

The B-List: 6/23

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Tuesday, June 23 2009 7:00 PM -

The B-List is back baby. And what a wild one last night that Buff gets to write about. Another night, another Chernobyl by the Indians bullpen, who turned a David Huff four hitter into a white knuckle 5-4 win. In today's column, Buff says that this Indians team is hilarious, and proposes a trade for a player who would fit in well with the hilarity that ensues here on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. Buff also explains why he could not write the Monday B-List, and also spends some time touching on the failed weekend set in Wrigley.

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W: Huff (3-2) L: Snell (2-8) S: K. Wood (hilarious)



There is nothing quite like a Pirates-Indians tilt, except maybe a war between San Marino and the Cincinnati Bengals. You're not sure who's going to win, but you are pretty sure the

significance of the battle is well-defined in advance.

1) Weekend Epiphany

I apologize for not being able to write about the weekend set with the Chicago Cubs: Sunday was Father's Day and my family had many activities this weekend, and then Monday featured site visits from clients.

In any event, the Cubs series was wonderful in the sense that it provided me some closure on the first part of the season, which is to say, my expectations that the Indians will pull out of their collective tailspin and become a contender for the A.L. Central crown have evaporated. Freed from this angst-ridden premise, I have been able to step back and realize a crucial point:

The Cleveland Indians are *hilarious*.

Now, I don't mean in the classical "Bad News Bears" or even "Major League" sense. They don't execute their pratfalls particularly well (Jhonny Peralta and Ben Francisco notwithstanding), and they hardly ever hit the mascot with a pitch.

And I certainly don't mean they have, as a team, a wonderful, irreverent interview style in which zingers are quoted to the press like, "I really think Matty Herges would be the answer to all our problems if, in fact, our problems consisted of, 'How will we manage to walk more guys then groove more fastballs with runners on base?'"

The team is actually quite dull in interviews, obviously a reflection of their manager, whose speaking style falls somewhere between "Carlton your doorman" and "Steven Wright."

But there is a trend in modern comedy, which is not so much a new development but rather something that has gained in public acceptance and practice in recent years: the advent of "Uncomfortable Comedy." I'm sure there were practitioners of this craft in days of yore (Andy Kaufman comes to mind), but it's really taken off in recent years with Ricky Gervais' brilliant documentary-style British sitcom "The Office" begetting American devotees like Ben Stiller, Steve Carrell, Larry David, and Michael Cera.

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The idea is to put the (often-clueless) protagonist into a situation in which behaving cluelessly and insensitively will cause the audience to squirm, but laugh at the same time.

THIS is the type of hilarity that ensues at a Cleveland Indians baseball game. Especially when a relief pitcher is on the mound.

Really, now, it was AGONIZING to watch the Indians squander a 7-run lead with Cliff Lee thoroughly outpitching Rich Blunderharden on Friday, and the "Parade of Charade" that was the 8th through 10th innings was simply astounding. But stepping back from the agonization (which really came from the expectation before the Brewers series that the team was heading in the right direction), you really have to appreciate the sheer genius that is this team.

Can you blow a seven-run lead, immediately on the heels of blowing a pair of 5-run leads in the previous series? You can, but only if you're dedicated to your craft. I mean, *really* dedicated. Super extra *triple* dedicated.

The fact that it was one ex-Cub reliever blowing the save, and a SECOND ex-Cub reliever losing the game ... well, that's simply the kind of small touch that the true professional puts on top of the cake, like Carrell actually waxing his chest in "The 40-Year-Old Virgin";

And to lose the NEXT day ... because the first ex-Cub first blew the save, then allowed the winning run on a WILD PITCH ... well, that's simply inspired.

Huzzah, I say.

Huzzah!

For Jeremy Sowers to fall apart in his 5th inning of work speaks to the value of retaining a link to past classics. It is important to maintain a reference point for your audience.

2) And now for something completely the same, but likely pointless

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David Huff's season statistics are inflated by a very unfortunate pair of debutlets, in which he gave up 7 runs in 3 2/3 innings on the "strength" of 4 walks, then 6 runs in 3 innings on the "power" of 3 home runs. I mean, listen, that's dreadful.

Since then, though, Huff has had only one start that could really be called "bad," a 4-run affair against Minnesota in which he gave up 9 hits in 5 innings. The other starts have all been quite acceptable, although only two have been Quality Starts.

Including this one.

Huff went a career-high 8 innings, throwing an impressive 75 strikes in 112 pitches and giving up only 4 hits and walking 2. Only one of the hits was for extra bases, a double by Mighty Jack Wilson. Now, there are some signals from the game that Huff was not entirely dominant: he only struck out 2 batters and 13 of his outs came in the air.

