

The B-List: 4/11

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

Tuesday, April 12 2011 2:40 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, April 13 2011 9:01 AM

Mighty Mitch Talbot shut down the Angels last night while the power-hitting tandem of Asdrubal Cabrera and Matt LaPorta made Tyler Chatwood's debut memorable in the negative sense, and today's B-List addresses things like Talbot's command, the early-strike offense, and the fact that nothing whatsoever of interest happened after about ... the second inning. The most thrilling moment came when Cleveland loaded the bases without a hit, then did not get a hit. That, and Vinnie Pestano running briskly. Monkeys! (click)

FINAL

1

2

3

Indians (8-2)

1

3

0

Angels (5-5)

0

0

0



W: Talbot (1-0) L: Chatwood (0-1)

The only two hitters in the lineup with OBPs under .300 hit 3rd and 4th.

1) Destination Semi-Known

I have loaned my copy of Jim Bouton's seminal work, "Ball Four," to my father for a while, so I am spared the effort of trying to find the exact quote, but for all the alcohol and underpants and ill-conceived behavior, the thing that sticks with me from the book is when Bouton talks about control. I can't remember the quote verbatim, but broadly put, he said the idea of "pinpoint control" is nonsense and a myth. "You can't hit a spot on the outside corner, exactly where you want it," I paraphrase him saying. "I aimed for the middle, knowing I'd be off 6 to 8 inches in some direction, and that would make it a good pitch."

This might be exaggerating a bit, but I do think that it is the exceptional pitcher who has what we'd consider great control. It bears remembering that while Bouton had an injury-shortened,

unspectacular career, in his early days he was a high-effort high-quality high-velocity pitcher. He wasn't just some journeyman, even if he career ended up there after he was hurt. The way I've always read this is that sure, there are a small percentage of pitchers who can hit a spot more often than not, the majority of pitchers settle for "quadrants" and leave it at that.

I was reminded of this last night watching Mitch Talbot pitch, because I swear I never saw him throw a pitch that ended up precisely where I predicted it would. He would throw a pitch, and I'd see in my mind's eye a "path," maybe bending down slightly from the middle toward the outside knee area, and all of a sudden at the end of the flight, the ball would "**voop**" somewhere else (often bending in to right-handers). He would throw a slider, and it would be singing along, and then at the end, "**vo**

op

" it wasn't there any more.

Obviously, any pitch that goes "**voop**" is going to have an enormous advantage over any non-**voop**

ing pitch. Ask Mariano Rivera or Cliff Lee about that. And a great deal of Talbot's vooping had a downward bent, which led to a lovely 13:7 GO:FO ratio, which was 13:5 through 7 innings. Until the 9th

inning, Talbot allowed only 4 hits, and two of them did not make it out of the infield.

But I was thinking about this watching Talbot walk Bobby Abreu a second time. Now, Abreu is a notoriously patient hitter. In addition, he's off to a fast start, hitting .378 with a .511 (!) OBP through the first 10 games. Bobby Abreu knows what a strike looks like, and he has never been all that interested in swinging at pitches that don't meet that criterion. He'll routinely take a second strike while looking roughly as concerned as The Crusher was when the Masked Karat unleashed his initial flurry.

Here's the thing: from a pure pitch location standpoint, Talbot's pitches all looked like Charles Nagy Commemorative Nibbles. Off the plate away. Outside corner low. Just off the corner. True, he bent one inside half for a called strike, but he threw six pitches, got a break when one outside was called a strike, and walked Abreu (with a four-run lead ... leading off an inning ... in the *sixth*) on six pitches. Here is where I normally break out some old saw about hitting a five-run homer or something.

But while it's probably prudent not to groove one to the borderline Hall-of-Famer hitting .378, who proves this point in the 9th by fighting off a RIDICULOUS pitch for a "double" down the third base line to end Talbot's night (a TERRIFIC piece of hitting by Abreu), I don't think Talbot was nibbling in the pure Nagian sense. I don't think he was AFRAID to throw strikes to Abreu; I think his pitches MOVED too far.

I think this is where we are with Mitch Talbot: not only does he have that titanic changeup that moves about a foot away from lefties, I think ALL of Talbot's pitches have some sort of natural movement. And I don't want to paint Talbot as some eyes-closed hurler out there: against everyone who was not Bobby Abreu, Talbot gave up 4 singles, 4 Ks, and 0 walks in 8 innings of work. Even with the two walks, Talbot threw 72 strikes in 112 pitches. Most of the staff would have to improve their performance to date to reach this ratio. No, Talbot was in total command, preventing the Angels from making great contact and efficiently mowing through the lineup multiple times. But I think when you look at HOW Talbot pitches, I think it is to pitch a six inch square, throw the pitch toward it, and realize that, hey, it's probably going to end up a little bit off from there. **Voop!**

Hitters aren't all that happy about that.

2) You don't actually get credit for that, but thank you anyway

I wasn't all that thrilled to see Talbot go back out for the 9th, but this is where I defer to the human management skills of the manager. Talbot's a big lad, he's not really young any more, he'd been efficient, and 106 isn't a grotesque, Livan Hernandez number of pitches. Still, did I imagine the shoulder fatigue in September? Maybe I did. Anyway, he got a shot, he gave up a hit, he got the wazoo, 6 pitches aren't going to ruin Mitch Talbot.

