

## The B-List: 5/14 - 5/16

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Monday, May 17 2010 1:47 PM - Last Updated Monday, May 17 2010 1:54 PM

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*The Indians come up with two astonishing performances this weekend: one by venerable starter Jake Westbrook, and a second in support of Mitch Talbot. It is one thing to overcome a 2-run deficit in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning: that's a nice comeback. It is quite another to score EIGHT runs because Mike Oldmond and Trevor Crowe each have two-RBI extra-base hits. Westbrook and Talbot each went at least 8 innings, while Justin Masterson ... oh, look, I'm up against the 80-word limit. So sad! (And planned.)*

FINAL

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[Indians (14-19)]

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**Orioles** (12-24)

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W: Guthrie (2-4)

L: Masterson (0-4)

**FINAL**

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Orioles (12-25)

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W: Talbot (5-2)

L: Simon (0-1)

FINAL

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**Orioles** (12-26)

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W: Westbrook (2-2)

L: Hendrickson (1-1)



I would love to draw some encouraging conclusions from taking the last two series, but Occam is shouting, "Bad teams are bad and lose frequently ... because they're bad!" at me.

## **1) Turn back the clock and shift time streams**

Once upon a time, Jake Westbrook was a durable, inning-eating, above-average groundball machine. He wasn't just some schmoe, but he wasn't ever going to win any post-season awards or even make an All-Star game. From 2004-2006, Westbrook plowed through his thirty-plus starts and 210+ innings with decent (4.17, 4.49) or even very good (3.38) ERAs. Of course, his K rate wasn't very good, but that's a function of his sinkerball "pitch-to-contact" style. Although his K/9 rates hovered in the high fours (4.64 to 5.08), at least he was posting a 2:1 K:BB ratio and generally providing ... you know ... pitching-type substance.

And one of the nice side-effects of being a groundball machine (1.76, 1.62, 1.66 GB:FB) is that Westbrook generally forced teams to string a bunch of hits together to give up a big inning. He held opponents to slugging percentages slightly under .400 and kept isolated power down (.131, .130, .106).

So, fast forward to 2010, after a year off and some serious command issues that have seen Westbrook's walk rate spike: he has walked 3 or more guys in 4 of his 8 starts and has walked 20 in 46 1/3 innings. And, of course, part of the function of walking guys and having poor command is that he's hit the 100-pitch mark a lot earlier in games: before Sunday, his longest outing was 7 innings, and fully half of his starts haven't even made it through the 6<sup>th</sup>. That doesn't make him a useless beefhead or anything, but it isn't where Jake needs to be to provide his most valuable value, so to speak.

Well, fast forward even further to Sunday, and you see Jake Westbrook inducing 13 swings-and-misses, sailing through all nine innings, and striking out 8 hitters. Except for a nice piece of hitting by ex-Tribehand Luke Scott, Westbrook blanked the Orioles, shutting them out for 8 2/3 innings before yielding the solo shot to Scott. (He got the next hitter to complete the game at 116 pitches.) 116 is a few more pitches than I'd like, but Westbrook is no spring chicken, and he certainly didn't look like he was laboring. 77 of the pitches were for strikes, a HUGE uptick in his command, and he walked only one hitter.

Some of the old magic is still evident: of his 9 hits allowed, 8 were singles. He induced two double plays and posted a terrific 15:3 GO:FO ratio. But it was the Ks and the strike-to-ball ratio that caught my eye more than anything.

Of course, this isn't what caught Ty Wigginton's eye:

"Westbrook had tremendous movement on his ball today. He mixed in enough sliders so if you went to get on the sinker, the ball is diving away," Wigginton said.

Given that Wigginton went 2-for-4 and was 7-for-12 for the series, he could afford to be magnanimous, but it meshes with something else I saw: there were several pitches that seemed to tail IN on right-handers. These are probably something like change-ups, but I'll have to admit that watching a game on MLB.tv on a small screen coupled with a thorough inability to scout pitchers results in a fair degree of ignorance on my part. But if Westbrook is using that goofy short-arm motion every time and a ball can essentially move in, out, or straight down on any given delivery, that would make for a pretty tough guy to face.

## **2) Personal Injury Lawyer**

By the way, special thanks to Ty Wigginton for hitting .320/.387/.680 with 12 homers THIS season, when I dropped out of Jonah Keri's fantasy league, instead of LAST season when he was on my team posting a .314 OBP and a .400 SLG. Oh, and now he qualifies at 2B as well. Between him and Ricky Romero, I would like a time machine, although Jonah whispers "Scott Feldman" and I have to shut up again.

