

The B-List: 4/16 - 4/18

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Monday, April 19 2010 2:03 PM - Last Updated Monday, April 19 2010 2:51 PM

The Indians fought their way back up to the .500 mark at the expense of the Joke Sox, and Buff explains why Mitch Talbot's masterful complete-game win is probably only the fourth-most important thing that happened. He also addresses the one-man offense, bullpens great and small, a preponderance of ground balls, a trip through the rotation, notable improvement, and Mike Brantley's departure. As we head to Minnesota to check out the new digs, don't forget to thank Ozzie Guillen on your way out.

FINAL

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Indians (4-6)

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W: Talbot (1-1)

L: Buehrle (2-1)

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Indians (5-6)

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W: J. Lewis (2-0)

L: Thornton (1-1)

S: C. Perez (3)

FINAL

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Indians (6-6)

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W: Carmona (2-0) L: Floyd (0-2) S: C. Perez (4)



Imagine the guffaws you'd have engendered last week from suggesting that a six-inning Quality Start from Fausto Carmona with a 4:2 K:BB ratio would be the worst start by a Cleveland starter in a three-game set.

1) The Most Encouraging Sign from the weekend

In Jake Westbrook's first start of the season, he posted an unconscionable 10 Witt Points, including 4 wild pitches. The meme is that pitchers recovering from UCL replacement get their command back last of all, but this was plainly absurd. Four wild pitches is ... I mean, did he hit the mascot? In Durham? Was he wearing mittens?

The thing is, in watching the replay, Westbrook wasn't THAT off target. Sure, 4 walks and 2 hit batsmen in 4 innings show conclusively that his control (never mind command) was pretty high on the One to Putrid scale, but ... you know, some of those wild pitches didn't look THAT bad.

So it made sense when I read this quote from an unnamed scout, reported by John Perrotto on [Baseball Prospectus](#) (subscription piece):

Indians catcher Lou Marson: *"He really struggles to catch pitches with good movement, like Jake Westbrook's sinker. I know he's a rookie, but that's not a good sign."*

Well, that coincides with what I saw: Marson seemed to be missing the vision/anticipation skill or the physical ability to get down and block a pitch in the dirt. Since he's a professional catcher, I would have to think the former is more likely higher-weighted than the latter. I mean, surely Tofu Lou has seen a pitch in the dirt before, right? The man was in A-ball at one point: I believe it is a job requirement for A-ball pitchers to throw a ball in the dirt every inning. At least, this is the conclusion I draw from watching A-ball.

Now, consider this quote:

"Mitch had me make an adjustment and it helped," catcher Marson said. "He asked me to set up on the corners and he pitched to my glove. When you command your fastball on the corners, it doesn't matter what level it is, you're going to have success."

I hadn't even mentioned Talbot's first start, which was nothing to write home about: through four innings he had already given up four runs and generally looked like a guy you'd get in a trade for Kelly Shoppach. On Friday, however, Talbot looked like a guy who could hit his spots with excellent (or at least above-average) command, generating 17 ground ball outs and going the distance in only 97 pitches.

Some of this is extrapolation, of course, but consider this path:

- a) Talbot has trouble with command in first start
- b) Talbot and Marson get together and Marson makes an adjustment
- c) Talbot pitches career-best game

How does this relate to Westbrook? Well:

- a) First start: awful, 5 H, 4 BB, 2 HBP, 4 WP in 4+ IP (The "Plus" means "Now with More Fail!")
- b) Second start: decent, 9 H, 3 BB, 2 HBP, 1 PB in 5 2/3 IP
- c) Third start: good, 5 H, 3 BB, 0 HBP, 0 WP/PB in 7 IP

I don't have enough information to tell you that Marson is clearly the primary factor in this: why not credit Westbrook for improving his control? That's the simplest explanation, after all. And, of course, WP and PB require men on base to be "counted:" Westbrook may very well have thrown some preposterous bouncing garbage at some point and it just didn't show up in the box score. The fact that he didn't hit anyone is obviously a lot more due to Westbrook than Marson (unless Marson was setting up a target at Gerald Laird's thigh).

And, more to the Big Picture of it all: Lou Marson is not a crucial player. Carlos Santana is. Lou Marson is Josh Bard to Santana's Victor Martinez. It doesn't really matter a lot if Tofu Lou develops this skill or that skill, unless the skill is making Alvaro Espinoza Bubble Hats on the bench. However, the fact is that Marson's defense has been a huge detraction in the first two weeks, to the point where it wasn't clear that Marson can catch a sinkerballer with good movement. Given that this describes half the staff and FOUR-FIFTHS of the rotation, this is a pretty big deal. The less I see of Mike Redmond, the better. He can be Fausto's Personal

Catcher for all I care, but that's about all I want of that past the potential day-night doubleheader or day game after a night game. Tofu Lou might get better. Mike Redmond stays Mike Redmond.