In runs Vinnie Pestano. I'm rooting for Pestano a lot more than I am actually CONFIDENT in Vinnie Pestano. He has stuff. He deserves the shot. My track record liking and unliking and re-liking and being driven insane by right-handed Cleveland Indian relievers is really, really long and almost universally misguided. Closers of the Futures Ferd Cabrera and Tom Mastny say hi!

I'll give Pestano this, though: if he fails, it is not going to be because he minces about and

nibbles at the corners. Hey, he might miss the plate altogether, but the man is not going to get cheated out there. Anyway, with Abreu in scoring position, Pestano puts together a whiff and a pair of flyouts and that's the ballgame.

Because Abreu hadn't scored and the lead was 4, there is no save for Pestano. Vinnie's not going to get a lot of saves this season with Chris Perez in the role. I'll tell you this, though: right now, he might be the only right-handed reliever besides the closer I feel I can watch without wanting to dive out the back door to hide from the real-time results.

3) Drooby Doo!

Four hundred three feet! Four hundred bloody three feet! Straightaway center, homes!

The man's slugging .659. That's just silly, man.

4) Boom goes the dynamite!

With two on in the second inning, Matt LaPorta unleashed the kind of swing that makes one understand what it is that makes him an attractive player. Angels Stadium is an oddly-shaped affair, so if a right-handed hitter gets one out to right-center, he's hit the ball a pretty long way. This is not sneaking one over the wall in New Yankee Stadium: this is hitting something over a wall an appreciable distance away.

Now, let's be honest: this is the type of shot that made me think that Jhonny Peralta could be a special player (at least as an offensive middle infielder), too. The pitch was on the outer half, and LaPorta went with it, showing great strength to pop it over the wall. While I saw a comment on Twitter last night to the effect that Chatwood is effectively a AAA pitcher and that's why LaPorta was able to hit him, the dirty secret is that Chatwood held the Indians to four hits over

five innings and was undone more by a high pitch count (4 walks) than Super Hittability. No, this was a quality piece of hitting, going the other way, and doing so with authority.

But here's the other point: with all the noted understandings of small samples included, LaPorta is now hitting .241/.361/.483 on the season after hitting his second homer. Is the .241 good? No, it isn't. Is the .242 SLG sustainable? I know that LaPorta is a legitimate power threat, but that seems higher than I'm willing to expect from him. Maybe .200 as a *goal*.

But look at that OBP again: .361. First off, I will take .361 from Matt LaPorta in 2011, I absolutely will. Second, this is obviously buoyed by a number of walks: he had another last night. And this might be the most encouraging thing: despite being derided by fans, despite being threatened by more Santana at first, despite not hitting particularly well, LaPorta has maintained his plate discipline, going up to the plate with a PLAN about how he wants to attack the ball, and with a .242 SLG, is doing that.

I remain skeptical, but here's the other thing to keep in mind: how much does Mitch Talbot's entire season's worth of work in 2010 make him more comfortable, confident, and skilled in 2011? I'm not saying I'm interpreting his first two starts as some sort of a state change, but I think as fans we tend to nod sagely at other teams' young players getting a couple years under their belts before we're willing to consider them one thing or another. Since we watch THESE guys EVERY DAY, it SEEMS like they've had PLENTY of time to "develop." Well, they haven't. LaPorta has battled injuries, inexperience, and guys like Jayson Nix and Jhonny Peralta peppering him with random missiles. Is he clearly "breaking out?" Heck, no. He's hitting .241. The track record is not good yet. But ... well, that was a nice piece of hitting last night. Cross your fingers.

5) Ho Hum Dept.

Mike Brantley got a hit and a walk. In nine games (he got one off), he has reached base twice in SEVEN of them. He has at least one hit in each one.

6) Schmoe Hum Dept.

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After LaPorta drew a 5-pitch walk off Chatwood to lead off the 5th, Jack Hannahan flew out on the first pitch. Listen to me, sir: do not listen to the nicknames. Do not point to the .469 SLG. You are Jack Hannahan. The kid is losing his grip. Do not swing at the first pitch unless you can POUND it. A lazy fly ball to the opposite field? Not POUNDing.

Brantley then drew a 5-pitch walk, making Hannahan look that much more Hannahanny.

Asdrubal Cabrera worked a walk off a full count. If you're keeping score at home, this loads the basis, and only Hannahan has actually struck the ball into play.

Shin-Soo Choo did not swing at the first pitch: he worked the count full. Well done. And then ...

... double play. End of inning.

Feh.

7) Schmoe Hum Dept. II

Vern Wells is hitting .091/.149/.114.

That deal ... that's a bad-looking deal right there, Wink.

8) Credit Where Credit is Due Dept.

Austin Kearns boomed another double right before LaPorta's homer.

9) Cause for concern?

I like the jumping out to the early lead and all that, but after LaPorta's blast:

6 2/3 innings

2 singles

0 runs

(To be fair, also 5 walks)

It is okay to keep scoring after you have the lead.