

The B-List: 9/24

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The losing string extends to 11, but not before the Indians take their first LEAD in OVER 70 INNINGS! Huzzah! In The B-List, Buff talks about the role of broken bats in last night's game, and why the broken bullpen is making him far more upset than any single Inning of Crap by Carlos Carrasco. He applauds Shin-Soo Choo's reponse to Ferd Rodney, laments more Squander Ball, and notes that Michael Brantley gets on base. Which he likes. **FINAL**

Tigers (82-70)	0	0	0	4
Indians (61-91)	0	0	2	0

W: Verlander (17-9) L: Carrasco (0-3) "S";: Rodney (35)

We had a lead! For nearly half an inning! Out of the last 80!

My cup runneth over ... with suck.

1) Shattered bats, shattered dreams

Justin Verlander throws hard. This does not rise to the level of "original insight," but it is true nonetheless. And through two innings, Verlander looked virtually unhittable, collecting 4 strikeouts in 6 batters; for the game, Verlander ended with 11 Ks in 7 innings of work. He doesn't just throw hard, he is an excellent pitcher, and it showed.

Still, in the third inning, Trev Crowe was able to poke Verlander's first offering for a single, and then followed perhaps the least-explicable sequence not involving Pia Zadora being paid money to act:

Andy Marte (Andy Marte!): double
Wyatt Torgas starts 0-2, then draws a walk

Now, let's pause here for a moment to theorize what is going through Verlander's head at this point. Wyatt Toregas is a neat guy. He is named for Wyatt Earp because his parents were watching a Western while trying to decide on what to name their child. He has an amusing, well-crafted goatee. He is one of the catchers to ever play for the Cleveland Indians. But here is the scouting report on Wyatt Toregas:

Can. Not. Hit.

Wyatt Toregas has 8 hits at the major-league level, and not ONE of them has gone for extra bases. He has good plate discipline, with 6 walks in 50 plate appearances, but ... guys ... let's be frank. Wyatt Toregas can't hurt you with a bat. Well, I mean, he probably can: bats are hard and he's a strong guy. But he can't hurt you by hitting a BASEBALL with a bat, only your *body*. To walk Wyatt Toregas on four straight pitches after having him down 0-2 is basically saying, "I have disengaged my brain from this process." Possibly, "I have leprosy, and the fingers have fallen off my pitching hand." Potentially, "I promised a child in the hospital that I would walk Wyatt Toregas tonight." I have little insight into the inner motivations of Justin Verlander. I will say this: that's something you proly wanna avoid there, Jay Vee.

The next hitter, Michael Brantley, has, in fact, gotten a extra base hit. Well over 2 of them, in fact. But Verlander challenged him with an inside fastball on a full count, and Brantley uncoiled his sub-mighty swing and actually pulled a ball that was likely in the mid-90s. I mean, that's a tough pitch (right on the inside corner, possibly not, but you certainly can't take that pitch 3-2 if you're a rookie and he's Justin Verlander). And Brantley's mighty swing resulted in a mighty short bat handle in his hand, because he bat turned to shards of wood.

However, the ball found the hole between first and second, and Brantley ended up with a two-run single for his efforts. Cleveland had it's first lead in ANY inning of ANY game in the past 70-plus innings.

Now, Ferd Rodney ostensibly throws hard as well. It doesn't LOOK as hard as Verlander's, but part of that is the difference in the two men's deliveries, and also due to the fact that Ferd Rod rarely has a lot of advance knowledge about where the f&#(the ball is going. But after trying his level best to blow the game out his sizable wazoo, Rodney faced Jhonny Peralta, who had only recently ended a marvelous 0-for-26 slide with a single earlier in the game, with the tying run on first and two outs.

Peralta was fooled by the pitch, and inside garfball of some sort: I can't really pinpoint what Rodney was throwing there, but it looked perhaps like a high slider or maybe a chicken pot pie. It didn't seem like a very good pitch. It certainly wasn't as hard as Verlander's sawer, but Peralta hit the ball with that section of bat that is three millimeters thick on the handle in order to generate extra bat speed, and the bat turned into a Hefty bag full of matchsticks as the ball looped toward the hole between shortstop and third.

