

The Tribe took a third consecutive series from an A.L. Central rival, winning two of three in Chicago this weekend, and Buff is happy to consider whether there are real signs of improvement from the roster of 2010. Jeremy Sowers went 7 innings for the third time in six starts, Luis Valbuena has been hitting like a regular since the All-Star Break, and Wyatt Toregas is on nearly a 200-RBI pace. Okay, well, maybe not Toregas. But he identifies a new marketing opportunity, and wonders if it's more impressive to hit three triples in two games, or ground into 6 double plays in one. He's pretty sure he knows which he'd like to see again, though.

FINAL	1	2	3	
Indians (47-62)	1	2	1	1
White Sox (56-54)	0	0	2	0

W: Sowers (4-7) L: Buehrle (11-6)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Indians (47-63)	0	0	2	2
White Sox (57-54)	1	0	0	0

W: D. Carrasco (4-1) L: Todd (0-1)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Indians (48-63)	0	0	0	0
White Sox (57-55)	0	3	0	0

W: Huff (6-6) L: Contreras (4-11)

Given the recent results of the Indians and Red Sox, it is empirically clear that the problem all along was Victor Martinez. (Of course that's tongue in cheek. Heck, that's tongue *through* cheek.)

1) Fairness, fandom, and the overlap of heart and head

Part of what I strive to do with this column is to cut a careful balance between a dispassionate look at what is reasonable and fair to expect and conclude from the team's recent performance and the impassioned emotional reaction I get from following the team. That is, part of being an intelligent fan is to understand that an 0-for-15 streak is completely normal and happens to even the finest players, and

that this says very little about the long-term prospects for future success. On the other hand, part of being a FAN is to understand that an 0-for-15 streak is really infuriating and makes me FEEL like the player in question is performing like an untrained beetle grub.

Part of my approach here is that I consider it perfectly fair to point out negative trends, even if the trend line isn't particularly long: for example, I have no lingering sense of guilt in pointing out that Kelly Shoppach strikes out with some frequency. I mean, he does. This isn't news, and it's not cruel nor mean-spirited to say something about it. On the other hand, it WOULD be unfair if that's ALL I ever mentioned about Kelly Shoppach. If it's fair to compare him to a West Texas wind farm, then there's also a certain obligation to point out that he singlehandedly produced more runs than the Chicago White Sox Friday night. There has to be some balance, or the column devolves into a sort of negative-tinged TMZ where all I do is mention how ugly everyone's shoes looked on the red carpet.

In this vein, then, consider my frustration with Jeremy Sowers. A good portion of my frustration is borne from the amount of time it has taken for Sowers to be a mid-rotation stalwart: he came up in 2006 when I began writing the B-List, and had some flashes of brilliance, including back-to-back starts in which he began the game with 5 perfect innings. Sowers was supposed to be a polished pitcher from the college ranks, a guy who might not have the lofty upside of a C.C. Sabathia or Adam Miller (guffaw!), but who would be major-league-ready in very short order. And here we are in 2009, three full years later, wondering if Sowers is even a guy we want to commit a roster slot to next year, when he is out of options. See, there's a sort of "heightened expectations" thing getting in the way of rational analysis here, although, in my defense, there's also a sort of "extended suckage" thing getting in the way as well.

It's perfectly fair to point out the troubles that Sowers has had with one of the truly crucial skills an effective starter must have: that is, the ability to go multiple times through a lineup. It is theoretically possible to be an effective starter that goes through a lineup exactly twice, but this would require a pitcher to throw 6 perfect innings every start and then leave. And even though Sowers has actually approached this asymptotic limit in the past, it's really not a reasonable way to

make a living. But consider Sowers' last six starts, since a poor start in a park ill-suited to his game (Wrigley Field):

7 IP, 6 H, 2 R
6 IP, 11 H, 5 R
5 1/3 IP, 5 H, 4 R
7 IP, 4 H, 0 R
6 IP, 4 H, 2 R
7 IP, 6 H, 2 R

Only once in these six starts did Sowers fail to complete a 6th inning, and in fully half he completed the 7th

. Four of these starts are Quality Starts, including the last three in a row. And, not coincidentally, 3 of Sowers' 4 wins on the season have come in this 6-game stretch.

