

## The B-List: 4/16

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}  
Thursday, April 16 2009 7:00 PM -

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Does it get much better than that? A nine run explosion in the seventh inning to beat the New York Yankees in the home opener of their new ball park? And just like that, the Indians have won two straight, and the AL Central leader is only 5-4. In today's B-List, Buff says Cliff Lee was pretty good, but hardly special. He talks about the Indians improved patience at the plate. And the exceptional situational hitting of Honny Peralta. Buff also gives us his Managerial Head Scratchers and all around analysis of yesterday's glorious win.

FINAL

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Indians (3-7) (2.5 GB)

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W: C. Lee (1-2)    L: Veras (0-1)

To paraphrase reader Bob Collins, there is nothing quite like the sound of New York fans turning on their own team.

### 1) Cliff Lee and the Art of Columnizing

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Words are a columnist's stock in trade: they are not simply the best tools at one's disposal, they are the *exclusive* tool. There is no green screen. There is no telestrater. The columnist writes the words, the reader reads them, and hopefully there is more of a connection than you had reading "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" or "Your Twisty Friend, the Path Integral." I tend to use numbers and statistics because these are things that make sense to me and help me understand the sport better than simple, rote phrases like "110 percent" and "rocket arm."

There's something to be said for the evocative nature of language, but as often and as convincingly as one can say "located his fastball well" or "late movement" or any number of descriptive adjectives, sometimes there is no substitute for actually *seeing* something.

Here is what the numbers say about Cliff Lee: he was pretty good, but hardly special. He gave up more than a hit an inning.

He threw a more-pleasing distribution of strikes and balls (71 in 115 pitches: still short of last year's numbers, but better than his first two starts).

He gave up one run on a solo shot in 6 complete innings, and won his first game of the season.

He and Raffies combined to strand 15 Yankees on base, a barely-conceivable 8 of them in scoring position: it bears mentioning that the one player to touch Lee up for a run, Jorge Posada, was the same player who stranded three net runners in scoring position while making the last out of an inning.

He walked too many guys again, 3 in those 6 innings, to finish with a game WHIP of 1.67, which is pretty bad.

Here's where I wish I had more observational skill, where I could look at video of his first start (horrific) and his last start (greatly improved) and say, "This is where he adjusted his framingstan and bilbooked his nargblatt, resulting in much greater flarfoogling of the rickerbarkin." I can't do that. Cliff Lee's motion yesterday looked exactly the same as Cliff Lee's motion on Opening Day looked exactly the same as Cliff Lee's motion in 2008, 2007, 2006, and for all I know as a high school student in Arkansas.

I can tell the difference between Cliff Lee's motion and C.C. Sabathia's motion, but it pretty much always looks like Cliff Lee's motion to me, just with different result sets.

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But here's where I DO have a bit of observational skill: Lee's REACTIONS to his pitches were a LOT different yesterday than they were on Opening Day. See, it's all well and good to say, "Cliff Lee was locating his fastball exceptionally in 2008."

I mean, that's true.

He really was.

But what does it MEAN?

It's not just that he threw strikes while avoiding the upper middle of the strike zone: there's more to it than that.

Lee threw fastballs in such a way that they looked like they were going to be  
*here*  
, and they ended up a little bit  
*there*  
, and they moved after the batter had already committed to swinging  
*here*  
, so the batter couldn't make solid contact.

And what you could tell from watching Lee last season was that he KNEW the ball was going to  
go  
*there*  
, and that the batter was going to swing  
*here*  
, and that made him  
*feel*  
confident and masterful.

I don't mean masterful in a egotistical supervillain sort of sense, just that he'd mastered the skill: he knew he could do it, as often as he wished, and it would produce a good result.

So, I mean, this is kind of roundabout way of saying that Lee looked more confident on the mound yesterday, except there's more to it than that. Or maybe there isn't. Perhaps that is the genius of the professional athlete, to be able to put aside any cluttering metaphysical thoughts about significance and psychology and what have you, and simply embrace the pureness of consistent, repeatable, excellent performance.

