

The B-List: 9/25-9/27

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Great googly moogly! The Indians snap their 11-game losing streak in style, sweeping the hapless Orioles this weekend to run THEIR losing streak to 10 games. In this version of The B-List, Buff talks about how David Huff has made him reconsider, how Fausto Carmona looked professional, and how Jeremy Sowers ... um ... so, how about that home run by Kelly Shoppach, huh? Buff pulls on his salesman's cap, as well as another Completely False Statement, and looks to Chicago. **FINAL**

		1		2	
Orioles (60-93)	0	1	0	0	0
Indians (62-91)	0	0	0	0	0

W: Carmona (4-12) L: D. Hernandez (4-9) S: K. Wood (20)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Orioles (60-94)	0	0	0	0
Indians (63-91)	0	0	0	4

"W": K. Wood (3-3) L: Jim Johnson (4-6)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Orioles (60-95)	0	0	0	0
Indians (64-91)	6	0	0	2

W: Huff (11-8) L: Tillman (2-5)

Man, the Orioles have lost 10 in a row. Imagine rooting for a team like that!

1) Mea, meet culpa

Here's my favorite stat from Sunday's game: the Orioles hit 0-for-1 with runners in scoring position. And the only reason they had that opportunity was because of an error.

Oh for ONE.

How dominant was David Huff on Sunday? Well, "dominant" isn't really the right word: "dominant" should be reserved for a pitcher who saws through a lineup multiple times with several perfect innings and a bunch of Ks. Huff struck out 5 hitters and was certainly in control, but he was more efficient than dominant.

On the other hand, the Orioles didn't get a baserunner to second base until the 8th inning, when Huff appeared to tail off after the 100-pitch mark. After getting Jeff Fiorentino down 0-2, he threw three straight balls before getting him to K swinging, but this was a warning sign, as Justin Turner reached on a 1-0 error and Cesar Izturis walked on 4 pitches. Thankfully, Gil Rodriguez flew out on the first pitch he saw, Huff's 112

th

, and the inning was over.

One key for Huff's success before the 8th was hidden from the RISP stat because everyone else he put on base stayed glued to first: in the first 7 innings, Huff held the Orioles to 0-for-11 with 0 walks with a runner (literally "a" in this case) on base, including a pair of double-play grounders. He was obviously effective in EVERY situation, really, but was especially effective with a runner on base, and this helped result in 8 shutout innings.

Huff's 6 other baserunners before the 8th came on 5 singles and a walk, meaning that even when the O's were putting the ball in play well, it wasn't anything too damaging. For a guy who has yielded a .483 SLG over the course of the season, this is a pretty big deal. In fact, in his superior September (4 starts), he's actually held hitters in the Tyner Zone, with opponents hitting a paltry .214/.280/.255 off him. Considering that his

other months ended with slugging percentages of .680, .450, .550, and .559 (the last, August, including a couple of good starts, which is a little scary), this is a Very Big Deal.

Now, of course, Baltimore is a bad team, and 4 starts is not a lot of starts. Anyone can have a good 4-game stretch, and Cleveland fans better than most know better than to draw a lot of grand conclusions from a strong September. But here's the thing: after some flippant comments earlier in the year about Huff being frustrating to watch and wondering out loud if there was any "there" there, Adam Burke publically cautioned me that I was expecting WAY too much immediacy from a rookie pitcher in his first exposure to the majors. I countered that while I might have been exaggerating a bit, the fact was, I saw no actual THING from Huff that predicted sustainable success. That is, Fausto Carmona has a very heavy sinker: he doesn't command it particularly well, but you could certainly SEE that IF he learned to command it, there was the POTENTIAL for something very effective there. With Huff, I can't necessarily even identify his repertoire.

So here I am, publically acknowledging that Adam was

right insofar as managing expectations: regardless of whether this stretch represents "the Real David Huff" or "a Really Lucky Gork" or somewhere in between, the fact is, when asked in the summer what I needed to see from David Huff to consider him a legitimate major-league pitcher, this stretch is pretty much what my answer was.