## **3) P.T. Flea presents, "Flaming Death!"**

It is one thing to be throttled by Jeremy Guthrie: he's not exactly Roy Halladay or anything, but the man is better than his record. But Brian Matusz wafted through 7 innings, giving up 7 hits and 4 walks, which is not super special. Still, with some timely outs, bad baserunning, and a double play, Matusz worked around trouble to shut out the Indians for 7 full innings.

After some 8<sup>th</sup>-inning LaRussan shenanigans, Alf Simon came in with 5 saves and a spotless ERA of 0.00 to close out the game.

He did not.

Trevor Crowe shrewdly worked a 3-0 count into a full count foulout, but Asdrubal Cabrera singled and Mark Grudzielanek drew a five-pitch walk. Shin-Soo Choo drove in Cleveland's first run with a sharp single to right, bringing up Austin Kearns.

To this point, Kearns had not had a good night. He had struck out twice against Matusz and was 0-for-4. He quickly fell behind 0-2 to Simon, who then uncorked the David Huff Commemorative Fatball in Kearns' wheelhouse, and Kearns responded with a 411-foot homer that gave the Indians a 4-2 lead. (It was apparently a splitter that did not split.)

Disappointed, the Orioles yanked Simon, brought in Cla Meredith, and watched him walk Travis Hafner. Jhonny Peralta singled, and Russ Branyan Branyaned swinging. Mike Oldmond, who had entered as a late-inning replacement because Grady Sizemore was a more-aesthetic choice to whiff than Lou Marson in the 8<sup>th</sup>, then smacked a two-run double to right, which is a nice piece of hitting, especially largely cold. Trevor Crowe then followed with his first home run since Wiffle Ball matchups in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, completing the scoring at 8-2.

Kerry Wood did not get the save. I was probably less-disappointed in this than he was.

#### **4) The happiest man in the world**

You know who was excited when Kearns hit the three-run shot? Mitch Talbot.

All Talbot had done to this point is completely throttle the non-Wigginton portion of the Orioles' lineup, giving up three hits (one double) and two walks in 8 complete innings. Although his 66 strikes in 103 pitches was a notch below Westbrook's he did only walk two guys. Oddly enough, Talbot had a "backwards" 7:12 GO:FO ratio, something that might be attributable to an increased use of his changeup, which manager Manny Acta lauded after the game. Again, I'm not so good at the "pitch recognition" thing.

The problem was, the pro-Wigginton contingent of the Orioles' lineup was 2-for-3 off Talbot, and each hit was a solo homer.

I don't want to make it sound like Talbot was thoroughly dominating: the Orioles ran themselves into two outs on the bases and hit 1-for-5 with runners in scoring position. The hit didn't even produce a run. On the other hand, he did complete 8 innings with a WHIP under 1.00, so regardless of how he got there, he pitched a fine game. Still, the guy has a "negative" 19:21 K:BB ratio and a .227 BABIP. At some point the glass slipper is probably going to fall off. Until then, he's our best starting pitcher.

### 5) In direct contrast

Justin Masterson is NOT our best starting pitcher, by virtue of being our **worst**.

In one sense, it is impressive that the leading K-rate belongs to a starter: Masterson's 10.16 is better than Sipp's 9.60 or any of the low-sample relievers with a K an inning. Most teams have a back-end bullpen guy leading their team in K-rate.

Arguably, so do the Indians.

Listen, I'm not going to rehash the ol' left-right thing, or the 1.82 WHIP thing, or the 5.92 ERA thing. I will admit that Masterson entered the 6<sup>th</sup> inning with the score 2-1, and Aaron Laffey let two of his runners score out from under him. But I want you to consider this plate appearance:

Cesar Izturis: Ball, Ball, Ball, Ball

Now, Izturis came into the game hitting .209/.255/.231. He left the game hitting .202/.262/.223. He is hitting .094/.189/.094 in May. Cesar Izturis is not likely to hit the ball, and he is

EXTREMELY unlikely to hit the ball and end up on any base but first. He is certainly not going to hit the ball over the wall. His last (of TWO) DOUBLE was 20 games ago on April 18<sup>th</sup>. If you throw the fattest pitch imaginable to Cesar Izturis, the most he's going to do with it is probably end up on first base. Which is where you put him, but WALKING HIM ON FOUR PITCHES!

Basically, long story short ... what I'm saying is ... you suck.