But in watching the replay on MLB.tv, this is what I saw: Cliff Lee threw the ball the WAY he wanted in the SPOT he wanted more often than he had to this point in the season, and his (admittedly potentially projected by me) body language and facial expression changed perceptibly from:

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First two starts: "I know I can do this, I just need to buckle down and execute ... damn."

This start: "I will throw this pitch, and he will not hit it well ... right."

(Cliff Lee does not look like the type of man who uses a lot of exclamation points.)

One interesting, more tangible effect of Lee's pitches yesterday was that he must have broken a half-dozen bats, several in rather spectacular fashion. This tells me that he is back to throwing that fastball (possibly a cutter? See, this is where I wish I had better observational skills again.) with late movement that bores in on hitters.

I guess the point is, I feel a lot better about Cliff Lee after watching him pitch than I felt about Cliff Lee by counting up hits and walks. (5 of the hits were singles, although Posada's homer really was hit a ton, going out to dead center with room to spare.)

A repeat Cy Young seems exceptionally unlikely, but a "front-of-the-rotation starter" season no longer does.

## 2) The Fall and Rise of St. Grady

In the top of the 6<sup>th</sup> inning of a 1-1 game, the Indians put together a rally of sorts with a walk, an error by ersatz major-leaguer Cody Ransom, and an infield single by Trevor Crowe.

Loading the bases without a ball leaving the infield is a fairly difficult feat, at least when neither Jensen Lewis nor Raffy Perez is walking the bases loaded.

C.C. Sabathia had been lifted after his 122<sup>nd</sup>

pitch, and right-handed reliever Enwar Ramirez was replaced by lefty Phil Coke, a man with an ERA more suited to rating gymnasts than retiring major-league hitters.

On Coke's first pitch, which was not particularly hittable, Grady Sizemore lifted a routine fly ball to left that ended the inning.

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At this juncture, a hue and cry arose on the message boards to the effect that this the kind of thing that separated Grady Sizemore from being Merely Very Good from being Truly Elite: the inability to produce consistently in clutch situations. Never mind, of course, that the nature of baseball prevents any player from producing consistently under any circumstance: a sort of observational bias exists for situations like this, in which the expected becomes the memorable and the unexpected is treated as fluke.

So perhaps it was not altogether shocking that when faced with the identical situation in the 7<sup>th</sup> (albeit with a 5-1 lead instead of a tie game, but a decent left-handed reliever on the mound instead of Phil Coke), Sizemore was able to wait until the third pitch (which was admittedly, from Damaso Marte's and the city of New York's collective perspectives, quite execrable) to launch a grand slam over the outstretched glove of Nick Swisher in right field.

(I say "over the outstretched glove" because he did stretch out his glove arm, but had he been 20 feet tall, he might still have missed it.)

Look, swinging at the first pitch against a bad young pitcher is ill-advised. He didn't handle that plate appearance well.

But the man hit the first grand slam in New Yankee Stadium history, and I think Sizemore's going to be okay.

### 3) Everybody hits!

Well, actually, Shin-Soo Choo didn't get a hit, but everyone else did. Four Indians had multiple hits, led by Victor Martinez' 3 and highlighted by the first multi-hit game of Trevor Crowe's career (although one of the "hits" was more "awkwardly-placed ground ball").

### 4) Patience as a virtue

The top two hitters in the lineup, Sizemore and Mark DeRosa, each had but one hit on the day, going 1-for-4. Sizemore's hit, of course, was the grand slam, but DeRosa's was a mundane single.

However, each hitter drew a pair of walks, meaning that the pair combined to get on base 6 times in 12 trips to the plate. I think we'll take a .500 OBP from the top two in the order, especially as hit as Victor Martinez has been (and as productive as Travis Hafner, Jhonny Peralta, and Shin-Soo Choo have been in the small samples available to us).

### 5) Questionable timing

How does Victor Martinez get three hits, immediately behind two guys who got on base six times, and only get one RBI because he himself launched a ball over the wall? I mean, this is just getting weird.

### 6) Another case in which actions speak louder than words

The box score will tell you that Jhonny Peralta banged out two doubles and drove in two runs, and the game log will tell you that the two runs were driven in at the start of the 9-run 7<sup>th</sup> inning on a "double to right."

