

The B-List: 4/6

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Thursday, April 07 2011 1:38 PM - Last Updated Friday, April 08 2011 1:52 PM

The Tribe's offense came primarily from Thunder Sticks last night, as three Indians homered and the Whole Staff Approach helped keep the feeble Boston offense from breaking out. In today's B-List, Buff lauds Manny Acta's bullpen management, contrasts some foul-off battles, and points out that two of the four hitters with .500 SLG in last night's lineup would probably defeat Justin Bieber in a cage match, but you could get some pretty sweet odds on Biebs. You know, just in case.

FINAL

1

2

3

Red Sox (0-5)

0

2

0

Indians (3-2)

2

1

0



W: R. Perez (1-0) L: Matsuzaka (0-1)

You might say that Asdrubal Cabrera's homer barely cleared the wall, but was it really that much shorter than Adrian Gonzalez'?

1) Managerial Back-Patters

Mitch Talbot was fine last night, with flashes of real goodness (I still love his change) and a surprising 7 Ks. I normally start with the starting pitcher in the first List item, because he normally has the most material to delve into, and there's plenty to talk about there. We'll get to it shortly.

To me, it seems like it would be terribly unjust if the first focus didn't go on Manny Acta's handling of the 5th inning before anything else.

One thing I didn't mention about Tuesday's "save" by Chris Perez was the point at which Acta came out to talk to Perez with a 2-0 count on David Ortiz with two men on base. I called this a "mature, gentle Tony Pena head slap" in a conversation on Twitter (follow me at @stevebuffum) last night. Whereas Pena's will always live more fondly in Cleveland Lore, especially since it

resulted in physical abuse to Jose Mesa, Acta's was equally effective in that it got Perez to focus, throw quality strikes, and retire the batter.

With this backdrop, Talbot ended up in a bit of low-wattage trouble in the top of the 5th by walking Carl Crawford, watching him steal second, and then getting Dustin Pedroia on a runner-advancing groundout. After falling behind Adrian Gonzalez, the one Boston hitter who has resisted the Global Newtification Process, Talbot decided to use the better part of valor and finished the walk intentionally.

That was it for Talbot, who had given up 2 runs through the first 4 frames and led 3-2. It was not clear whether the Cleveland offense would score many more runs off Daisuke Matsuzaka or the Parade of Death that potentially loomed in the Red Sox bullpen. You can't necessarily insist that one point in the middle of the game is *definitely* the crucial juncture, but it seems reasonable to say that this situation was a pretty big deal.

Acta called on Chad Durbin rather than try to squeeze a couple more outs out of Talbot. He didn't call on Justin Germano just because he's the nominal "long guy:" he called on a right-handed reliever with the capability to strike out a hitter and at least flash some groundball stuff just in case. Now, this was somewhat bold in that the second-to-last thing you need there is a guy who might fall behind, and Durbin had walked his first batter of the season on 4 pitches. However, Durbin is a veteran and was a logical choice based on usage and stuff.

Choosing between Durbin and Someone Else frankly goes deeper down the Minutiae Well than even I care to go. The interesting point to me was that Acta identified the opportunity and acted decisively. That Durbin was outstanding almost seems beside the point. Almost, but not really: Durbin threw three strikes in three pitches and recorded the second out without either runner moving an inch. (With Crawford on third, almost any batted ball that wasn't a short popup or a double play would have scored a run.)

Just as decisively, Acta went to Raffy Perez to face David Ortiz: while you might think this smacks of knee-jerk orthodoxy, the fact is, orthodoxy does not spring from the earth fully-formed from nothing. It becomes orthodox in no small part because it works. You bring in the lefty to face Ortiz with men on base because that gives you the greatest chance of a successful outcome. And to Raffy's credit, he retired Ortiz (then stayed in the game for another perfect inning, although that's kind of a different topic).

Here's the thing: if you wanted to think about this game as a modular, non-sequential series of innings, what happened in a sense was that Durbin acted as the setup man for Raffy to finish off the save. The fact that this occurred in the FIFTH inning is somewhat irrelevant. And the fact that Manny Acta was willing to take that approach is a good thing, not only in my opinion, but something that is supported by any number of statistical analyses about win percentage and leverage.

