second run to cost Laffey the win.

#### **4) Well, that wasn't so good, but at least ...**

Oh, no, it doesn't stop there.

Lewis threw a high-stress 22 pitches in the 6<sup>th</sup> inning: he got squeezed a bit, but that's a lot of pitches in one inning, and every one was thrown with a runner on third base. So that's got to be enough of that, right?

Except ... again, Jackson's bronze casting hadn't dried yet, Raffy Perez was busy running up walls in pursuit of insects, Raffy Betancourt was being saved for the 8<sup>th</sup>, Vinnie Chulk is apparently made of glass, Kerry Wood is the closer, Smiff already pitched, and Masa Kobayashi ... I will not pretend to know the whereabouts of Masa Kobayashi, but it was not on the pitcher's mound. Somehow ... **SOMEHOW** ... with a preposterous 8-man bullpen and a 13-man pitching staff, there was no option but to send Jensen Lewis out for more abuse.

One triple and single later, and the seemingly-cushy 5-2 lead became a more-stressful 5-3 lead, and Lewis finished the 7<sup>th</sup>.

**5) Well, that seems like needless luck-pushing, but at least ...**

Oh, no. It doesn't stop THERE, either.

At this point, Lewis had thrown 1 1/3 innings, but he had faced 9 hitters to get there and had thrown 35 pitches in the process. He had spent more than half his time pitching with a runner on third base and really wasn't doing particularly well. (He did strike out John Buck, whose 0-for-3 performance with a pair of whiffs suggests that my previously-stated opinion of John Buck is somewhat more accurate than the way we made him look Tuesday evening.) You have saved Raffy Betancourt to be able to come in to start the 8<sup>th</sup> inning, so naturally ...

... you get more Jensen Lewis! More and more!

Lewis caught a break when Mark Teahen tested Choo's arm trying to stretch a single into a double, succeeding only in stretching a single into an out. This proved crucially fortuitous, as the next hitter walloped a home run off poor Mr. Lewis.

And then Betancourt came in and retired the two hitters he faced, throwing 6 strikes in 8 pitches and recording a K in the process.

The only thing I can think of is that Betancourt, notorious for his slowness on the mound, was also slow to warm up and poor Jensen took the brunt of that slowness squarely on the chin. If not, this smacks of malpractice-level reliever management.

## **6) The return of sanity**

And then Kerry Wood pitched a perfect ninth for his first save.

## **7) I'm sorry, I'm unfamiliar with that**

# terminology

Yes, it's true: it is possible for your team's closer to come into the game, throw very hard, and retire every batter he faces. I have seen it done.

## 8) In Cleveland?

Technically, it was in Kansas City. But it was FOR Cleveland. It's true.

## 9) Nice hose, but about that head ...

I had a certain amount of concern for Shin-Soo Choo before the season started: first there were the reports of arm trouble that kept him in the DH role in the WBC, then he really didn't hit well in the Classic at all (although he did have a big bomb to give Korea the lead over Japan before ultimately falling short), and when he finally arrived in Arizona, his numbers were piss-poor. It was hardly the kind of pre-season preparation that instills a lot of confidence. However, with a nice 2-for-4 day and his 4<sup>th</sup> RBI on the season, Choo is hitting .333 and looking for all the world like a legitimate corner outfielder.

In addition, his throw to peg out Teahen was, in retrospect, a real game-saver, saving one run in a one-run game.

However, it was a one-run game because his previous decision to try to gun down the speedy Covelli Crisp going from first to third on a single to right was so incredibly bad and poorly executed, it COST the Indians a run. Had he simply made neither play, the result would have been the same: had he used a modicum of baseball sense, the final score would stand at a more comfortable 5-3. I don't know

the Korean, but in French, that throw to third would be termed &quot;le tete du poulez.&quot;

## **10) Pronk smash!**

I don't know exactly who this &quot;Travis Hafner&quot; fellow is, but he looks a lot like Pronk's younger brother. Hafner smashed a pair of doubles, one to the opposite field and a second SMOKED into the right field corner off left-hander Ron Mahay. The second double essentially won the game, as it drove in one run and

advanced Victor Martinez to third where he scored on the next pitch when Choo lifted a sac fly to left.

I could grow to like this fellow. Maybe not as much as Pronk, but he's still pretty good. (Did I mention his OPS is currently over 1.200?)

## **11) Worthy of note**

Ryan Garko stroked an RBI single.

Mark DeRosa continued his tepid streak with an RBI single and a run scored. (Tepid is better than sub-Arctic as he was in the first week.)

Grady Sizemore laced a double off a lefty, also collecting an RBI single and a walk.

Asdrubal Cabrera had a hit, but also a quality sacrifice bunt that advanced Tony Graffanino into scoring position ... from which he scored (on Sizemore's hit).

**The Indians only struck out 6 times.**