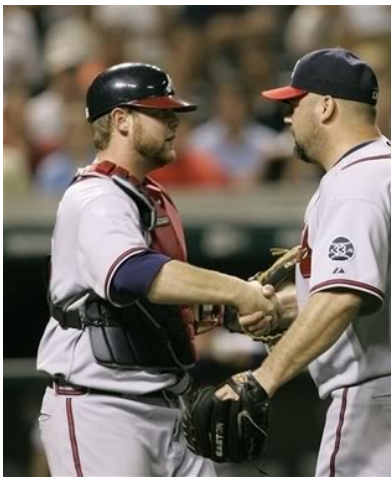
The Tribe dropped two of three over the weekend to the Braves, and are hanging on to first place in the AL Central by a threadstring. The series included a frustrating performance/loss from C.C, another impressive performance from god send Fausto Carmona, and more evidence that Paul Byrd is nearing the end of the road as a MLB starting pitcher. Buff hits on all three games of the weekend set in the Monday B-List. And he still hates bunting.



| **FINAL** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | **R** | **H** | **E** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Braves (36-32)** | 0 | | | | | | | | | 0 | | 0 |
| **Indians (39-27)** | 1 | | | | | | | | | 0 | | 0 |

*W: R. Soriano (2-0) L: Sabathia (9-2) S: Wickman (12)*

| **FINAL** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | **R** | **H** | **E** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Braves (37-32)** | 0 | | | | | | | | | 0 | | 2 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Indians** | **(39-28)** | 0 | 0 | 2 |

*W: Smoltz (8-3) L: Byrd (6-3)*

| **FINAL** | | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | **R** | **H** | **E** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Braves** | **(37-33)** | 0 | | | | | | | | 0 | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Indians** | **(40-28)** | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*W: Carmona (8-2) L: Davies (3-6) S: Borowski (20)*

It still interests me that I feel such a difference between going 1-2 over a weekend and going 2-1, but that emotional distance is multiplied when one of the losses was a straight giveway by our Ace.

**1) Eric Potter and the Poorly Constructed Bullpen**

One of the downsides of taking the last two games of the Florida series was that they were close enough games to warrant the use of Rafael Betancourt and Joe Borowski in each of the games. Using Betancourt was a problem because there simply isn't a better option than Raffy, who is quietly having a Zumaya/K-Rod/Rivera type season as the setup man who never gives up anything. Betancourt historically has had problems going three outings in a row, and I can understand the reticence for trying it now, when he's been so successful. Using Borowski was a problem because he's … uh … well … okay, I don't actually know the answer to that, but maybe using him three in a row would be a problem, too. Anyway, he was the obvious choice to be called out to protect a 1-run lead (obvious for Wedge, I mean: if there is a knee to be jerked, he's just the jerk(er) to do it), and he wasn't, so I'll assume that's why.

Thus with a 4-3 lead in the 9th inning Friday, starter C.C. Sabathia was dredged out to throw one more inning, despite having already thrown 107 pitches through 8. Now, I'm not saying that under no circumstances should Sabathia throw more than 110 pitches: he's a big boy, and he's proven himself durable enough to get the occasional long outing from. The problem here is not one of pitch counts, but one of simple Not Really Good-ness. Sabathia had given up 10 hits in those 8 innings, and despite 7 strikeouts to 1 walk, just wasn't all that sharp. In Wedge's defense, Sabathia had polished off the Braves in order in both the 7th

and 8th innings, suggesting that he had settled into something like a “groove,” but really, it all comes back to who is the best guy to get three outs: a fresh reliever, or a guy who’s thrown 107 pitches and given up 10 hits already.

And here, in a sense, the answer is not solely one of Simple Managerial Ineptitude (although it clearly played a role), but also one of Being Dealt Substandard Cards. Wedge’s choices at this point included:

a) Tom Mastny, who would be virtually guaranteed to walk at least one batter and put at least two on base, not the best recipe for a shutout inning, although he did have 3 scoreless outings in a row
b) Ferd Cabrera, from whom it is reasonable to expect literally anything at this point
c) Rafael Perez, a yoot who would historically not be considered by Wedge
d) Oldberto Hernndez, who had pitched the night before and has been quietly effective in June with a recipe of not throwing consecutive nights
e) Aaron Fultz, the single most mismanaged player on the roster, who, uh, I dunno, shaved Wedge’s ferret or something

So of Wedge’s five options (given that Betancourt and Borowski were Right Out), two were scary, one was eliminated from consideration for

being young, one was old, and one was much too Aaron Fultz. By closing himself off to possibilities before they were even considered, Wedge's hands were partially tied, even if he tied some of the knots himself.

Now, Mastny DID come in after the two-run barn door had been opened, and he DID walk two guys, but he DID throw 2/3 of a scoreless inning. Had he started the inning, there's no gurantee it would have gone any better. And Cabrera can be a maddening player, but has undeniably good stuff. You could see warming up, say, Cabrera and Fultz, then playing mix-n-match. Or, if you were going to leave Sabathia in, you would SERIOUSLY have to consider NOT pitching to .327-hitting Yunel Escobar with first base open. What seems really hard to defend is what actually happened: having Sabathia put a couple guys on (thanks in part to an error by Jhonny Peralta, then go ahead and pitch to Escobar. I refuse to consider that second-guessing, as I was screaming at the game at the time, and was nothing resembling alone in this sentiment.