A goodly number of these reached the outfield, and he got some good measure of fortune not to give up more hits and runs.

And for a guy who threw 67% of his pitches for strikes, it was a little disconcerting to see that fewer than half of the batters he faced were started with a strike (14 of 30).

But after the first inning, Huff pitched aggressively against a Pirates offense that is not particularly patient (OBP-AVG):

McCutchen: .031
Sanchez: .041
Diaz: .016
Wilson: .025

I mean, McCutchen is a rookie and is hitting .325: I cut him some slack. To a lesser extent, Robinson Diaz had exactly 10 plate appearances last year and isn't much more advanced.

Also, his name is misspelled on his birth certificate.

The other guys, though ... I mean, that's just pitiful.

Anyway, in innings 2 through 8, Huff gave up a measly two hits, and 8 shutout innings is still a good accomplishment, even if the way it was accomplished doesn't necessarily portend more such performances in the immediate future. The man's 24 with 8 career major-league starts. I will gladly take a flyball-ridden 8-inning shutout of the Pirates.

By the way, after the two-start debacle, Huff has a 3.41 ERA, which would essentially make him our #2 starter.

3) The Unbearable Pointlessness of Eight Shutout Innings

Okay, being serious for a moment. I really want to know.

I got a message from someone last night that said, in effect, "When we brought in a relief pitcher in the 9th inning of a 5-0 game, I turned to my wife and said, 'Watch, we will proceed to lose this game.'" And I nodded.

Email me and tell me, BEFORE the meltdown got too far, you:

- a) thought we would manage to lose
- b) didn't think we'd lose, but found it plausible that we could
- c) figured we had it in the bag and even WE couldn't blow it

I am going to go out on a limb here and predict that I get very few (c) responses.

Now, I think it helps at this point to consider our relievers as being from the Uncomfortable Comedy School. I haven't decided whether Matt Herges is Michael Cera or perhaps Chief

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Wiggum, but imagine you are Andy LaRoche and what shame you must feel at actually making an out against Herges. Because, simply put, no one else did. A leadoff homer, a sharp single, and a pinch-hit double by Some Guy Named Moss later, and Herges had turned a 5-0 coaster into a 5-2 Save Opportunity with a runner in scoring position.

Now out trots Kerry Wood. It helps to think of him a Dwight Schrute. Oblivious to all sense of reason and proportion, Wood-Schrute begins peppering the ball zone (the opposite of the strike zone) with pitches varied and sundry, giving up a double to Super Jack Wilson, who has made Pirates fans almost forget Pat Meares, and raising the score to 5-3.

Let us pause here for a moment of silent ridicule for Delwyn Young, who struck out, generating three of the four swings-and-misses that Schrutewood would record on the night.

Andrew McCutchen bounced a single up the middle to make the score 5-4. And then the True Genius of Woot came through, walking Nyjer Morgan after having him 2-2, then walking Freddy Sanchez on five pitches.

Freddy Sanchez has about 300 plate appearances and has walked 16 times.

To walk Freddy Sanchez on 5 pitches is to throw such execrable gunk as to question whether your uniform should come with brown shorts and a vehicle with no doors.

And then, with the bases loaded, Schrood got ahead of Adam LaRoche, who had led off the inning with a homer, 1-2, both strikes looking, probably in raw, unadulterated disbelief.

Ball two.

Ball three.

A foul ball.

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And then, on a pitch that very well could have been ball four and tied the game (it looked like a strike to me, frankly: certainly too close to take with two strikes and if you're Adam LaRoche), LaRoche lifted a useless fly ball to right field for the final out.

The best part of this new-school humor: **Kerry Wood "earned" a SAVE. A save!**

For giving up two hits and two walks, giving up a run of his own and one of Cera's, and getting a massive two outs.

I mean ... c'mon!

That's
hysterical
!

Well, *I* was in awe.

4) Welcome back!

Somewhat lost in all the pitching heroics (either Huff being heroically good or the bullpen being heroically humorous) was that Grady Sizemore is back off the DL and once again playing center field. And pretty well, I should add: he made a nice play in the 4th that reminds us that Ben Francisco is, in fact, not really a center fielder.

More importantly to the Tribe, though, Sizemore smashed a two-run triple in the 3rd inning to go with a single in his first at-bat.

Although Sizemore didn't accomplish anything else at the plate after that, a 2-for-5 night with a tripe (less a "triple" than "a ball misplayed by Steven Pearce, who has less business playing right field than a small intestine") is a nice return.

