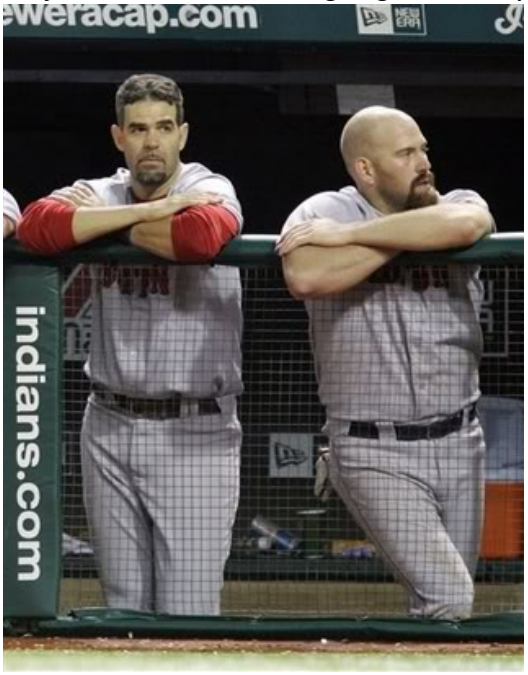
Are we having fun yet? From the sounds of things, we're having more fun than the Red Sox, TBS, FOX, and ESPN put together, but you know what? I'm okay with that. In the B-List, Buff credits Paul Byrd for a terrific start, Jhonny Peralta for a strong night at the plate, and admits he is less than serious. On to Thursday!



FINAL SCORE				
Red Sox (1-3)	0	0	0	0
Indians (3-1)	0	0	0	0

W: Byrd (2-0) L: Wakefield (0-1) S: Betancourt * (1)

** I don't see that Betancourt was officially credited with a save, but I don't see why not.*

If I were to imitate a Boston writer, I would go out of my way to pretend to be giving credit to Boston for blowing this series, but really be saying that it is Cleveland's superior team play and pitching that is the reason the Indians lead 3-1.

1) One-night whippersnapper

The nice thing about facing Tim Wakefield is that with few exceptions, you are both younger and throw harder than your counterpart. For one night, Paul Byrd was the spring chicken in the equation, often outpacing his opposing number by 20 mph, something that has happened to Paul Byrd ... um ... possibly in high school. Actually, Byrd is a fun interview and the ultimate credit deflector, and went out of his way to give credit to the energetic Jacobs' Field crowd for providing him with some extra adrenaline, and I swear the FOX gun has him at 88 on one pitch. Now, television radar gun readings are often taken with entire salt licks, but Byrd's fastball did appear to have a little extra "pop" last night in certain places.

Last year, I (based on an offhand suggestion by Gus Brooijmans on a mailing list) proposed the Good Paul Byrd Theory, in which Byrd would be successful if he threw 70% strikes, be unsuccesssful with 60% strikes, and somewhere in between if ... er ... somewhere in between. It was a good theory in terms of being consistent with his first five appearances or so, but wasn't highly correlated after that. Still, intuitively, pitchers are generally more successful when getting ahead in the count, something already borne out in the first three games of this series (Sabathia, Carmona, Matsuzaka: bad; Beckett, Westbrook: good; Schilling: jerk). Let's see how this applies to Paul Byrd last night:

Top 5th: Doug Mirabelli: Strike (looking), Ball, Ball, Strike (foul), Ball, Strike (swinging)

Now, why pick a plate appearance like this? Because it represented the third batter to see Ball TWO from Byrd. The fifth inning! Ball TWO! We talked yesterday about Jake Westbrook throwing a lot of first-pitch strikes, but Byrd threw one non-strike in the first INNING. He threw TWO balls in the SECOND inning. By this time, he had also struck out three batters and given up a single baserunner on a two-strike single to Manny Ramirez.

Now, much has and will continue to be made about the decision to start Tim Wakefield instead of Josh Beckett on three days' rest. Personally, I found the decision to be pretty reasonable. In the interest of full disclosure, I am a huge Tim Wakefield (and knuckleball) fan. But this is a call the Boston staff made based on his simulated start and medical clearance, and Beckett reportedly told the staff that he was sore anyway. Well, for four innings, it would be hard to argue that Josh Beckett would have looked any better than Tim Wakefield did. That's what 3 2/3 no-hit innings with six strikeouts will do. And really, except for a reaction play by Wakefield, he would have gotten through the fifth giving up a single run. Beckett would have been better than that? Come on. Be serious.

