It was a good ole' fashioned pitchers duel yesterday afternoon at The Prog as Jake Westbrook and Chicago's John Danks went toe to toe. In today's B-List, Buff found a lot to like about Jake's start, commenting that Jake may be evolving into a front of the rotation guy right before our very eyes. Buff also likes what he's seen so far of Jensen Lewis, and takes a look around the division at what's transgressed early this season.

FINAL SCORE				
White Sox (1-2)	0	0	0	0
Indians (2-1)	(2nd		1 GB	KC)

W: Dotel (1-1) L: Westbrook (0-1) S: Jenks (1)

Life, it has been said, is a tale full of sound and fury. Remove 8 parts sound and 9 parts fury, and the Cleveland offense Wednesday is approximated.

(Note: sadly, this makes me the "idiot.")

1) Something new has been added

In previous seasons, the charm of a Jake Westbrook start has largely been in its drabness: you don't get a lot of strikeouts, you don't get a lot of extra-base hits, just a bunch of ground balls, probably some of which make it through the infield for base hits, a couple walks, likely a few runs, and some innings well-eaten. No one has asked Westbrook to don the mantle of Staff Ace, nor is he likely to usurp it from anyone of whom it is asked. He throws his 200 innings, mostly of fine quality, and the clockwork machinery of the season goes on.

This isn't to say that Westbrook is simply a league-average starter with no real promise: on the contrary, he signed to an eight-figure deal precisely because he is more than this. Westbrook has enough "stuff" to throttle good offenses, and the ability to chew six-to-eight innings with Quality Starts is undervalued by some. If it could be done by just anyone, the ability would not command ten million dollars. He is considerably more than Just Some Guy, although considerably less than Automatic Win as well.

There was some hope that the off-season refinement of Westbrook's new-found changeup might elevate him to the status of True Front of the Rotation Guy. Jake used the pitch some last season, noted in some games against Tampa Bay in May, and was lauded for it in the pre-season, a collection of entirely-scoreless innings that simultaneously meant next to nothing and held large pods of hope for a substantial step up in 2008. Now, the problem with a changeup to me is that I can't really recognize the pitch when it's thrown. As I stated last season, Jake seems to throw sinkers that sink a little, and sinkers that sink a lot, and I couldn't really tell you with great reliability much of the

cause behind the effect. Still, I can tell when a hitter is "out in front" of something, and that's what I saw last season.

Regardless of what it was he was throwing yesterday, Westbrook could hardly have looked more brilliant from the start. The first three innings were perfect, and batters two through seven were all retired on groundouts. The control was not particularly good, as six of the first seven batters were started off with a ball instead of a strike, and four of the hitters saw Ball Two (two had full counts before making outs). Still, he retired the first eleven batters he faced and didn't give up a hit until the fifth when A.J. Pierzynski stroked a single to center. Westbrook snuffed the threat by striking out Joe Crede swinging.

Cracks in the foundation had presented themselves, though, in the guise of five flyouts to the outfield through those five innings. In Westbrook's most-successful starts, he is able to mix in more than a few strikeouts with a preponderance of ground balls, much like Fausto Carmona was able to do the night before. Five flyouts suggest that either he is trying to muscle a fastball past some hitters, that he is hanging breaking pitches (either sliders or curves: as a lay fan, I think I saw both), or that this Magical Changeup is, in fact, more Doug Henning than Gandalf.

Indeed, Indians nemesis Juan Uribe ruined the mutual shutout with a solo shot in the sixth. It was not hit spectacularly, but it is Juan Freaking Uribe, who bats .034 against the rest of the American League and approximately .937 against Cleveland. Without Cleveland pitching, Juan Uribe would be a professional potato sculptor or something. I hate Juan Uribe. Anyway, after this, the next two hitters were also retired on fly balls (one infield pop) before Westbrook got Jim Thome swinging.

Now, there is a place for healthy second-guessing about giving Westbrook an 8th inning, in which he gave up the game-winning blow to Crede on an execrable 2-0 hanging curve that traveled roughly six thousand feet. However, consider that Westbrook's 7th consisted of 9 pitches, each of which was a strike, and with runners on first and second, the ninth pitch produced an inning ending 1-6-3 double play. In all, Westbrook threw 67 strikes in 100 pitches to get through 7 1/3 innings, and gave up 3 of his 6 hits in that 8th inning of work. It wasn't an *excellent* start because the one thing a sinkerball pitcher should *not* do is give up multiple home runs, but it was an excellent first five innings, and a very good first seven. If Jake Westbrook makes this start thirty times, he would have a significant chance at winning 20 games. But if I never see that curveball again, I would be a happier idiot.

