Clifton Phifer Lee. What a start to the season. And what a big performance for the Tribe on Sunday. And with it, takes a big step towards winning back Buff's love. In the Monday edition of The B-List, Buff opines on all three games from the weekend, providing some analysis of what went wrong with C.C. and Fausto on Friday and Saturday. And Garko ... the Indians best overall hitter? Buff makes the case that he may be.

FINAL SCORE				
Athletics (7-4)	1	5	1	2
Indians (4-6)	0	1	0	0

W: Blanton (1-0) L: Sabathia (0-2) S: Street (3)

FINAL SCORE				
Athletics (8-4)	0	0	2	1
Indians (4-7)	0	0	1	0

W: DiNardo (1-0) L: Carmona (1-1)

FINAL SCORE				
Athletics (8-5)	0	0	0	1
Indians (5-7) (	3	rd	2 GB KC/CHW	**)**

W: Lee (2-0) L: Gaudin (0-1)

Our course for success is clear: reprint the schedule so that every game is a Sunday game against the A's, and start Cliff Lee.

1) We all knew the tall left-hander with control of the strike zone would be successful

In looking at the weekend's matchups, you had to feel pretty good with C.C. Sabathia pitching at home and Fausto Carmona following up after a brilliant start, but maybe were a little iffy on the Sunday turn with our nominal fifth starter on the hill. Well, if Carmona turned into a newt, I am at a loss to describe Sabathia's transmogrification, settling uneasily on "sea cucumber."

Cliff Lee pitched better.

Admittedly, it is not hard to pitch better than a sea cucumber. That is akin to tasting better than a sea cucumber. And as awful as sea cucumbers taste, they apparently pitch even worse. But Lee, on the other hand, was just barely short of Completely Brilliant: 7 of his eight innings were perfect, he recorded four swinging strikeouts in the first three frames, and Travis Buck's triple down the right field line was the first fair ball hit out of the infield. Although Buck did foul off a pair of 1-2 pitches before succumbing in the first, Lee got five swings and misses in the first nine batters, and four of them were Strikes Three.

After the run-scoring fourth in which Lee gave up his two hits, he settled back in to throw four more 1-2-3 innings, and struck out the final two batters he faced swinging. In all, Lee recorded eight strikeouts, which is a bit on the high side for Lee, while balancing these with exactly ZERO WALKS, which is a bit on the *unprecedented* side for Lee. After 102 pitches, spotted a 6-run lead, and not protecting either a perfect game

nor a shutout, Lee's day was complete as Raffy Betancourt sawed through the ninth to finish the win.

Think about this for a second: the triple down the line was laced between first baseman Ryan Garko and the bag: the infield single that scored Buck was a hit by virtue of being hit exceptionally poorly. Had it been struck harder (on a 1-2 count), it's entirely possible that it would simply have been a routine groundout to short. A handful of inches to the left on the triple and a handful of mph on the grounder, and we might be waxing poetic on Cliff Lee's Perfect Game.

Before we get all saccharine and airheaded about how Cliff Lee will be the second consecutive Cleveland Indian to win a Cy Young, it bears mentioning that Sunday was a truly miserable day on which to play baseball: it was cold, it was windy, and the A's looked very much like the group of campers who want to go home and suddenly think that earning the Cleveland Baseball Badge is no longer as attractive an option as it once seemed. They had the series in their collective pockets and hitting a ball with a bat was likely a singularly painful experience. Still, Lee had excellent command of his stuff, pounded the strike zone (67 strikes, 35 balls), and under any circumstances an 8-inning 2-hitter with no walks and 8 Ks is just a tremendous performance. At this point twice through the rotation, Lee and Westbrook have two quality starts apiece and average over 7 innings per start; Carmona was with them until the newtification process Saturday, but still sports a sparkling 2.20 ERA and only 10 hits in 16 1/3 innings. But Jake's WHIP is a wonderful 0.86 ... and Lee's is very nearly HALF that at 0.48! That's just sick.