What is it that drove me most to distraction when it came to Sowers' pitching? The fact that he has such terrible mid-late-inning fades: I won't post the stats again, but trust me when I say that familiarity with Sowers has, in the past, bred something even stronger than "contempt." But consider Friday's game, in which after two trips through the order, Sowers had given up 2 runs on 5 hits and a walk in 4 innings of work. In his third trip through the order, which is normally known as "The Sowers Disintegration Zone," Sowers recorded **nine straight outs**: perfect innings in each of the 5th, 6th, and 7th

innings, including two swinging strikeouts and 8 consecutive batters

being started with first-pitch strikes. He retired 12 in a row in all, and finished the 7th inning with 81 pitches.

Yes, he gave up a ground rule double and a walk to start the 8th and end his night, but those both came on 3-2 pitches and he was quite excellent from the 4th

through 7th

innings, something he had struggled to do in the past. Moreover, this isn't a one-game fluke, but rather an emerging pattern: not necessarily a significant-sample pattern, but you have to ask, "What am I asking for as a fan to give me a sign that this player is improving?" That's pretty much it, right? Yes, you want to see if he can do it for a much longer stretch, but you have to measure the data you have when you have them. The Browns can't win 8 games in September, and Jeremy Sowers can't post 10 Quality Starts in 6 starts. The question is, "Is it reasonable to be encouraged by this recent stretch," and I think it is.

2) Early transition results

I was a little surprised with the speed with which Justin Masterson was to be converted from reliever to starter, but there is an obvious plan with obvious implementation being executed here, and I'm all for a bit of decisiveness. This hasn't been a real strength with this team, so I'm all for it.

(As an aside, I would lobby for Alex White to be considered a starter long-term. If we sign him, I mean. I'm assuming that White is going to be one of those over-slot late signings that many first-rounders end up being. If there is a more-impotent, more poorly-considered professional sports policy than the Commissioner's "slotting recommendations" system, I don't want to hear about it, as I think I will have an aneurysm.)

Masterson's obvious, glaring weakness as a starter isn't his ability to go deep into games, but rather the fact that his delivery has to this point produced a sizable platoon split. So it was somewhat encouraging to see this kind of split from Saturday's game:

Right-handers: 1-for-6, 1 BB, 1 HBP, 1 K

Left-handers: 3-for-10, 3 K, 0 BB, 0 HBP

Well, I mean, no, letting left-handers hit .300 isn't anything tremendous, but it isn't terrible, either. And the .300 AVG translates into a .300 OBP as well, which is actually lower than the right-handers got. The three strikeouts from left-handers is particularly encouraging, suggesting that Masterson has at least one pitch that left-handers don't see as an incoming beachball: he's got *something* to keep left-handers honest (although, truthfully, I don't actually know what it is).

Now, look: hitting a guy on a 3-0 pitch, walking another, and uncorking a wild pitch is not exactly "fine control." Masterson threw first-pitch strikes to exactly half of his 18 batters, and 61 pitches through 4 innings is not particularly efficient (although it's not particularly inefficient, either). But 1 run on 4 hits and a walk in 4 innings while maintaining a 9.0 K/9 ratio is pretty good stuff, and Masterson conjured up a 7:1 GO:FO ratio as well. I'm nowhere near ready to carve him into a stone tablet representing the 2010 rotation, but

I'm encouraged by what I saw.

3) In the interest of completeness

David Huff pitched.

I like that he overcame a 3-run second to toss 4 more scoreless innings and get into the 7th. I dislike that this start lowered his ERA. He is a rookie. Reps are good. He, in contrast, is not. Yet.

Something to note: loading up a lineup full of right-handed hitters against David Huff is foolish: left-handed hitters hit .376/.447/.632 against him. I'm not certain which of those three numbers is most-terrifying. I think they all generate equal amounts of terror. Also, they stink.

4) Steroids, steroids, steroids!

Adorable J. Carroll smashed his second home run on the season.

Okay, yes, of course I am kidding here. I have no evidence that Carroll has used performance-enhancing drugs of any type, except maybe pixie-brewed enchanted bluebell dew wine. I have no suspicion that he's used PEDs. I don't even have an INTEREST. I'm just saying ... Jamey Carroll ... who guest-starred in Avenue Q as a Muppet ... hit a ball over the fence.

Carroll also hit a two-run double into the corner and went 2-for-4 on Friday. He is no longer in the Tyner Zone, sporting a SLG of .388 to an OBP of .387. Of players still on the roster with more than 20 AB (he has 183), Jamey Carroll's OPS is the 4th-highest.

5) One Man Gang

Kelly Shoppach faced Mark Buehrle with a runner on base in the second inning Friday. He hit an opposite-field home run to give the Tribe a 3-0 lead.