That's very nice, and Peralta is now hitting .297 on the young season.

This doubles his number of extra-base hits, all doubles, so his SLG is still kind of low for a guy you think of as a secondary power source on this club.

But you have to actually watch the replay to see HOW Peralta hit this double: after watching his way to a 2-1 count, Peralta fouled off a pair of offerings from Jose Veras, drew ball three, then spoiled a pretty nasty pitch on the outer half of the plate, driving the ball down the right field line with some pretty fair extension. (It was impressive enough to score Victor Martinez all the way from second, which is hardly a given.)

This was an exceptional piece of hitting: Peralta can be a bit of a streaky hitter, and he has struck out 10 times already this season, so a couple well-struck balls (even his out in the second was well-hit) may make for a very nice weekend series for Peralta as he gets locked in.

Caveat: Joba Chamberlain today may not be the best matchup for Jhonny.

### 7) Baby steps

As much as the management of the bullpen to date has made me grind my teeth (and, to be fair, the situations Eric Wedge has had to deal with have probably caused a fair amount of his own teeth-grinding), I have to say that I really liked that Raffy Perez was brought out to pitch the 7<sup>th</sup> with a fresh 9-1 lead. We need Perez to be effective to have a solid bullpen, but as poorly as he's pitched in the first weeks of the season, I don't trust him in a game in which the outcome is more in doubt.

My observational skill on the topic of pitching motions did not magically improve between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>

innings, so I can't tell you what Perez is or is not doing this season that is different from his more-successful days.

He walked three guys in 2 innings, which is obviously crappy.

He did get his first two strikeouts of the season, which is just as obviously a welcome improvement.

Giving up 1 run in 2 innings is nothing special, especially since there were a total of 4 baserunners involved (a WHIP of 2.00 is bad, after all).

But it was a good spot for Perez to work in, and he ... wasn't as terrible.

I don't know what to tell you here, folks.

### 8) Walk this way

It was bad enough for Lee to walk 3 batters in 6 innings: his impeccable control last season was one of his most charming charms. It was awful for Perez to walk 3 in 2 innings, but then, he's been dreadful and this is just more evidence in the box.

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But for Raffy Betancourt to come out in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning of a 10-2 game and walk two guys ... I mean, that's just infuriating. Also lame-assed.

In all, the Yankees drew 8 walks and the Indians 7, making the game last approximately 9 hours and 35 minutes.

### 9) Managerial Head-Scratchers

C.C. Sabathia makes a lot of money. I mean, lots and lots. A whole lot. Also, a great deal. He wore down at the end of the season, pitching on three days' rest a number of times and finishing the regular season with a career-high 253 IP.

A year after finishing with a career-high 241 IP.

In both years he pitched in the playoffs, giving him 513 IP over the two years combined.

Now, Sabathia is a horse. He is 28 years old and has been exceptionally durable. But to send him out for the 6<sup>th</sup>

inning at 108 pitches, and finish up at 122 ... in an April game ... I mean, that's just a bad idea.

I think the intention was to give him every opportunity to win the first game in NYS, but ... how important is that, really?

More important than getting an actual N years out of him?

Why was this a good idea?

I had the same KIND of reaction to Wedge throwing Lee out there for a 6<sup>th</sup> inning, but this sort of gets back to what I was saying in #1 about how Lee looked: Lee's 6<sup>th</sup>

was his best inning, an efficient 10-pitch 1-2-3 inning that finished his day at 115 pitches.

Still too many for my tastes this early, but not by more than a few.

I think this is a case of Wedge knowing Lee well, and besides, Lee is no longer a young arm to

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protect (he's 30 now).

But Sabathia's innings were pretty high-stress, often with men on base (he walked FIVE), and his 6<sup>th</sup> wasn't very smooth at all.

Also, Tony Graffinino played again.

### 10) Nice hose!

Cody Ransom may have made an error, and his hitting is truly Mike Rouse Revisited (I have seen few non-pitchers look more useless and overmatched at the plate), but he did make a nice throw to gun down Peralta at the plate.

### 11) Baserunning follies

Mark DeRosa got doubled off on a botched hit-and-run: you have to react better than that. That was just poor.

Ptui!