2) A tip of the cap

When Chicago traded Brandon McCarthy to Texas for John Danks, my heart sank. First, it suggested they understood the principle of pitching to their ballpark, in that McCarthy was a flyball specialist and the Cell is a miniscule ballpark not conducive to such beasts. But more to the point, Danks is a product of a Round Rock, Texas high school that is about fifteen miles from my home and I'd been following him for that reason. Part of the vaunted "DVD" draft (with Thomas Diamond and Some Guy Whose Last Name Starts

With V), Danks was a tremendous high school pitcher whose younger brother Jordan is a star outfielder at the University of Texas. Anyway, I may be irrationally overrating Danks because he is a hometown guy, but what I've seen of him suggests he can pitch.

The Indians probably agree.

Casey Blake's solid single to lead off the sixth was Cleveland's first hit. In fact, the Cleveland offense can be summed up thusly:

Casey Blake got a hit
Travis Hafner walked
Ryan Garko did both
Nothing else accomplished jack shit

That's not entirely true, as Kelly Shoppach did sacrifice Blake to second after his single, and Franklin Gutierrez did reach on an error. But neither action resulted in Actual Offense and is summarily dismissed. Danks needed only 87 pitches to go 6 2/3, yielding to Octavio Dotel to retire Blake with runners on second and third. They would be the last baserunners for Cleveland. (As such, props to Scott Linebrink and Stay-Puft

Jenks for two perfect innings of relief.)

3) Sideburns of Doom

After a mixed-bag first outing in which Jensen Lewis struck out the first two hitters he faced to strand his inherited runners but then opened the next inning with the aplomb and poise of Arnold Horschak singing a duet with Barry White, it was nice to see Lewis challenge and win the battle with Jim Thome (a left-handed power hitter: Thome saw four pitches, all strikes, and missed the last of them) and then retire Paul Konerko, all with runners on first and second. Again he had a little trouble in his second inning of work, yielding a single and a walk in a scoreless inning, but he did record another swinging strikeout with men on base.

In fact, Lewis has not yielded a hit with a runner in scoring position thus far, and the two runs charged to him are the result of someone else doing this instead. Lewis has twice been called into games to close the door on an inning with runners on base, and twice has done so with swinging strikeouts. (He has actually done this *three* times, but I am giving him less credit for the third in that one cannot inherit one's
own baserunners
.)

Reliever statistics are sometimes hard to fathom given the necessarily small sample sizes, and especially in April when one hit can change one's ERA by double digits. And it would be hard to be 100% sincere and claim 100% serenity while watching Lewis jerk fastballs through the zone hovering around 90 mph. But while having a guy be able to stroll in to start a late inning is quite valuable (cf. Betancourt, R.), having a guy with the composure to record outs with someone else's runners on base is a terribly valuable thing as well: to date, Lewis has been able to accomplish this.

4) I am ready

For Jhonny Peralta and Jason Michaels to stop sucking.

5) Why single them out?

Valid point.

(But the other guys have done something in other games: all fawning over Danks aside, these guys are sub-Mendozan for an offense that had double-digit hits the previous two games, and Michaels has nary a one.)

6) Ho Hum Dept.

Travis Hafner looked bad striking out against Jenks. I don't necessarily get all that worked up by my power guys racking up a goodly number of Ks, but it's one thing to strike out, and quite another to look like a goober while doing so. Man!

Of the three runners the Indians stranded in scoring position, two were by Casey Blake. (Michaels had the other, but Michaels seems capable of sucking independently of the situation: to bring up RISP seems almost superfluous. Of *course* he made an out. He's Jason Michaels!)

7) I am also ready

For Asdrubal Cabrera to get a hit while batting right-handed.

Vs. left: .000/.000/.000
Vs. right: .429/.429/.571

Sample size noted. Get a hit!

8) Around the Division

Kansas City finished off the sweep of the Tigers as Zack Greinke held Detroit to 1 run in 7 innings and Joakim Soria notched his second save. In the series, Detroit pitching held the Royals to 4 runs in each of the first nine innings of each game, but the vaunted "best lineup in baseball" scored an AGGREGATE five runs in 29 innings.

Minnesota lost to Caliheimgeles because of a home run by ... Torii Hunter. Ouch.

9) Department of Corrections Dept.

Reader David Lastafka objected to my characterization of Jason Michaels as a non-good left fielder, and on further review, I allowed my impression of him as a stocky schmoe to color my off-the-cuff mention: he was actually an above-average defender last season, and near-average the season before that. He still hits completely unacceptably for a corner outfielder, or, for that matter, a hominid. Also, his hair is

completely false.

Several readers gently pointed out that Cleveland's own Joe Tait and Austin Carr are not appreciably different from Hawk Harrelson in their propensities to overstate things in favor of the home team (the Cleveland Cavaliers, for those fixated on baseball). Although the general sentiment is probably true (I do not listen to Cavs broadcasts, being in Austin TX), the execution simply cannot be. However, Carr has the added bonus of spouting absolutely nonsensical and outright false statements, often when excited. Most readers agreed that the "mute" button was the most valuable method of dealing with Harrelson. With Carr, it's more a matter of jaw retrieval.