Anyway, if Marson is capable of making adjustments (Talbot) and improving his receiving skills (Westbrook), this makes more times per week he can be in the lineup, but also suggests a long-term viability (in the Gregg Zaun sense) for Marson that couldn't be predicted with any great certainty from the action in the first week or so. Good for him.

Now, if someone could convince him to take a bat to the plate instead of an oatmeal-stuffed cardboard tube, we'd be all set.

2) The Second-Most Encouraging Sign from the weekend

I touched on Westbrook's starts to date, but to be explicit, the fact that he was able to go 7 innings deep in this game in only 94 pitches is a Big Deal. Yes, I understand that this is nearly as many pitches as Talbot needed to go all 9, but ... look, I have to say it out loud: Jake Westbrook is more important to this team in 2010 than Mitch Talbot. He is. It's true.

Why? Well, first of all, I know that Jake Westbrook can throw over 200 innings in a season. Mitch Talbot threw 161 innings in each of 2007 and 2008 in the minors (then 9 2/3 in the majors in 2008), then apparently hurt himself last year because he only threw 65 1/3 innings total in 2009.

Second of all, I know that Jake Westbrook can be good at the major-league level. From 2004 to 2007, Westbrook posted ERAs around the 4.00 mark with roughly a 2:1 K:BB ratio and over 6 innings a start. He wasn't Cy Young, but he was dependable and won 14, 15, and 15 games from 2004-6. Mitch Talbot was preposterously bad in 2008 as a Ray (2.79 WHIP, 11.17 ERA, 11 BB in 9 2/3 IP) and wasn't really that good as a Durham Bull in 2009 (1.56 WHIP, 4.47 ERA).

Enough of this: Westbrook's start didn't feature the 7 Ks of his last outing, but also didn't feature more than a hit-and-a-half an inning. Part of this, of course, is the White Sox offense, which

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should be arrested for impersonating boiled pasta, but given a choice, I will take fewer hits and fewer strikeouts, especially considering Westbrook generally keeps the ball in the park.

Of course, he did allow three doubles, which is not very encouraging: a groundball pitcher should post an ISO under .100, and Jake's .125 is a little high. On the other hand, he induced two GDP, especially in the 6th when then ChiSox threatened to blow the game open.

Generally speaking, it will take a while for the sample size to drown out the blunderbussery of the first couple of games, but one thing sticks out as pretty weird thus far: Westbrook has an enormous NEGATIVE platoon split thus far, with a .375/.500/.575 line against right-handers and .167/.286/.167 against lefties. Again, facing the White Sox has something to do with that (as do the sample sizes). Still weird, though.

3) One-man gang

Consider:

Home runs: Shin-Soo Choo 4, Rest of team 5

RBI: Choo 12, RoT 30

Runs: Choo 10, RoT 35

XBH: Choo 7, RoT 21

Stolen Bases: Choo 3, RoT 4

Caught Stealing: Choo 0, RoT 3

Choo: .350/.500/.725

Rest of Team: .204/.239/.268

Now, I don't want you to read TOO much into this: of COURSE when you remove a team's best player from its batting line, the results are going to look worse. That's what "best hitter" and "remove" mean. But ... great googly moogly! An OBP of TWO THIRTY NINE?!?! An ISO of OH SIXTY FOUR?!?! Are you kidding me?! That's abysmal! I almost feel bad pointing this out because someone might figure out that pitching to Choo is a pretty bad idea. In fact, forget I

said anything.

(Except that Choo hit a grand slam ... and a game-winning double (off a superior lefty, no less) ... and reached base three times in each of two games ... and went 2-for-4 with runners in scoring position ... and would have even better stats if he hadn't erroneously been called out for missing a bag. Other than that, I won't say anything.)

4) Well, except this

Great Scott, man, get in front of the damn ball and pick it up!

5) The Third-Most Encouraging Sign from the weekend

In a one-run game, Chris Perez fired 11 strikes in 15 pitches, including first-pitch strikes to each of the three hitters he faced. In fact, each hitter saw a strike, a ball, a strike, and a strike. One batter fouled off the third strike, before eventually succumbing on a fly out (well hit, I admit, but an out nonetheless). One hit the third strike in fair territory, flyout out to center. And the other missed the third strike entirely and the game was over.