2) When you end up throwing more pitches per inning than Daisuke Matsuzaka, something has gone awry

I remain unconvinced that Mitch Talbot is ever going to be truly Good, but it's not like your team is doomed if he's one of your five best starters. He has a terrific changeup but average stuff overall: without better command of his fastball, he's probably got a ceiling of, say, Danny Darwin.

This having been said, the man struck out 7 guys in 4 innings on the strength of being able to move his pitches around, both in terms of location and in terms of movement. He struck out left-handed hitters (Gonzalez, Drew), right-handed hitters (Pedroia, Youkilis, Scutaro), and no-handed hitters (Ellsbury, Ellsbury). He had three innings in which he struck out more than one guy. Does this mean Talbot has transformed himself into a strikeout pitcher? This is unlikely. He got only 7 swings-and-misses, although 4 of those were strikes three. I think it's more telling that he got 22 foul balls, which to me suggests his pitches have good late movement. He'd walked only one hitter through the first four innings (91 pitches), so he was working well around the strike zone. The thing is, Boston is a patient lineup historically, and Talbot spent a lot of time deep into counts due to foul balls and close misses.

The two-run "outburst" in the second was the result of mostly gunk: a single, an opposite-field single on a 1-2 pitch after two fouls by J.D. Drew, a walk, an infield single that was more of a dying grackle, and a groundout to first. It probably didn't help Talbot to fall behind 6 of the 7 hitters he faced, but he was hardly getting pounded.

Overall, Talbot looked like a net asset in the rotation: his final 7:3 K:BB and 60:42 strike-to-ball ratios get a little skewed by his running out of gas in the 5th (2 walks, 3:8 strike-to-ball).

3) This having been said

Watching Daisuke Matsuzaka pitch is really, really, really, really painful.

4) Chicks dig the long ball

I am far from being ready to declare that Shin-Soo Choo is “totally back now, you bet, for real, all righty then” just because he hit a home run off Matsuzaka in the first inning. I will say this: Choo did not get cheated on that one. And starting the game off with a 2-run lead allowed us to absorb the second-inning gunk without developing much panic or hopelessness.

After scoring the Jason Varitek Nimnud Run in the 6th, Asdrubal Cabrera was able to lift one far enough for a three-run homer that essentially ended the game. This is kind of the extent of Cabrera’s power: he’ll get some doubles and probably even a triple in that he has gap power and some degree of speed, but if he hits even 10 homers, it’ll be quite surprising (career-high: 6 in 131 games). It sure was awesome, though.

I am far from being ready to declare that Matt LaPorta is “even functionally adequate” just because he hit a knuckleball over the wall.

5) The Inadequacy of Words

I always read through various recaps and game logs the day after the game, not only to prepare for the column, but because I’m interested in the play-by-play aspects of the games. I also watch using MLB.tv, though, so I can see the plays as well.

Consider these two plate appearances:

Adrian Gonzalez: Strike (looking), Strike (foul), Foul, Ball, Foul, Foul, Foul, Ball, Foul, Foul, Foul, Gonzalez homered to right

...

Jacoby Ellsbury: Ball, Strike (looking), Strike (foul), Foul, Foul, Ellsbury grounded out to second

These may look functionally similar: pitcher is throwing strikes, batter is able to ruin two-strike pitches, and ultimately the good hitter does well while the poor hitter fails. Or maybe you want to blame the first pitcher and credit the second. Perhaps you want to congratulate *both* the hitter and pitcher from the first pair.

Let me tell you what ACTUALLY happened, though:

In the first instance, Frank Herrmann was tenacious and fearless. He was not going to give in to Adrian Gonzalez, no sir. Herrmann's head appears to be made of a substance of great hardness indeed. And he threw pretty good pitches: Gonzalez may have helped him on two of the EIGHT foul balls by swinging at something out of the zone with two strikes, but for the most part, Herrmann threw strikes and Gonzalez fouled them off.