Look, Ferd Cabrera is a valuable relief pitcher or he's not. Tom Mastny is either a reliable bullpen arm or he's not, and since they sent Matt Miller down to make room for Jason Stanford, you'd have to think they're leaning toward the "yes" side of that ledger, right? Aaron Fultz has a 2.04 ERA, for Pete's sake: I know he had a couple tremendously bad bases-loaded outings, but the man is a legitimate bullpen arm. Rafael Perez is either ready for the big leagues or he's not (what would an ERA of 0.00 at the time suggest to you?). I can see the point with Hernandez, although it's somewhat of Pyrrhic one. The length of the hook on Sabathia at that point had to be about the shortest in

major-league history, and instead he'd throwing to their hottest hitter with two runners in scoring position and the bullpen is not ready to contribute anything more constructive than spitting seeds. The weapons at Wedge's disposal were not the very best, state of the art weaponry of a Seattle or San Diego. But to throw up your hands at that point and handcuff yourself to the proverbial radiator isn't excusable, either.

Let me go back to the point about pitching to Escobar for a moment: Yunel Escobar is not Magglio Ordonez or Victor Martinez. He isn't a well-established fearsome hitter to be avoided at all costs. But this represents another time that pitching to a hot hitter with first base open has bitten the Indians (one memorable time being the infamous Joe Borowski Meltdown with Alex Rodriguez), Sabathia had induced a double play earlier in the game, and finished with an 11:6 GB:FB ratio. I just don't understand why of all the knees available to be jerked, the silly ones get chosen and the potential lessons learned remain ignored.

Yeah, the defense (Peralta, Dellucci) was bad. The management was worse, and more controllable.

## 2) Having a backup plan

Remember when I made the analogy of hitters using the skill of

disbelief in approaching Paul Byrd? Well, any good D&D character didn't depend solely on illusions to saw through the enemy: once the illusion was dissipated, you could fall back on a fireball, or a lightning bolt, or a long sword, or a Bohemian Ear Spoon, or some Prozac and a polo mallet. Something. Anything. You didn't just keep coming up with variations on the theme of an implausible ally coming from an impossible location to perform an unlikely action.

Byrd gave up 10 hits in 5 innings, including a pair of doubles and a triple. He walked none and struck out 7, a high number for Byrd, but the 10 hits were pretty much insurmoutable and he gave up 5 runs, 2 ½ times as many as his counterpart John Smoltz, and lost his third game of the season.

Byrd certainly threw plenty of stikes (71 in 95 pitches, including the aforementioned 0 BB and 7 K), but you just can't give up two hits an inning, one of them for extra bases, and get by. The strikeouts might be encouraging in that the split-finger pitch of the off-season may be rounding into form, but without something more interesting between the first pitch and the third strike, Byrd is not an asset.

By the way, two Braves stole bases off Byrd, with ostensible "defensive" catcher Kelly Shoppach behind the plate. I am not in a position to credibly evaluate Shoppach's throwing skills, but if these were stolen off Byrd, that compounds and already grave problem: Byrd puts enough guys on base already without giving them an guided path into scoring position.

## 3) I'm beginning to think this Fausto guy will catch on

Fausto Carmona won the only game of the set for Cleveland with a 7-plus inning outing, giving up 4 hits, 0 walks, and no runs through 7 full innings while striking out five. In the 8th, he pretty much Cabrerified, giving up a leadoff homer and walking the next two batters, but that's still a helluva start from the youngster.

Carmona's sinker was particularly effective, inducing 11 ground ball outs to 4 flies, but also playing a role in the 5 Ks. It seems needlessly greedy to point out that Carmona's stuff appears to vary in effectiveness from start to start: I mean, whose doesn't? Sabathia didn't have his best stuff Friday, either. Still, it's just one of those things where you see a guy throw a particular way and wish you could see that all the time: a couple starts ago, a lot more of Carmona's pitches were flatter and up in the zone. The nice thing about Carmona is that he is not a "pure" sinkerballer like, say, Jake Westbrook: he still can dial it up to the mid-nineties and have another dimension with which to be effective. But boy howdy, when he has that ball boring down, he just looks like a thicker, saner, less jerky version of Kevin Brown, and that makes me drool.

For what it's worth, I don't see how you can make an honest

argument that Carmona shouldn't have been sent out for the 8th: he was dominating the Braves and we had a 5-run lead. He'd only thrown 85 pitches through 7 innings, 63 of them for strikes. It bears mentioning that he didn't just completely fall to pieces or anything: Thorman has legitimate power, and both walks came on 3-2 pitches. When all is said and done, Carmona's start was not only excellent, but sorely needed.