No, the reason I bring up Wakefield's stats is that this is what Paul Byrd was up against. From the second batter, it became obvious that:

a) Wakefield had a very good knuckler last night
b) The Indians had no more idea of how to hit a very good knuckler than they did of how to turn lead into gold

A good knuckleball can make hitters look ridiculous, and the Indians looked *completely* ridiculous for four innings. Sure, they drew a couple of walks, but until Peralta hit a double, Wakefield was completely ... well, "dominant" seems like a funny term to use in regards to a man throwing at batting sub-batting-practice velocity, but what term do you prefer? Masterful? Whatever it was, it looked for all appearances that it would take a near-shutout to match Wakefield. That's a lot of pressure for a guy to be up against.

All Byrd did was throw an ACTUAL shutout for five innings. No, he wasn't dominant, either. He put two guys on for David Ortiz in the third, and gave up a hit in three of the five innings, but five shutout innings is five shutout innings. Byrd threw 49 strikes in 66 pitches through those innings and threw a first-pitch ball to three of the nineteen hitters he faced, two of whom were Doug Mirabelli and Julio Lugo, neither of whom can actually hit.

The long layoff from the fifth seemed to dull the sharpness Byrd had displayed up to that point, giving up consecutive homers to Kevin Youkilis and David Ortiz (and neither was cheap). Besides, twice through the order might have been all the lubricants tricks Byrd had up his sleeve. But needing a huge performance from Byrd, the Indians got a huge performance from Byrd. Which, one is tempted to say, was *huge*.

2) The shot heard round the pitcher's mound

Although one could argue that the ground ball Ortiz hit into the teeth of The Shift that Jhonny Peralta fielded for the third out of the third inning (with two men on) was a crucial play, no single play had more bearing on the game than Asdrubal Cabrera's at-bat against Wakefield in the seven-run fifth. With men on first and third and one out after a homer, single, HBP, and runner-advancing fielder's choice, Cabrera lifter a foul ball behind first base that Kevin Youkilis attempted to play hacky-sack with before catching. Sadly, Youkilis hacky-sacks like I did back in the day and was unable to catch the ball.

This points out something I did not know about the tag rule: a runner who is tagging up does not need to wait for the ball to be caught, but rather simply for the ball to be touched. So while Youklilis was juggling the ball like so many flaming chainsaws, Franklin Gutierrez alertly ran home and had slid across the plate by the time Youkilis had finished bollixing the catch. That's heads-up play, although probably by third base coach Joel Skinner as much as Gutierrez.

Anyway, at the time, I was sorry he'd dropped the ball, because, after all, Gutierrez would have scored, and I didn't have much faith in Cabrera's ability to lift a ball to the outfield for a real sacrifice fly. (I was thinking specifically of his overeager plate appearances in the 2-1 Yankees game.) And the danger of a double play is always lurking with a knuckler that is dropping severely at the plate as Wakefield's was. However, Cabrera lined a pitch into the box, where Wakefield tried to stab it, couldn't, and Cabrera reached on an infield single as the ball deflected harmlessly into the middle of the diamond.

Now, certainly this is a big play because it drove in a run. However, it also meant that Travis Hafner's subsequent strikeout was only the second out and the inning could continue. But even more importantly, second baseman Dustin Pedroia had shaded Cabrera toward the bag at second, and had Wakefield simply fallen asleep after throwing the pitch, it looked likely that Cabrera's shot would have been a simple double play ball.

Now, had Cleveland taken a 1-0 lead to the sixth but Byrd DIDN'T have to sit around for 35 minutes waiting for the Indians to score seven runs, it's not a foregone conclusion that he would have given up home runs. It's impossible to say what would have happened after that. But what

DID happen was a seven-run explosion, and since the Indians only got one more hit after the fifth, it isn't hard to infer that the game would have looked a lot different had Wakefield never touched the ball.

3) Jhonny on the shpot

Potentially annoyed at having ceded the total bases lead to Kenny Lofton in Game Three, Jhonny Peralta looked silly in his first plate appearance against Tim Wakefield. This made him one of the nine hitters to look silly against Tim Wakefield. However, Wakefield first pitch in Peralta's second at-bat stayed up high and Peralta barely (well, by some five-ten feet, but still) missed homering to left, settling instead for a double fo Cleveland's first hit on the night.

