

The Indians weren't able to duplicate Monday night's last-inning heroics, but they certainly seem to have Brian Fuentes' number. In today's B-List, Buff talks about what he expects the team's goals are for the rest of the season, why David Huff's night was statistically strange, welcomes back Andy Marte, and wishes Ben Francisco was a better baserunner. **FINAL**

Indians (42-59)	1	1	0	1
Angels (59-40)	0	0	3	0

W: M. Palmer (9-1) L: Huff (5-5) S: Bulger (1)

I suppose a season-ending 70-game winning streak was out of the question.

1) A treatise on global v. local strategy

In case there was someone left out there with some delusional belief that the Indians could sneak into the playoffs by winning the A.L. Central with 75 wins, let's just get this out of the way: the Indians are going to finish the season in 4th or 5th place, with a severely losing record, and are playing for next season. This season's results matter only insofar as "Baseball is good";

This team plays games with a different ultimate goal than a team like Calieheimgeles or St. Louis. Those teams want to win games in 2009 in order to compete for the championship in 2009. A condition we old math geeks call "necessary but not sufficient" is that these team win regular-season games in 2009: you can't win the Series without getting to the playoffs, and you can't get there unless you win more games than a majority of other teams. Win these now to play those later.

The Cleveland Indians are not in this position. Certainly winning an individual game in 2009 is more desirable than losing that game. No

one is trying to lose. This isn't the Bill Fitch Houston Rockets trying to draft Akeem Olajuwon. But the goal of any professional team is to win a championship ... even if it's not THIS championship. The Baltimore Orioles are not going to win the 2009 championship (sorry, aunts and uncles), so they have to play with the goal of winning *A* championship, meaning that they have to properly identify where that championship will be attainable and play THIS season with THAT goal in mind.

To this end, there were two reasonably-obvious questionable tactical decisions last night:

- a) trotting David Huff to the mound for the 8th inning with 102 pitches already thrown
- b) leaving Tony Sipp in to face Garry Matthews, Jr. with the bases loaded

Now, Matthews hits .173/.271/.288 against left-handed pitching (he hits better, but still poorly, against righties), so much of the wailing about leaving Sipp in is either post hoc analysis (you WANT a lefty facing Matthews there), but it is reasonable to ask if a guy who just walked two straight guys really has acceptable stuff.

(Frankly, the better question is, "Why not just let Smiff pitch to Izturis?" Izturis can't hit right-handed pitching very well, while he's posting a tiny-sample 1.000+ OPS against

lefties. I don't care if he stands on the opposite side of the plate and Smiff has a goofy delivery. Why not just let him hit?)

Here's where a different lens might help: remove the "win this game" lens and replace it with "develop a skill required for the team to win" model.

If David Huff can throw 7 innings and give up 3 runs, that's a fine thing. Hey, it's a Quality Start, with an extra inning tacked on. But if David Huff can develop the ability to go DEEPER into games, to start one more inning after already passing 100 pitches, that it a skill that good pitchers like Cliff Lee have. I'm not comparing Huff to Lee for reasons discussed in previous columns, but I am saying that I interpreted Huff's appearance on the mound in the 8th inning in the light of a guy who is being challenged to develop into more than a back-end starter.

Now, Huff is not that guy yet. The only split that makes Huff look even average is "vs. Pittsburgh Pirates." I was going to post a scathing description of how he needs to pitch better with guys on base, and when I looked it up, it turns out he DOES pitch better with guys on base. So that wasn't very insightful, insofar as it was, in fact, completely false. Falsehood is rarely

insightful. But if you're asking, "Was sending David Huff out there a bad idea," it is because you are leaving off the dependent clause "With respect to the goal of winning the game on 7/28/09." The real dependent clause that is important to the 2009 Cleveland Indians is "With respect to the goal of winning a championship with David Huff as a member of the team." And although I can't answer the question with a lot of certainty, I can at least understand the argument that it potentially was.

As for Sipp, well, same thing: is a team that features a Tony Sipp who can recover from self-inflicted foot wounds better than a team that doesn't? Sipp has very good stuff. This reminds me of the game in 2006 in which Ferd Cabrera was allowed to continue to plow ahead even after walking in a run on his third walked batter. He recovered from that, and the decision was made, for better or for worse, that it was worth coughing up a June game in a losing season for the potential of making Ferd Cabrera a dependable reliever. It didn't work, but not trying it certainly wouldn't have worked. Sipp certainly made a bad pitch, but this is the nature of development.

In the final analysis, I was disappointed to lose the game, but I don't see anything carved in stone that the decisions that led to the result were stupid and thoughtless: in fact, just the opposite. I see a real long-range plan behind them, and since Ordinary Suck is preferable to the Rudderless variety, I'm not too bent out of shape about it.

2) Stats as illuminators

One of the reasons I need stats is because I have a lot more experience and confidence in numbers than I have in my observational skills. More specifically, I have a much better idea of the limitations and strengths of numbers: I know that small sample sizes have limitations and I don't try to make them more meaningful than the data support. Whereas I used to watch Oddibe McDowell swing a bat and be CONVINCED that he was going to hit a laser somewhere, probably for extra bases. I was normally wrong. I had the same feeling about Gary Sheffield, and was often right. A guy with a lot more experience and skill at watching baseball players could probably explain to me why Oddibe McDowell was no Gary Sheffield (probably wrist strength), but I've learned

that I don't have this skill and am not willing to invest the time and money necessary to develop it. I can still enjoy watching baseball without having it developed to a fine degree.