## 4) One man's weak spot kicks another man's ass

Consider the bullpen this weekend:

Tom Mastny: 2/3 IP, 0 H, 2 BB, 0 K, 0 R, 0 inherited runners scored (IRS)
Rafael Perez: 4 IP, 3 H, 0 BB, 6 K, 1 R, 0 IRS
Rafael Betancourt: 1 IP, 1 H, 0 BB, 2 K, 0 R, 1 IRS
Joe Borowski: 1 IP, 2 H, 0 BB, 1 K, 0 R, 0 IRS

Now, I understand that Mastny's goofball accuracy contributed to Sabathia giving up the winning run in his stead, and that Perez' innings were largely "garbage time" since the Indians' offense was largely "garbage," but look, we have some relief pitching. Don't complain to me when we don't choose to *use* it. Again, if Hernandez and Cabrera and Fultz are no good, well, replace them with someone who @#%*ing *is*. And if they aren't not no good, well, then @#%*ing *use* them. Would I rather have Matt Miller and Eddie Moo up here instead of (at this point) Mastny and Hernandez? Yeah, I prolly would. But it's not like this is a totally worthless collection of Jason Davises here.

## 5) A modest request

Although I fully appreciate what Jhonny Peralta is accomplishing with the bat, I would like him to invest in a glove made of leather instead of plywood.

Although I fully appreciate that David Dellucci is … uh … er … reportedly kind to puppies and kittens, I would like to invest in a left fielder who is not confused by the flight of baseballs and can run faster than a large mainframe computer.

## 6) Kudos with a side order of perspective

Casey Blake extended his hitting streak to 26 games with a hit in each of the three games. Blake has hit safely in 36 of his last 38 games, hitting .331 during that stretch with 7 homers and 24 RBI. Blake's solo shot in the 8th inning Friday should have been the game-winning blow. And with the implosion of Andy Marte in mind and body, the Indians would be in a world of trouble had Blake not stepped back into his original position so smoothly and provided stability to a infield with huge question marks. His hitting out of the 2-hole, and recently the 3-hole with the continued struggles of Travis Hafner, has provided another solid offensive performer in front of Victor Martinez, who now has 57 RBI on the season. Blake has already scored 39 runs this season

after only 63 last season and 72 in 2005. He has walked 32 times this season after only 45 in 2006 and 43 in 2007. (His basestealing remains crappy, but this is picking nits.)

As neat an accomplishment as a long hitting streak is, though, realize that Blake's average went DOWN in each game this weekend. Going 1-for-4 a bunch of times doesn't make you a great hitter, or even a very good one. I understand the philosophy of moving Hafner down in the lineup, but not at the expense of putting Dellucci (and to a lesser extent, Michaels) in the 2-hole in front of Blake. This seems like so much nose-cutting somehow: it isn't jump-starting Dellucci and removes Blake from the place where he's been most productive.

## 7) The shot heard 'round Scott Thorman's glove

The “big blow” in Sunday’s 5-2 win was a mighty blast off the checked swing of Ryan Garko who bounced a ball down the first base line that Thorman whiffed on to score two runners. Garko later scored on a single by Franklin Gutierrez, who then scored on ridiculous defense by the Braves.

I would really like to pretend this becomes the jolt that jump-starts Garko into being an effective offensive force again. In fact, I declare it to be so. Huzzah!

(Yeah, I’m not confident of that, either.)

## 8) Credit Where Credit Is Due Dept.

Josh Barfield collected 3 hits and 3 RBI this weekend.

Franklin Gutierrez went 2-for-4 Sunday, scoring a pair of runs and driving in one.

Kelly Shoppach doubled and scored off John Smoltz (although he also K'd twice).

Grady Sizemore stole his 20th base.

Trot Nixon buffaloed the Braves into walking him thrice on Sunday despite going 0-for-4 and

1-for-3 in the previous two games. After his last walk, David Dellucci pinch-ran for him, which suggests that Nixon is slower than Dellucci, which is really hard to conceive.

## 9) Bunt-hating Dept.

Bunting is an excellent tool to have late in a game. It's been shown that under certain circumstances that sacrificing an out for a base will increase the expectancy of scoring a run. The reason it is a "sacrifice," though, is that it greatly depresses your chance of scoring *more* than one run. (Outs, as it turns out, have a significant negative impact on offense. Huh.) So in a tie game in the ninth inning, bunting a runner to second might make the difference

between winning the game and going to extra innings: however, while one run in the ninth inning may share the same degree of oneness with a run scored in, say, the fifth, it has a lot more “leverage,” in that there are a lot fewer opportunities for either team to score subsequent runs. The number of overall runs a team can expect to score with no outs and a runner on first is actually HIGHER than the expected value with one out and a runner on second. The ONLY thing the second situation has going for it is the chance of scoring ONE run: unless you are playing for EXACTLY ONE RUN, the out turns out to be the most valuable commodity. As Earl Weaver once said, “If you play for one run, that’s all you’re going to get.”

This is kind of a long-winded way of saying, “Bunts are not universally bad things, but if you’re using them as pure sacrifices in an

inning before the 8th, you are no better student of the game than a retarded fruit bat."

Sunday. Fifth inning. Josh Barfield. Eric Wedge. Fruit bat. QED.