And then Brandon Inge made a nice reaction play to snare the ersatz liner to end the game.

Given my choice of only one, I would certainly still have taken Brantley's, which drove in two runs, while Peralta's probably wouldn't have even advanced the runner from first to third. However, I kind of wanted both, frankly.

2) Smash-Soo Choo!

Sometimes when a pitcher throws a pitch near a batter's head, it is to send a message, and I think this was definitely the case with Ferd Rodney last night. The message is, "I have the control of a pithed frog with electrodes connected to my amphibian brain stem." I don't think that Rodney was so much throwing at Choo's head as he was hoping that he was pointed in roughly the right direction when he let the ball go. This is like getting upset that a teenage driver with a learner's permit stalls out his mother's manual-shift car making a left turn at a light,

or when Kelly Shoppach strikes out. This is the skill set. You live with the skill set.

However, it is gratifying when one of your players displays the appropriate response to this "message," and Choo's blast off a Rodney crunkball not only sent a return message to the Tigers, but it narrowed the game to 6-5, meaning that if Cleveland had somehow produced a decent relief pitcher since 2007, they would have won the game.

Neat stat: Choo sports the second-highest total bases per game on the Indians with 1.82. For comparison's sake, Victor Martinez had a 1.77. The highest? Grady Sizemore (1.83), of all people.

3) Wait, don't you usually write about the starter first?

Only when he's interesting.

I'm more upset with the bullpen, anyway.

4) The Hata Interlude

Here's why I'm upset with the bullpen: it's foolish hindsight to say that the two runs allowed by the bullpen cost us the game. There was no compelling reason to believe that the Indians would score three runs in the last two innings to make the game as tight as it was, not before the fact. But those two runs did ultimately cost us the game, or at least made it that much tougher to come back.

But more importantly, the two guys who did the very worst job last night are two of

the guys who will be utterly CRUCIAL to the 2010 team having any legitimate shot at success. And they've been screwing things up for a while now.

Consider poor Jensen Lewis, who was charged with an earned run. Why? Because he gave up a 1-out single in his second inning of work. Then, facing Detroit's best hitter in Mig Cabrera, he pumped four completely unhittable pitches past him (one out of the strike zone) to whiff him swinging. Cabrera swung and missed at THREE PITCHES in the plate appearance. And then, with the left-handed Aubrey Huff due up with two outs, Lewis got yanked for Tony Sipp.

Now, a word about Aubrey Huff: toast. Here are some more words about Aubrey Huff: cannot hit left-handed pitching. I mean, he used to be able to, but this year, he is "hitting" .232/.294/.356 off lefties. That's just awful. And here's the thing: Tony Sipp threw two strikes to Aubrey Huff, and Huff swung and missed at both of them. Sipp had pretty much established that Aubrey Huff could not hit one of Tony Sipp's pitches. However, Sipp is SUCH a blunderbuss, SUCH a ta-ra-ra-goon-de-ay, that he walked Huff on six pitches (two swings and missed, four balls). I mean, that's just infuriating.

And it's all the more infuriating because the next hitter drove home Lewis' run.

Not to be outdone, Chris Perez picked right up where he left off, relieving Sipp and striking out Brandon Inge (excellent), then starting his next inning in Brownian Motion Mode (piss-poor). Gerald Laird took a strike and two balls before bailing Perez out with a fly out, and then Ramon Santiago walked on five pitches.

Again, this is simply infuriating. Not simply because Santiago isn't a good hitter (he's not, but that's not really the point), but because this is the same pattern that set me off a couple days ago. It's the start of the inning. There's no one on base. And your stuff is good, man! Make him beat you, fer Crissakes!

To compound this, Perez got the next hitter and was ahead of Potato Head 1-2, but because he threw two more balls to Polanco, Santiago had more options, and stole second base, which directly meant that he scored on Polanco's single, something he wouldn't have done had Perez thrown strikes.