There are still warning signs: 16 Ks in 27 IP without serious ground ball numbers is not really very good, and a 16:9 K:BB ratio is really not quite what I want, especially since this represents the high end of what Huff has provided. But he just turned 25 a month ago, it's still his rookie year, and look: the man has five excellent starts in a row. The warning here, of course, is, to look at Jeremy Sowers' 2006 campaign (specifically 7/22 - 9/5, or 8/13 - 9/5 if you want a more direct comparison). Right now, though, in September 2009, David Huff is Cleveland's best starting pitcher.

Postscript: I still cannot tell you how David Huff gets batters out. I'm not saying he has no stuff, I'm just saying that I don't see any particular thing that sets Huff apart from any other guy. I strongly advocate teaching

him a cutter.

2) .Fausto.

There was no more encouraging first inning thrown by any pitcher in the majors than Fausto Carmona's first inning Friday: of the seven pitches he threw, every one was a strike. Hitters watched four of them, meaning they were actually in the strike zone according to the umpire, and the three swings produced a fly out, a foul out, and a swinging K. For a guy with MAJOR command/control problems (and I mean both things here), this is about as great a first inning as he could possibly have.

Sure, he started 5 of the 6 hitters in the second inning with balls and allowed a run on three singles, then walked the leadoff hitter in the third, so it's not like Carmona is now Officially Yip-Free or anything so grandiose, but Carmona's troubles usually start so early in the game that this first inning was worth commending.

Overall, Carmona's numbers were more workmanlike than excellent: he gave up 9 hits in 6 innings, including two doubles and a homer. His first single in the 2nd looked like it was going to be a double. He was bailed out by a double play and two doubles that did not score the runner on first base (one because it was a ground rule double, the second because Ty Wigginton has the speed of an opiated koala). Still, as with Huff, it's probably more instructive to ask, "What would you have to see from Carmona to consider him an asset in 2010?"

a) He needs to walk few hitters

He did this, walking 1 and not hitting any

b) He needs to throw strikes

This two, was good, with 65 strikes in 92 pitches

c) It would be helpful to miss bats

Carmona struck out 6 in 6 IP, 1 per inning, including 4 swinging, and got 9 swings and misses overall.

d) He needs to keep the ball in the park and get ground balls

He did sport an 8:4 GO:FO ratio, although he did get taken out by Nick Markakis.

e) He needs to limit the damage with runners on base

Despite allowing multiple baserunners in each of the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th innings, he only gave up 1 run as a result (the other run coming on a leadoff

(hence solo) homer).

Is this a great start? Well, no: it's Quality, but 9 hits in 6 innings isn't exactly masterful. It sure beats his past three starts, though.

3) No excuses, but an explanation would be nice

At first glance, Jeremy Sowers' start Saturday was so Jeremy Sowers it makes me weep: 4 innings of 2-hit shutout ball followed by an **Inning of Sowers**
TM

in which he yielded 5 runs on 4 hits in the 5th

inning for the umpty-umpth time and everyone went, "Well, doy! It's Jeremy

Sowers!"

However, the weather was poor (there was a light rain during much of the game), and you get this passage from the AP writeup:

An intermittent drizzle fell throughout and Sowers appeared to be bothered by a wet mound during the Orioles' rally. Trainer Lonnie Soloff twice visited the left-hander, who took warmup pitches and continued. During those delays, the grounds crew applied drying material to the mound and parts of the infield.

"I don't want to make excuses, it was a situation you have to deal with," said Sowers, who said his left hamstring cramped up while he was scraping mud off his spikes.

"It just sort of locked up," Sowers said. "I don't think it affected what I did, though you are already apprehensive because of the conditions. I lost focus."

Okay, see, here's the thing: I appreciate a guy not wanting to "make excuses." You want guys to be accountable for their own performances. Manly manliness and we're all grownups

here and no excuses and wagga wagga wagga.

But there is a difference between an "excuse" and an "explanation." I would like for the hamstring to be the *explanation* for Sowers' very very very very bad fifth inning. You know why?