### 6) Pronk bip!

Travis Hafner did not exactly pound the ball this weekend, but he did get two hits in a game in which the Indians got only three on Friday. He then singled the next day while also drawing a pair of walks.

Although the walks put him into the embarrassment known as the Tyner Zone on the season, the fact is that Hafner is posting a .388 OBP and is quietly hitting .333/.500/.444 in May. Treat the contract as a sunk cost and forget about a preconceived notion of power: a guy getting on base at a .388 (or .500, obviously) clip is a starter, especially for a team that often treats offense as a necessary evil.

### 7) Everybody hits!

On Sunday, each Indians hitter, including mid-game replacement Trevor Crowe, got a hit. This is a day after each Indian starter got a hit, albeit mostly in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning.

Special mention goes to Mark Grudzielanek as the only Cleveland hitter to have 2 hits in each of those two games, and to Trevor Crowe, who due to the magic of small samples now leads the Indians with a .500/.571/1.000 batting line. Crowe was called up to replace Andy Marte on the roster, as Marte was put on the DL with *mumble mumbletonian mumblers*. Yeah, I have no real idea why Marte is on the DL. I heard it was a surgically-removed ingrown hair. That sounds like something I would have made up.

The other players to collect two hits in one of the games were Shin-Soo Choo, Tofu Lou, and Crowe.

### **8) Port smash!**

Matt LaPorta broke out of his season-longer homerless stretch by hitting a ball WAY out to dead center. It was kind of an odd-looking swing, as he seemed to swing *down* to the ball (admittedly that's where it was, but pretend you know what I mean here). On the other hand, 400+ feet is 400+ feet.

Since sitting for three games to work with Jon Nunnally on his swing, LaPorta has at least one hit in three of his four games (4-for-14 overall), and two of the hits were for extra bases. His numbers are still lame-assed, but hopefully this marks the beginning of a turnaround for LaPorta.

### **9) TTO All-Star**

Russ Branyan made 11 plate appearances. He racked up 5 Ks (including at least one in each game, including the one with 2 PAs), 1 walk, and 1 homer, giving him a 64% Three True Outcomes rate. His TTO percentage is over 50% for the season. He has struck out in only 38.3% of his plate appearances: pro-rated over a 650-PA season, this would result in 249 Ks. Which is plainly awesome.

### **10) Pointless bullpen update**

Aaron Laffey let Masterson's runs score, but didn't give up any of his own.

Raffy Perez was largely crummy, although he did strike out a hitter and induce a double play. He currently has a BABIP of .514, which is a LOT. On the other hand, he also allows hitters to post a 1.057 OPS against him, which is also a LOT. How much of the latter is driven by the

former? I do not know. I no longer enjoy watching Raffy Perez pitch, though.

Chip Ambriz might be one of the relief pitchers we've ever had.

### **11) Box Score Follies**

The Indians went 4-for-10 with RISP on Saturday. All 4 hits came in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning.

They also went 3-for-9 with RISP Sunday. They went 1-for-2 on Friday, which is a nice percentage, but ... I mean ... two is two.

### **12) Nice hose!**

Shin-Soo Choo gunned down Ty Wigginton trying to get to second on what probably should have been a double. It was a good throw.

Tofu Lou Marson caught both Cesar Izturis and Adam Jones trying to steal. After a tough start, Marson has now caught 8 of 21 would-be base-stealers, a 38.1% clip that is truly excellent. It's also in line with his tiny-sampled 47.6% (10-of-21) last season.

### **13) The terrifying thought of readership**

A month or so ago, I mentioned that I thought it would make more sense to split up the Sizemore-Choo-Hafner triumvirate by slotting Austin Kearns in the cleanup spot. Kearns now has 54 AB at cleanup, more than all other slots combined.

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Friday, I mentioned the column I wrote for ESPN in which I opined that moving Mark Grudzielanek into the 2-slot against lefties made more sense than leaving Sizemore there, and that Sizemore might ought to simply sit against left-handed pitching for the time being. Saturday's lineup featured Mark Grudzielanek in the 2 slot, as Sizemore sat against the lefty Brian Matusz. (The team called up Crowe to play center, which I hadn't recommended, because I think little of Trevor Crowe, but it did make sense, and Crowe performed well, so in my face and all that.)

So, as a test, I have three more recommendations for the Indians:

- a) Slider should dress like Herbert Hoover on the next home stand
- b) The photo they show on the JumboTron for Lou Marson should be a block of tofu
- c) David Huff should throw at least 20% of his pitches on the inside half of the plate

I figure I ought to notice those.