Kelly Shoppach faced Mark Buehrle with the bases empty in the fourth inning Friday. He hit an opposite-field home run to give the Tribe a 4-2 lead.

Because Chicago never scored again, Shoppach decided to take it easy on Buehrle and hit a mundane RBI single in the 6th inning.

6) Two, two, two outs in one!

The Indians grounded into an unfathomable 6 double plays on Friday. They also had a baserunner picked off first base, meaning that even though they got 11 hits, 3 walks, a hit batsman, and the benefit of an error, they only left four men on base while scoring 6 runs. And Mark Buehrle isn't even a groundball pitcher (G/F ratio this season: 0.89).

7) Let's take three

Shin-Soo Choo hit a triple off Buehrle on Friday, then hit ANOTHER triple off Octavio

Dotel on Sunday. This marked Cleveland's second triple of the game, as Luis Valbuena had hit one earlier in the game off Scott Linebrink. Apparently these guys are fast. And hustling. Also, Jermaine Dye is fifty-seven years old.

8) A quick note on hustling

[Joe Posnanski](#) writes a thoughtful piece on what it means to say, "The Kansas City Royals have quit on this season." His point is good: it's never as simply as, "Those guys aren't trying," but rather more like, "Those guys have stopped believing that what they do is going to make a significant difference in the

outcomes."

Say what you want about Eric Wedge (and Lord knows, I certainly have), but this does not happen to the Cleveland Indians. Other things, yes, but not this thing.

9) Fast Track

Valbuena's triple was one of four hits he had this weekend, going 2-for-4 with a double Saturday and 2-for-5 with a triple on Sunday.

In May, Luis Valbuena was very bad, hitting .188/.250/.313. In June, he got almost twice as many opportunities, and did only slightly better, hitting .200/.266/.400, showing a lot more pop than I gave him credit for, including 4 home runs.

In July, Valbuena had a minor hot streak, hitting .321/.368/.472 for an .840 OPS. And thus far in August, he has hit a robust .300/.364/.500, despite not having any more home runs.

Before the All-Star break, Valbuena hit very much in the manner of a young Seattle middle infielder, at a .219/.274/.387 clip. Since then, Valbuena has hit

.294/.368/.471, which would make him a starting-caliber LEFT FIELDER for the Cleveland Indians. For reference, Asdrubal Cabrera hits .311/.363/.454 on the season (although he, too, has flourished after the break as a .340/.371/.567 hitter, which IMO he plainly is not).

For as long as it seems to take our rookie pitchers to get their sea legs in the majors, the same does not seem to apply to our young middle infielders.

I do not see the point of Jason Donald on this team, except that it should be noted that Valbuena does not hit against left-handed pitching. (I don't mean he's

performed poorly: I mean he has 22 total AB against left-handed pitching. This is probably prudent and a fine way to break him into the big leagues, but you can't say that "Valbuena can't hit lefties" with any empirical confidence.)

10) The game of his life!

I may remain confused about a long-term plan that involves Wyatt Toregas in it, but it should be noted that he collected 3 RBI in a 2-for-3 Sunday. Of course, one of those "RBI singles" nearly made it all the way to the shortstop, but the man now has 4 RBI in 11 AB, which projects to 182 RBI over a 500-AB season.

(This is unlikely. Either part of it.)

11) Worth Mentioning

Jhonny Peralta had hits in each of the three games, going 5-for-13. He had a double in each game.

Shin-Soo Choo collected 4 hits and 3 walks in the series and reached base in each game.

Asdrubal Cabrera got a hit in each game.

Trevor Crowe is apparently our everyday left fielder. Every day.

13) Crank up the marketing machine

In four August appearances, Kerry Wood has gone 1 complete inning each time, including pitching back-to-back games August 6th and 7th. He has given up 4 hits, 0 runs, and walked no one while striking out 4 hitters.

You would have to think that whatever problems Wood was having earlier in the season have now been ironed out: Wood

looks fluid and dominant, and would be an outstanding late-season addition to a contender with a thin or weak bullpen. Sure, he has a massive contract, but if the Indians kicked in a significant portion of his salary, he would be a tremendous add. Think about what kind of message that would send not only to your fans, but to your ballclub: we are willing to do what it takes to shorten ballgames and add an experienced back-end bullpen arm, and all it will cost us is a bit of cash. Is there a team out there proactive enough to make sure a bold maneuver? We shall see ...