I'm still not sure what to make of David Huff as a long-term career guy. He throws hard, but not very hard. He changes speeds, but not to a superior degree. He has a breaking ball, but not a great breaking ball. He's a guy. He's a rookie. He's a yoot. He gets some slack, but I have limited expectations as well.

One interesting thing about last night's game: in the first three innings, David Huff induced 8 ground ball outs (including a double play). The ninth out was on the basepaths. The only balls hit into the air were hits, part of a five-hit third inning that was really pretty awful.

Over the next four innings, Huff induced a total of TWO ground ball outs, got another on the basepaths, and got NINE outs in the air on a variety of popups and flies.

(Huff didn't strike anyone out, but the Angels as a team are not very whiff-prone.)

I mean, this is pretty weird. Does this suggest that Huff changed his approach in the 4th inning? Perhaps he went from a two-seamer to a four-seamer? Perhaps he wanted to show the Angels a different eye line his second and third time through the lineup? I can't recall another start in which Huff changed the KIND of pitching he did so severely in the middle of a game.

Anyway, Huff's overall numbers look kinda poor because he gave up two runs in the 8th (with "help" ... not "helpful help," but more "sarcastic help"). Had he been pulled after 7 IP, he'd have ended with 3 runs on 7 hits and 2 walks, which is very solid stuff: and it's not like he was out-of-gas-pounded in the 8th

. Erick Aybar saw four strikes in four pitches and beat out an infield hit, and Bobby Abreu has walked twice off every pitcher since his career started in

1934. At this point, I'm kind of stuck thinking of Huff as a guy getting Bulk Experience Innings rather than thinking I'm going to learn any great secrets about him in 2009.

3) Welcome back!

There have certainlyl been enough jokes told at Andy Marte's expense, from the horrific debut he made in 2006 to being deisgnated for assignment this spring, having no one claim him, and getting optioned back to Columbus as The Biggest Bust Ever To Bust Since Al Escobar and His Trick Knee. To Marte's credit, by all reports he simply worked hard, played every day, and produced very well in AAA. Sometimes it's hard to remember that he's still only 25 (if, in fact, he is), and may simply have needed some development time he didn't get on the bench in Cleveland.

Of course, he may also be a severely limited Jeff Manto Quality Quad-A player with a long swing. Reports are that he's shortened up his swing, and he's always had some decent plate discipline (check the 2006 archives). It's impossible to say without more major-league evidence, and I'm glad we're getting some actual data on which to evaluate him.

His 2-for-3 night with a walk was not quite as awesome as it might appear: one of the "singles" was a ground ball to second base. But 2-for-3 is a lot better than a collar of any size, and it would be a Fine Thing if Andy Marte morphed back into an acceptable ballplayer. And if the Tribe could get a team like the Twins to get antsy enough to offer something valuable for, say, Jhonny Peralta (Joe Crede is apparently hurt significantly), it could at least be plausible ...

4) Forced news, bad news

Having Joe Smiff induce a double play is good: waiting until after he's yielded the tying run on a sharp single is not quite as exciting.

Having Tony Sipp get the inning-ending flyout is okay, but not after a pair of full-count walks and a bases-clearing double by a feeble hitter. Actually, that's just shitty. Forget I brought it up.

5) Whispers in the shadows

Victor Martinez came up with the big blow last night, a three-run shot that effectively won the

game. The blow was big enough that people tended to overlook the fact that Martinez was 0-for-4 up until that shot.

Last night, Martinez drew a pair of walks off ersatz young gun Jered Weaver, which is still a fine skill to have. Martinez still has more walks than strikeouts (51 to 50) at this late date in the season, which is quite impressive. He's always been right in range (his career high in Ks is 78, and has never had more than 15 fewer walks than Ks), but has never finished on the "plus side" before. He's a wise, patient hitter with some pop.

But he also grounded into a pair of double plays, including one with the bases loaded in the 9th inning. He is hitting .169/.270/.247 in July, and his OPS has decreased each month.

He is 30 years old (officially), and is a catcher. It is entirely possible that Victor Martinez is worn down to a degree that Cleveland fans don't necessarily want to think about.

Keep this in mind over the next few days as rumors come out about the Indians listening to offers for Martinez. My gut feeling is that they are indeed ... and that it is not a mean, cheap, or foolish thing to do ...

6) The gentle downslope

Well, it was unreasonable to think that Jhonny Peralta's extra-torrid pace could continue, but the fact is, he still smacked a

home run and drove in a second run with a sac fly. His game-ending ground ball was hit rather well, too. Peralta is looking quite locked-in at the plate, and during such streaks he's a fun player to watch.

7) Tiny clutch

Driving in a run with a pinch-hit single off the opponent's nominal (but struggling) closer is a fine thing: it wasn't enough to tie the game, but Adorable J. Carroll's run-scoring single was a welcome shot and looked like it might be the catalyst for a big comeback.

(It wasn't, but Carroll is still darling.)

8) Nice hose!

Ben Fungusco gunned down Chone Figgins trying to score from first on a double to the center field wall. This was almost as impressive as his being gunned down trying to stretch a single into a double (by Juan Rivera). This net-zero basepath machination makes for good television, but doesn't do much for having the Indians actually win the damn game.