(I say "potentially" because I don't recall Jhonny Peralta's face ever actually moving. The man's face is perpetually frozen in a combination of amused and bewildered that has not changed since about 2002. Has anyone tested this man for botulism? Has Jhonny Peralta ever actually raised his voice?)

After Wakefield gave up a run-scoring single to make the score 3-0, Terry Francona had seen enough and brought Manny Delcarmen into the game to face Peralta. Now, Delcarmen has looked awfully good in this series. He's the fellow we tried to get instead of Gil Mota in the Crisp-Marte-Shoppach-Riske deal. This would have served two purposes: to give us a promising young hard-throwing reliever, and to give us one *fewer* Gil Mota, which, like thneeds, everyone, everyone, everyone needs. (Ask the Mets.) And on a 2-1 pitch, despite my

advice in a previous column, Delcarmen threw a belt-high fastball on the outer half that Peralta deposited into the right field seats for the three-run homer that essentially ended the game.

Peralta is now hitting .353 for the series to lead the club. His head weighs twenty-eight pounds.

4) Mighty Casey at the bat

The fifth inning was a good time to be Casey Blake. Leading off the fifth, Blake watched one knuckler float through the zone, then hit the next one onto the home run porch in left.

As the Indians batted around, Blake came to the plate with two outs and Kenny Lofton on first. After Lofton stole second off Delcarmen and Mirabelli, Blake blooped a single into center to drive in the seventh run of the inning, providing bookends for the Casey Blake Commemorative Inning. If the Indians advance, I am expecting the Franklin Mint to be contacting Blake, then producing a plate that looks nothing like him.

Although not in keeping with the heading, Blake also made a nice stab of a ball hit down the line to turn a potential double into a simple out.

5) Sotto voce

Grady Sizemore did draw two walks, including one to lead off the game, stole a base, and scored a run, looking very speedy on the bases, but he also took an 0-for-3 collar and is hitting .188 out of the leadoff spot. Don't tell anyone.

6) Hum this!

Rafael Betancourt ... wow.

Now, Jon Miller on the radio broadcast seemed very surprised by Raffy Betancourt. It was like he was reading typographical errors: "He struck out 80 ... and walked NINE!" He couldn't believe how good Betancourt was. Part of me was a little disturbed by this, but then, it really IS kind of hard to believe how good Betancourt has been.

Betancourt needed 12 strikes in 15 pitches to get through TWO COMPLETE INNINGS, including retiring Youkilis, Ortiz, and Ramirez in order on six pitches (all strikes) in the 8th. He got to pitch the ninth because it would not have been a save situation for Borowski, and because ... he threw six pitches in the 8th! Of course, this being Raffy Betancourt, this took roughly 15 minutes, but ... he threw six pitches in the 8th!

7) By the way

After battling with Manny Ramirez, who fouled off three two-strike pitches, Jensen Lewis gave up a long home run to make the score 7-3. Lewis then retired the next three hitters in order, gave up a single, erased him with a double play, then was the beneficiary of Drooby Doo's vertical leap. Lewis threw 19 strikes in 26 pitches (9 to Ramirez alone) to throw 2 complete innings of one-run ball. However, Luke Perry called and wants his sideburns back.

8) Climbing the ladder

Cabrera's catch of Dustin Pedroia's liner was a work of art. Gracious.

9) Quick, call the haberdasher

I do not know if they make Golden Sombreros in "bucket size," but Travis Hafner collected four strikeouts in four plate appearances, three against Wakefield. Hafner could not have looked more helpless had he been a Star Trek character wearing a red shirt with the rank of Ensign. Hafner made

contact (foul balls) twice in four at-bats and struck out to lefty Jon Lester on three pitches. When asked for comment, Hafner ate the reporter.

10) Explicit mention

Several readers out there have wondered why I continue to call for the firing of Eric Wedge, especially in light of the fact that he has pushed all the right buttons in the post-season and won the Manager of the Year award to boot. The answer is simple: pure superstition. The team has a better winning record when I write one than when I don't, so it will continue unabated through the end of the season. (I don't own a rally cap.)

11) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro celebrated the win last night by flying to Boston and shaving Dan Shaughnessy's head. The curly-haired boyfriend appears on the Boston Globe's website in full curly-haired regalia, although he does not look particularly happy while doing so, and this statement is a big, fat lie. Fire Eric Wedge.