Because if it isn't, J, then it means you simply *suck*. I want *less* suck. Please don't suck.

4) The Middle Infield of the Future!

There are many fine middle infield combos in the majors. One of the finest last year was directly responsible for bringing the World Series title to Philadelphia, as Jimmy Rollins and Chase Utley were both superb players, arguably better at their respective positions than Cleveland has ever had (in terms of being complete players: the Vizquel-Alomar combination was certainly excellent, but unless you are also a Phillies fan, you are probably underselling just how good Utley is, and Rollins hit .277/.349/.437 with 47 steals in 50 attempts and until last season was considered a tremendous defender). Maybe not. It's an argument worth considering, though.

Cleveland's current combo cannot sincerely be considered at anything like that level yet:

Asdrubal Cabrera is having a fine season, but not a truly spectacular one, and Luis Valbuena will have to play many more months to fully overcome his dreadful start. But as with Huff, I greatly overestimated how much he was struggling at the plate: where I saw a player who looked thoroughly overmatched at the plate, Valbuena appears to have simply needed some time to adjust to major-league pitching. Since the All-Star Break, Cabrera has hit .315/.362/.465 to be one of the best offensive shortstops in the league, while Valbuena has posted a .259/.308/.415 line that looks like it belongs for a 23-year-old middle infielder.

This weekend, all the pair managed was to go a combined 11-for-26 with 4 doubles, a

homer, 7 R, 7 RBI, and a walk. The only hitless game was Cabrera's 0-for-4, and he followed that with a 2-for-5 out of the leadoff slot and a 4-for-5 out of the 3 hole, including 2-for-2 with runners in scoring position.

Valbuena now has 25 doubles and 36 XBH out of 84 hits, giving him more power than I expected from him, while Cabrera has 41 doubles and 51 XBH while sporting a complete absence of a platoon split.

Cabrera is hitting .307/.361/.451 as a lefty while hitting .310/.361/.407 as a righty, meaning I exaggerated the "complete lack," but he's still a good on-base threat against any pitching.

Cabrera is the older player by 17 days. He is 23 years old.

5) Encouragement

Jess Todd threw his fourth consecutive perfect inning to close out Huff's win. Sure, it's probably easier to throw strikes in the getaway game with a 9-run lead, but the fact is that he did it, getting 4 swings and misses and throwing first-pitch strikes to 2 of the 3 hitters he faced.

Raffy Perez resembled a major-league relief pitcher with 1 1/3 innings of shutout ball, yielding a single and a walk but whiffing three O's. The warning here is one of Blind Squirrel Theory, or Mike Gosling's first appearance with the Tribe. But again, if you're asking me what Perez has to show

me, this is the kind of thing I'm asking for.

Chris Perez recorded two outs on one pitch. This is less "encouraging" than it is "hilarious."

6) Encouragement II

Bland Lou Marson banged out three hits and drew a walk in 8 trips to the plate, reaching base twice in each game in which he played and driving in as many as he scored (2 each). Two of the hits were doubles, giving him 5 on the season, and making his XBH ratio nearly 1.0 (5 doubles, 7 singles). He's still in the Tyner Zone, but

with a .120 ISO that isn't completely worthless.

Matt LaPorta got 2 of Cleveland's 8 hits on Friday as the DH, then hammered a solo shot on Sunday while scoring 2 runs and playing left field.

But arguably Cleveland's most impressive aggregate offensive performance from the non-MI contingent was from Andy Marte, who posted this series:

2-for-3, 1 BB, 1 R

1-for-3, 2-run homer, SF

1-for-4, R, RBI

Marte has a modest 5-game hitting streak going, with an extra-base hit in three of the five. He is being considered seriously as a corner infield backup for the 2010 team, something that might be handier than in years past if the team goes with the inexperienced Matt LaPorta at 1B and ersatz third baseman Jhonny Peralta.