But as infuriating as any single-game failure might be, the fact is that a huge part of Cleveland's make-or-breakness in the past five years has been almost exclusively the bullpen. We've been through this before: in 2005 and 2007, the bullpen was very good, and so was the team. In 2006 and 2008, the bullpen was pretty awful, and so was the team. This season is a bit hard to draw any grand conclusions from, since the pitching staff has been shitty up and down the board, but you have to look at the data and conclude that having a strong bullpen is crucial the Indians' success.

Well, who is going to make up the 2010 bullpen? We want to avoid the Greg Aquinoes and Vinny Chulks and Matt Herges reclamation-type projects, although I'm not averse to riding a hot hand here and there. Whatever. The thing is, the BULK of the bullpen should be set: we have young guys, all with major-league experience, and some nontrivial amount of talent. This is exciting and encouraging. But only if they pull their collective HEADS out of their RUMPS and PITCH.

Look, I see next year's bullpen as something like this:

J. Lewis
J. Smiff
R. Perez
Sipp
Todd
C. Perez
Wood

I'd like to trade Wood, so plug Veras in and slide C. Perez to closer. Whatever. And there could be other guys involved: I don't want to get too exacting here. The point is, guys like Chris Perez and Tony Sipp are ENORMOUS for next season ... and their Septembers have been Garbage on a Stick. Perez' September ERA is 8.38. Sipp's is 2.00, but he's allowed inherited runners to score and has walked 5 guys in 9 innings. These are the guys who HAVE to perform well (face it, are you excited by the prospect of more innings for Raffy Perez at this point?), so when they blow games like this, it is disheartening to a HUGE degree.

5) This having been said

I see nothing from Carlos Carrasco that suggests that he is ready to make 30 starts in the major leagues. 4 shutout innings is good. 1 **Inning of Crap™** is not. He's a guy. He's 22. He's not ready. Let's move on.

6) Squander Ball Update

In the 6th inning and two outs, Luis Valbuena drew a hard-fought walk off Verlander, advancing Travis Hafner to second. One wild pitch later, there were two runners in scoring position for Trev Crowe to tie the game with a single. Which he did not get.

In the 8th inning, after Hafner doubled home Shin-Soo Choo, Valbuena again came through with a bloop single to advance Hafner to third. However, Crowe's subsequent ground ball to first reminded everyone of just how poorly Andy Marte handled the similar chance the night before, as Mig Cabrera gunned down Hafner at the plate. Ironically, it was Marte who strode to

the plate next ... and he promptly lined out to second.

7) Interpretation bias vs. blind squirrel

Hafner had a nice 3-for-5 night with the double, two singles, and an RBI.

However, after a pre-Break line that made him look very valuable (.289/.389/.556), Hafner has batter a paltry .247/.317/.390 after the All-Star Break, including .233/.324/.367 in September before last night's game (now his Sept. is .262/.342/.400, which is still not DH-quality, but is significantly better).

You would like to believe that this is more a cold string from Hafner than a chronic wear-down of his shoulder, but ... well, let's just say I'm not placing a lot of money on the cold string.

8) Learning Opportunity

Mike Brantley is ostensibly fast, but coming into last night's game had actually been caught stealing more times (4) than he'd been successful (3). So in one sense, it's nice to take the Lost Season Opportunity for him to develop this skill and send him anyway, and he successfully swiped his 4th bag of the season, as well as getting two hits and 2 RBI.

I understand the issue with having a left fielder with ABSOLUTELY ZERO POWER, and it's not really that good when a .337 batting average translates into a .756 OPS. I mean, that's just not very good for such a high average. If he's hitting "only" .280, he's probably not even an offensive plus overall, much less in left. One reason I'm encouraged, though: in 21 games, Brantley has at least one hit in 17 of them. He has reached base in TWENTY of them. That is, in three of his four collars, he drew at least one walk. And where you might want to make some point about September

competition being dilluted, 15 of those 21 games have come against teams fighting for the playoffs (Det 6, Min 6, Tex 3), so he's holding his own against some very fine company.

I'm far from guaranteeing success in 2010, but I'll go on record as saying a leadoff guy who reaches base every game is kind of a good thing to have.