

## The B-List: 8/11

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}  
Tuesday, August 11 2009 7:00 PM -

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With Cliff Lee in Philly and Carl Pavano in Minnesota, there's a new ace in town when it comes to the Indians starting rotation. That man is Aaron Laffey. Since returning from the DL in July, Laffey has made six starts: four of them have been Quality, and three have been flat-out excellent. Only one was a true clunker, and he has a 2.63 ERA over those six starts. Laffey is our ace ... but is there any chance he can become a real ace? In today's B-List, Buff says the notion is not completely laughable.

FINAL

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Indians (49-63)

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W: Laffey (6-3)

L: Nippert (3-1)



A nice birthday present from the pitching staff.

## 1) The meaning of "Ace";

There are two colloquial uses of the term "Ace"; one of which sort of implies the second. In its purest form, an Ace is the top pitcher on a staff who is truly excellent, certainly one of the 30 best pitchers in the league. It is possible for a staff to have more than one such pitcher (cf. mid-90s Atlanta Braves), in which case there is then an interesting argument about which one of them is "really THE Ace";

At that point you're splitting hairs and working off nebulous perceptions.

I mean, who was the Ace of the 2008 Cleveland Indians?

The second usage is broader, mostly from a sense of completeness: the best starter in a team's rotation is sometimes called "their Ace"; with the modifier being important. You can say that John Lannan is "the Ace"; of the Washington Nationals.

You'd be hard-pressed to convince me that he is actually "an Ace";

Sure, he has a 3.58 ERA ... but he strikes out 3.82 guys per 9 innings, has a horrible K:BB ratio, and has a lot more "pretty good"; in him than "great";

Picking the "Ace"; of the Minnesota Twins seems like a self-defeating exercise.

The concept of the Cincinnati Reds' Ace is simply hilarious.

In the second vein, then, it is pretty clear that as of August 12, 2009, "the Ace"; of the Cleveland Indians staff is Aaron Laffey. Laffey sports a 3.25 ERA, just a hair higher than Actual Ace Cliff Lee had when he departed (3.14). The next-best starter ERA is Jeremy Sowers' 4.75, a full RUN-AND-A-HALF higher. Carl Pavano's departed 5.37 was worse.

Tomo Ohka's 6.11 makes children weep.

Fausto Carmona and David Huff have had Geneva Convention injunctions filed against them in 12 states.

Zach Jackson is actually considered evil at this point.

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And Laffey certainly does some things very well. With 6 2/3 scoreless innings, Laffey has lowered his home ERA to 1.58 with a perfect 4-0 record.

Since returning from the DL in July, Laffey has made six starts: four of them have been Quality, and three have been flat-out excellent.

Only one was a true clunker, and he has a 2.63 ERA over those six starts.

On the other hand, there are things that Laffey does NOT do very well. Once again, Laffey managed to walk three batters, more than the two he struck out.

This is very Lannanesque stuff here.

Laffey loaded the bases in the first inning with one out, and was fortunate to induce a double play to Josh Hamilton

to get out of the jam.

And I say "fortunate," because the normal calling-card groundball stuff was missing from Laffey's repertoire last night, with more outs recorded in the air (10) than on the ground (8).

In fact, the margin seemed very thin indeed last night: four of the outs in the air were low enough to be described as "line outs," and two of the ground outs were actually exceptional plays by Asdrubal Cabrera ranging around his shortstop position.

Make half the lineouts hits and limit Cabrera to one exceptional play per inning, and this is no longer such a terrific start.

On the other other hand, Laffey is having a better season at 24 than he did at 23, which is better than the season he had at 22. It bears mentioning that when David Huff was 24, he was terrible (he is older than Laffey) with a 6.72 ERA.

When Jeremy Sowers was 24, he was undergoing his sophomore slump, posting a 6.42 ERA in the majors and spending much of his time in Beefalo.

When Fausto Carmona was 24, he was posting an ERA nearly two-and-a-half runs higher than his brilliant first full season, yielding more walks than strikeouts with a 5.45 ERA (and continues to wander in the wrong direction at 25).

Jake Westbrook made 6 starts in 23 appearances and put up a 5.85 ERA at age 24.

And Cliff Lee's Age 24 season featured his first full season in the majors, posting a 5.43 ERA that excited very few, except for the fact that he struck out 161 hitters in 179 innings.

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Laffey's 3.25 ERA is a true outlier in this set, except arguably for Carmona's Age-23 3.06, which looks more and more like a fluke.

On the other other other hand, Laffey's 3.25 ERA looks kind of unsustainable given his other peripherals. His K:BB ratio of 1.22 is awful, and he is striving to reach the 5.0 K/9 mark. He is allowing hitters to slug an unfathomably-low .325 off him, which is great if it's For Real, but I'm doubtful that it really could be.

Cliff Lee allowed hitters to slug .348 off him when he WON THE CY YOUNG.

Ultimately, statistics can be used in two ways: to explain what DID happen, and to predict what IS LIKELY TO happen. The statistics DO say that Aaron Laffey has pitched some very good ballgames. They also DO say that if he continues to pitch in exactly the same manner, the future ballgames are unlikely to be as good.

He really DID start out pretty poorly last night, loading the bases in the first and putting two men on in the second (the third out of that inning was one of the lineouts, so damage was narrowly avoided there).

He really DID finish well, giving up a solid single and a blooper in his final 11 batters over his last three innings.

After two innings, he had given up two walks and three singles: in nearly five innings after that, he gave up 1 walk and 3 hits.

If asked to make a snap judgement right now, I would tell you that Aaron Laffey is not likely to become an Ace in the sense of the first definition: he does not miss enough bats nor have enough command to get to this point. On the other other other other hand, the lessons of the other pitchers listed above at Age 24 warn us of making too-sweeping a statement about what is possible and what is IMpossible. (Improbable is different from impossible.)