Here's the problem: Marte appears to be an execrable first baseman. He made his 5th error of the season there Sunday. It would be hard for you to convince me that LaPorta will not be at least as good defensively as Marte. So you're certainly not going to bring Marte in as a defensive replacement, and you're not pinch-hitting there, either. You're purely giving your regular the day off. So here's the issue: Marte is best when he

plays long stretches, which he won't. And he's unlikely to improve as a defensive first baseman unless he plays, which he won't.

Further, what does this mean for the construction of the roster? If Marte is a corner utility guy, you still need a middle infielder, preferably a right-handed hitter who can spell Valbuena (who has hit lefties in a tiny sample, but about whom I'm not entirely confident). In fact, let's go this route: with an 11-man staff, you get 5 bench players: catcher, 4th OF, corner IF, middle IF, other guy (probably 5th OF or 3rd C). Of course, the odds of the Indians using an 11-man staff with the likely

rotation are low, so that other guy is probably out. So if you're looking at a 4-man bench, and one is Marte, you better have some pretty durable outfielders.

I'm not saying it can't work, and he's certainly inexpensive and good insurance in case Peralta goes down, but ... look, I can give Marte credit for a few nice games without getting all-in excited about him on the 2010 roster, okay?

7) DeRosa/Pavano Dept.

Kelly Shoppach continues to be a bright spot in the blight spot, shrugging off a 6-game DNP streak to go 2-for-4 with a three-run shot in the first inning to put the game away before Huff even got to throw to the heart of the Bal'mer order. This gives him a modest 4-game hitting streak, but then, he's only APPEARED in 4 games since Sept. 13. That's an awfully valuable skill to have, being able to come in cold, catch an excellent game (I'm sure Shoppach's game-calling was a primary factor in Huff's success!), flash the power he's always had, and do it all without complaint. In September, Shoppach is hitting a fabulous .333/.412/.567,

showing the discipline (4 walks) and power (1 HR, 4 2B in 10 H) that make him one of the best bargain backstops in the league.

Combine this with the invaluable intangibles he's almost certainly picked up from working with Victor Martinez, and Shoppach is the one catcher out there that looks ready to break out, given the playing time. Sure, he's struggled earlier in the season, but he's obviously figured it all out now (look at the Sept. numbers!), and has low-wear for a catcher of his experience. Quality

catching is such a rare commodity in today's league that it's hard to believe that he wouldn't be of great interest to a large number of teams. I guess the Tribe could get by with Bland Lou for a year or so, but for other team, Shoppach could be that piece that pushes them to the forefront of contention. I don't know if Shapiro's phone is ringing off the hook yet, but come the end of the season, I'm sure Shoppach will be a huge point of discussion. I wonder which GM will prove himself on the cutting edge of player identification and solve his catching woes with one phone call to Cleveland?

8) Cutting to the chase

Kerry Wood is a luxury we cannot afford. If you do not unload his contract in the off-season, it will be poor strategy.

As far as actual performance goes, he was good once and awful the second time. I can't pretend this interests me.

Let me say this, though: I believe the

official scorer has the discretion to award the win to the pitcher he feels most deserves it. There are probably some hard-coded rules, but I've heard this bandied about. If I ever got to officially score a game, first of all, I'd call more errors than you would possibly believe, but second, I would use this rule to completely gyp relievers whose offense undoes their mistakes out of cheap-assed "wins" like Wood "earned" on "Saturday."

9) Dept. of Blunderbussery

There is a wonderful old Monty Python routine in which Vikings at a restaurant chant, "SpamTM, Spam

TM

, Spam

TM

, Spam

TM

..."

Replace "SpamTM" with "Ball," and call it, "The Tony Sipp Song." Better yet, you sir, are now "Tony Spam

TM

." Throw strikes!

10) Made-up contractual obligation

I don't actually have a contract, so any obligations that arise are completely fabricated, but Shin-Soo Choo and Trev Crowe each had two-hit games that I didn't mention under any other

guise, so ... well, now I have.

11) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Eric Wedge allows Niuman Romero to appear in major-league baseball games in order to pay off an old debt to Romero's mother. This statement barely makes sense,

much less has any validity, and in fact is thoroughly untrue. Do not let Kerry Wood finish games to vest his third-year option.