In a four-run game, Chris Perez came in with two runners on base. Since those runners couldn't affect the outcome by themselves, he largely ignored them, letting one score on a sac fly, but striking out Cleveland nemesis Paul Konerko (hitting approximately 1.125/1.897/36.284 against Cleveland pitching this season) to end the game. He threw 9 strikes in 14 pitches in that game.

Strikes. Strikes. Strikes, strikes, strikes, strikes, strikes. I like them. They are good. Chris Perez is more effective when he throws them. Is this a blip, or were the previous two outings the blip? While we don't know for sure, it was big to close out that win Saturday and prevent Detroit II from happening Sunday.

Also, I like strikes.

6) Okay, yes, it was encouraging

With the normal caveat of Rod Nichols' shutout and Carl Pavano starting the year 2-0 with a 1.38 ERA (check out his last start), there was plenty to be encouraged by in Mitch Talbot's complete-game gem Friday night.

He was efficient, walking no one and throwing 68 strikes in 97 pitches.

He was effective, giving up five singles and a homer for 2 runs, only 1 earned (the homer, natch).

He made the other team beat the ball into the ground, with an astonishing 17 ground ball outs (including 2 GIDP) to 7 in the air.

In fact, it is the last thing that surprised me until I looked it up: it turns out that Talbot posted a 59% groundball percentage in the minors in 2007 and 2008, so this may be who he is after all. PECOTA for some reason only pegs him for about a 43% percentage. I don't know how those rates get translated. For now, Talbot is now on the right side of the ledger with a 27:19 GO:FO ratio. We'll see if that lasts.

But the most encouraging thing was that after walking FIVE guys in FIVE innings in his first start, Talbot didn't walk anyone in this start. Ultimately, the reason this is only the 4th-most encouraging thing is that I have my doubts as to how important a role Talbot will have to play in 2010: Marson, Westbrook, and C-Pez are all expected to make more-meaningful contributions and will have a higher impact if they don't meet them. Talbot is essentially a fifth starter who is asked to eat innings. Now, sure, it's possible that he can have a Mark Clark kind of pleasant surprise performance, but in terms of what we can reasonably EXPECT, Talbot is ... well ... Just Some Guy. It was a heckuva start, I must say.

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7) Sotto voce

.205, .256, .225, .235, .136, .233, .206, .167, .240

The batting averages of the lineup Talbot “shut down.” Let’s temper our collective enthusiasm here.

8) Welcome back!

Asdrubal Cabrera shook off a pair of Size 5 collars in the first two home games and has now gotten a hit in each of the last four games, going a total of 6-for-15 with two doubles and a homer. He got an extra-base hit in each of the three games, including the game-tying homer Saturday in the bottom of the 8th. (They are his first three extra-base hits of the season.) His ISO raised from .000 to .098 over the span of the weekend series, and he’s made several remarkable plays at short.

He obviously needs to raise his OBP, especially as leadoff hitter: a 2:9 BB:K ratio is pretty bad for that role. Even when Grady was striking out at a frightening clip, he at least drew some walks. But it’s early, and we can legitimately hope Cabrera is settling into a groove here.

9) The horror, the horror

Saturday: .231, .121, .207, .125, .091, .172

Sunday: .135, .216 (.125), .188, .200, .167, .156

What are “the averages of the Indians’ 4-through-9 hitters, Alex?”

My googly has been moogled. Oy, gevalt!

(Andy Marte, hitting .125, came in for Matt LaPorta, hitting .216, as a defensive replacement)

10) Mike, we hardly knew ye

And Mike Brantley shuffles off, high-fiving Russ Branyan on the way by.

Branyan has 5 fewer hits, 3 fewer RBI, and 1 fewer extra-base knock than Brantley. He has the same number of triples, homers, and stolen bases. His OPS is 416 points lower. Because he has not made a single plate appearance.

Mike Brantley may turn into a fine major-league baseball player, but ... um ... yeah. Let's see what Russ has got.

11) Around the bullpen

Jensen Lewis was very good, throwing a perfect inning with 11 strikes in 15 pitches.

Raffy Perez was pretty bad, retiring neither of his hitters, giving up a walk (in which the hitter never swung in 6 pitches) and a single.

Aaron Laffey retired both hitters he faced but didn't look all that terrific doing it.

Joe Smiff threw first-pitch strikes to each hitter and is still chuckling at the memory of Carlos Quention grounding into a first-pitch double play with two men on.

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Tony Sipp is getting on my nerves.

12) For completeness' sake

Fausto Carmona pitched pretty well, but not VERY well. Still, he struck out more hitters than he walked and only walked 2 in 6 innings and I'll take what I can get at this point.