He is clearly the best starting pitcher for the Cleveland Indians right now, though, and as long as that comes with a 3.25 ERA and a 2/3 Quality Start rate, that's not necessarily simply damning with faint praise.

Also, he has a superior middle name.

## **2) Nugget**

This is where I would encourage you to look up the lyrics to the Cake song if I were sure you would not be offended by such things.

Joe Smiff was given a chance to retire a left-handed hitter with two outs in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning, and upon failing, gave way to left-hander Tony Sipp to face the horrific-split-wielding Hank Blalock.

Sipp went to a full count on Blalock, but after a foul ball, got him to ground out to short.

In the next inning, Sipp got a swinging strike two from David Murphy before striking him out looking.

He then got a PAIR of swinging strikes to Jarrod Saltalamacchia to strike him out swinging.

And then Elvis Andrus was able to make contact with the two pitches he swung at, but only to foul them off. He did not make contact with the last pitch he did not swing at, which was strike three.

In Sipp's last six appearances, he has given up 1 hit and no runs. He has walked ZERO batters (which was a problem earlier in the season) and struck out 6 in 5 innings of work, lowering his ERA from 5.51 to 4.22. Batt  
ers hit .176 off Sipp for the season, including .140 in Not Jacobs Field and .063 in August.

With runners in scoring position, batters hit .167 off Sipp (although they sport a .375 OBP because of his wildness in May and July).

## **3) A fine job in his own right**

Some questioned the decision to lift Aaron Laffey in a "learning season," wondering

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if maybe his development might be more served by encouraging him to power through the last out of the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, but from my perspective, it's worth remembering that Aaron Laffey is not the only player on the roster we'd like to develop.

If Joe Smiff is going to be a valuable part of the bullpen, isn't part of his charge to be the guy who comes on with a runner on base and gets the tough right-handed hitter out without any damage?

Michael Young may not be the ultra super All-Star he once was, but the man is hitting .320 on the season. This is exactly the sort of hitter Smiff is on the roster to eliminate, and by golly, that is what he did.

In fact, Smiff did more than this, throwing a remarkable 15 strikes in 17 pitches to pitch one complete inning with a K and (obviously) no walks. He did give up a single to Josh Hamilton, but there I thought it was a nice piece of "development encouragement" to see if HE could power through the inning. He did get Hamilton down 0-2 with a swinging strike, so credit more goes to Hamilton than blame to Smiff.

(In my opinion, lifting him for Sipp was perfectly rational strategy: I have no complaint about either the decision to let Smiff pitch to Hamilton or to be removed immediately thereafter.)

After a truly dreadful April, in which he walked 5 in 6 1/3 innings and hemorrhaged a 7.11 ERA, Smiff has posted a 2.79 ERA in 9 2/3 innings in June, a 2.35 ERA in 7 2/3 innings in July, and a 0.00 ERA in 2 1/3 innings in August. He hasn't walked anyone since the All-Star break and has struck out 25 in 26 IP on the season. I'm wondering if he didn't simply START the season injured without adequately alerting the staff, because since coming back, he has been as effective a right-handed reliever as we've had since Raffy Betancourt's Gork Year.

#### **4) And the wind cries, "Scrubeeenie";**

It is moderately impressive that Dustin Nippert struck out 10 batters in 6 innings.

But only moderately so, because six of the batters he faced were Kelly Shoppach and Andy Marte.

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---

Shoppach struck out twice against Nippert and was able to persevere long enough to strike out against reliever Doug Mathis as well. (Shoppach was the only batter of the six Mathis faced to whiff.)

Marte, in contrast, was able to strike out three times in three trips to the plate against Nippert, including one in which he looked so disinterested in strike three as to question whether he has serial narcolepsy.

In other words, Nippert struck out 5 Indians in 22 batters against the other seven hitters, and 5 of the 6 Super Triple Windmills he faced. So I'm not reading a lot into Dustin Nippert as a super power pitcher here.

### 5) Sotto voce

The only other Tribesman to strike out more than once was Grady Sizemore. When is that surgery scheduled?

### 6) The danger of the outlier, or Local Announcer Follies

At one point in the game (which was carried on Channel 77 in Austin instead of on FOX or another real channel), the Rangers announcers (who I've [mentioned before](#)) were talking about how Nippert was really pitching a great game except for "that one bad inning."

Yes, well, the Denver Broncos would have beaten the Washington Redskins in Super Bowl XXII if not for "that one bad quarter."

Now, really, the guys had a point: in his other five innings of work, Nippert gave up 0 runs on 2 hits and struck out 8 while walking only 1. The Indians' offense was almost totally useless in 7 of the 8 innings.

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But ... geez ... you walk a couple guys and give up a bomb, that's a tough-luck loss because of one inning. When you give up:

single

single

HBP

walk

single

Double

K

sac fly

K

That's really just more a case of extended suck, isn't it?

Hey! Guess who the Ks were? Hard to believe!

### 7) This having been said

The pitch Hafner hit for an RBI single was up around his collar bone and nothing like a hittable strike. Not much Nippert could do about that.

### 8) Unexpected

Shin-Soo Choo stole his 17<sup>th</sup> base on the season. This leads the team. He also leads the team in OPS (which is less unexpected, but still not something I would have predicted with great confidence).

Luis Valbuena is slugging .015 less than Grady Sizemore. He has a higher SLG than Jhonny Peralta AND Kelly Shoppach.

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If Jamey Carroll played left field, he would have a higher OPS than the last two men to play the position regularly (Ben Fungusco and Trevor Crowe). Jamey Carroll is *nine years old*.