5) Sergeant Clutch

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Jhonny Peralta is unlikely to be the "captain" of "anything" any time soon, but the fact is, Peralta smacked a two-out two-run single for Cleveland's only two-out RBI of the night, and later hit a solo shot off Some Guy Named Meek for what ended up being the margin of victory.

Peralta has had a very strange season to date: in April, he could draw a walk, but not actually hit, posting a .211/.294/.276 line. In May, he could walk and hit, but not for power, good for a .316/.398/.389 line, marking two straight months in the Tyner Zone.

Now in June, he can't really hit and walks a little less, but is flashing some pretty good isolated power in a .235/.297/.471 line.

It's good that that power has blossomed a bit: without it, Peralta is kind of a useless player. And it's good he takes walks, showing a patient approach and less of the parasitic infection.

A .780 OPS player is a useful player: I mean, the mighty Mark DeRosa has an .810 OPS on the season.

But DeRosa is doing it in a more useful way: Peralta needs to put all the various aspects of his offensive game together, or he doesn't belong on the field.

6) Late for the bus

This is the only explanation for Luis Valbuena's awful night at the plate: I can accept an 0-for-4 night, because everyone has them over the course of a season. But the man saw EIGHT PITCHES. Eight! And he struck out once!

That whiff was a marvelous three-pitch all-looking affair. That irks me in a Casey Blake kinda way. But what that means is that in the other THREE plate appearances, Valbuena saw FIVE pitches.

(He popped two of them up.)

Valbuena has been a real find, and is hitting .271/.353/.542 in June. But last night was dreadful.

7) A alternate viewpoint

But hilarious!

8) The problem of performing for a jaded audience

Uncomfortable Comedy is a hard enough gig, walking a fine line between uncomfortably funny and simply uncomfortable. But it's even harder when you're up against one of the most uncomfortably hilarious franchises of the past 15 years, the Pittsburgh Pirates.

And to this end, I have a proposal: we should trade for Ian Snell.

Why is this? Well, there are several reasons. The Pirates are tired of him, so you could probably get him for the equivalent of Mike Audrey or Ryan Garko.

He's apparently kind of a jerk, so the Pirates might discount you down to Greg Aquino or an epileptic aardvark (pre-arbitration).

He certainly isn't actually very good, as evidenced by this quote from manager John Russell:

"He really hasn't been very good all season," manager John Russell said.

But why do I want to trade for Ian Snell? Because he is HILARIOUS!

Consider his third inning, a masterpiece of Rembrandtian proportions:

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Snell gets ahead of Chris Gimenez 0-2, gives up a 1-2 single
Snell gets up on David Huff, trying to bunt, 1-2, but allows a sacrifice
Snell gets Jamey Carroll 2-2, nibbles (ball), nibbles (foul), nibbles (ball), walk
Snell gets up on Grady Sizemore 0-2, nibbles (ball), nibbles (foul), nibbles (ball), nibbles (foul), nibbles (ball), nibbles (foul), nibbles (foul), grooves one for a tripe
Snell falls behind Victor Martinez 2-0, battles to a full count, nibbles (foul), nibbles (foul), nibbles (ball), walk

Now, at this point, the ghost of [Charles Radbourn](#) comes out to complain that Ian Snell has thrown too many pitches. Children in the crowd begin to weep.

A large hump forms on Snell's right shoulder, and Snell begins shouting "Sanctuary!" on the mound.

Snell falls behind 3-0 to Shin-Soo Choo, walks him on five pitches
Snell falls behind 2-0 to Mark DeRosa, but comes back to strike him out on a 3-2 pitch

The ghost of Chad Fox' elbow hovered over the field, wailing that a) this time, he'd hold up for sure, and b) Ian Snell had thrown too many pitches in the inning.

Snell got ahead of Jhonny Peralta 1-2, then nibbled (ball), nibbled (ball), and gave up a two-run single to end his outing.

In all, Snell threw 50 pitches to 8 hitters, an AVERAGE of over EIGHT pitches per hitter. He threw NINE pitches out of the strike zone with **two strikes** on hitters.

He gave up THIRTEEN foul balls (although one was bunted foul by Huff).

He recorded two outs because David Huff sacrificed and Mark DeRosa disagreed on the location of one of the TEN 3-2 pitches Snell threw in the inning.

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See, you trade for Snell, and immediately we have our "Gareth" from the British "The Office:" clueless, belligerent, and unable to harness what talents he has. Also, Kelly Shoppach could encase the game ball in a Jell-O mold, and even MORE hilarity would ensue.

I'm telling you, I'm having a hard time seeing the downside of this.