Here's the thing, though: there was NO POINT in that ENTIRE SEQUENCE in which I felt Frank Herrmann would get Adrian Gonzalez OUT. I'm not saying that Herrmann is bad, or even that Gonzalez is Super Good (although he is an excellent hitter). I'm just saying that as I WATCHED the sequence, the only way that Gonzalez would going to be out is if Herrmann got a strike call on a borderline pitch or if Gonzalez made a mistake. Gonzalez was in TOTAL COMMAND of that plate appearance: he had Herrmann's stuff timed, and Herrmann simply has no pitch in his arsenal that Can't Be Touched. Again, this doesn't make Herrmann a schmoe: I see his potential upside in the Cliff Politte / Matt Guerrier mold. He's big, throws pretty (but not VERY) hard, and throws strikes. I do love me some strikes. But he has no answer for a superior hitter, and Gonzalez eventually beat him.

In the second battle, the was NO POINT in the ENTIRE SEQUENCE in which I felt Jacoby

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Ellsbury would hit the ball OUT OF THE INFIELD. He was thoroughly overmatched by Vinnie Pestano. I wish that said something Sooper Awesome about Vinnie Pestano.

It does not.

6) For the record

Pestano did look good. But sawing off Jacoby Ellsbury proves very little.

7) For the nostalgic

Admit it: a small piece of you misses Jhonny Peralta.

Fortunately, you don't need him around every day to be reminded of his unusual qualities. Dennys Reyes' head has a similar spherical shape. And, on a bases-loaded ball hit to third, the Best and Even More Very Best of Peralta came to the fore.

Now, after Matsuzaka mercifully wore out his welcome, it was perfectly reasonable to bring in the lefty Reyes to face Buck, LaPorta, Hannahan, and Brantley, three of whom hit left-handed. However, I still don't think this was the right time for Reyes to unveil his new Pinata Pitch, in which he allows himself to be blindfolded and spun around three times before blindly flinging the ball toward home plate. I suppose that hitting Buck on a 3-0 pitch could be explained through other means, but I doubt any explanation would be better than that one.

With a runner on first, Reyes had to remove his blindfold to hold the runner on, but instead sprayed his hand liberally with WD-40. Although this resulted in an accidental strike to LaPorta on a 2-0 pitch, the next pitch hit him and now there were two on.

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At this point, we have to note the special team-first scrappiness of our best power threat, Jack Hannahan. It's not usual for a guy slugging .500 to lay down a sacrifice bunt, but in a 3-2 game, Hannahan has that team-first gritty guttiness that allows him to sacrifice his stats for the good of the team, and sure enough, there he was, squaring around to bunt.

The first pitch was not really buntable.

The second pitch was not really buntable.

The third pitch was really, REALLY not buntable.

And, with the blindfold back on and the WD-40 reapplied, Hannahan drew a walk.

Out came Dan Wheeler to face Mike Brantley. Brantley worked the count full, then blorped a garbage shot to Kevin Youkilis, who, overcome with the Spirit of Peralta still surrounding the bag, dropped the ball. Youkilis is a little more sentient than Peralta, so he had the presence of mind to step on third for the force out. Now, poor Travis Buck, who had hung around the bag so as not to be doubled off, ran for home, where he would surely be out by roughly a parsec ... except that Jason Varitek, absorbing the Peralta Rays emanating from third base, simply stepped on the plate instead of tagging Buck. Since Youkilis had stepped on third, there was no force at home, and Buck scored the Indians' 4th run.

Of course, Cabrera's homer rendered this all quite moot indeed, but somewhere, Jhonny Peralta could feel the disturbance in the cosmos.

8) Ho Hum Dept.

Brantley singled and drew a walk to reach base two more times.

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Tony Sipp threw 9 strikes in 15 pitches to complete a perfect inning of relief.

9) Ducks on the Other Guy's Pond!

The only Red Sox to get a hit with a runner in scoring position was Marcos Scutaro. In all, Cleveland pitchers held the Sox to 1-for-10 with RISP. Asdrubal Cabrera was 2-for-2 by himself.