2) No excuses

You know, in looking for insight as to just how C.C. Sabathia could give up 9 runs on 12 hits in 3 1/3 innings, I read that the home plate umpire was "squeezing" Sabathia and giving him a smallish strike zone. Look, I'll be the first to admit that I no longer feel qualified to predict which major-league pitches are or are not strikes: the strike zone I was taught as a youth no longer seems relevant to today's game, in which a strike is determined by a complicated combination of factors that may or may not involve moon phases and 12-sided dice. (They use 12-siders because the sides are five-sided, just like home plate, see?) But if a guy is being squeezed, there are subtle signs to look for, like gigantic numbers of walks or a large frequency of "hitter's counts," where a pitcher had to groove a fastball because he's down 2-0 or 3-1 in the count after not getting a call or two.

But consider Sabathia's five-run second inning:

Crosby: Strike (looking), Ball, Ball, Strike (swinging), single
Cust: double
Murphy: Ball, Ball, Ball, Strike (looking), Strike (swinging), groundout
Bowen: String (swinging), single
Denorfia: Ball, Strike (looking), Strike (looking), single
Ellis: String (foul), double
Barton: Ball, double
Brown: IBB
M. Sweeney: Strike (foul), sac fly

Now, the only one of these that might truly be affected by the umpire ... was the guy who made a simple out! Two of the hits came with two strikes, and hits were allowed on the following "pitcher's

counts:" 0-1, 1-2, and 0-1 (as was the sac fly, not listed). In the first, Emil Brown's double came on 0-2, and in the third, Donnie Murphy singled and Mark Ellis hit a sacrifice fly on 0-2 counts. Now, that's not a guy who's "getting squeezed:" that's a guy who can't throw a quality pitch to batters who have to protect the plate.

As is often the case with an outing of this crummitude, there's not a lot of insight to be garnered from the stats: Sabathia threw strikes, but so what? He struck out 4 guys, but so what? He didn't give up any homers and two of his runs were actually let in by reliever Jorge Julio, but who the flaming hell cares? Giving up more hits than getting outs is simply piss-poor, and there's no "analysis" that puts a positive spin on that. By the way, with 4 doubles and two walks, this means that the number of single-base transactions exactly equalled the number of outs, so the doubles were simply "extra." On the bright side, I now know how poorly one must pitch to get a "Game Score" of TWO. (50 is kinda average. 2 is ... well, it's a *two*. I made fun of Paul Byrd for a 25. This was a
TWO
.)

3) ¿Fausto?

What the holy hell was THAT?

The good news was that Fausto Carmona gave up only two hits in 3 1/3 innings of work, and did not strike any peanut vendors, bat boys, or weather balloons with errant pitches. The EIGHT walks suggest that

each of these things was actually *unlikely*.

Boy, he didn't have it. There's one you could make a case for the umpire not giving him the low strike, but ... he really didn't have it.

4) To the rescue!

If there's one thing the bullpen construction lacks, it might be the presence of an actual "long man," a guy who might enter the game in the first few innings in case a starter is injured or the game goes 17 innings or something like that. Having seen the Jason Davises of the world attempt to claim value on this basis, I can't say I'm all that disappointed. Still, with both Friday's and Saturday's starters recording exactly 10 outs apiece, the call went to the bullpen to cobble together some degree of stability out of a pretty rotten situation.

Jorge Julio did a feasible job of this: although he did allow both inherited runners to score on a wild pitch and a two-run single, he was able to saw through a scoreless inning of his own before yielding to lefty Craig Breslow. Breslow bridged the gap between the middle innings and the Actual Reliever Territory by throwing two innings of one-hit shutout ball and is making the decision to release Aaron Fultz look that much more brilliant with each passing day.

Jen Lewis came in with one of the least-attractive situations in baseball: bases loaded, 1 out, and the top of the order coming to the player. Although Travis Buck is not a True Seasoned Leadoff Guy (he hits .175,

fer crine out loud), he is the leadoff hitter, and Mark Ellis has some skill: Lewis struck out Buck on four pitches and retired Ellis on a 1-2 popup after feeding him 5 strikes in 6 pitches. Lewis did give up a double to Mike Sweeney in him next inning, but got Jack Cust on a three-pitch swinging Cust and induced a pair of groundouts; his third inning of work wasn't "clean" but it was scoreless.

The bullpen construction is based more on the principle that the starter will go at least 5 innings, then we have front-end options (Lewis, Breslow, Julio), mid-setup options (Kobayashi, Perez, Betancourt), and a closer (Borowski). No bullpen is (or should be) constructed to handle multiple piss-poor starts in a row, but it's nice to see that the front-end guys are not just the tenth-through-twelfth-best pitchers in the system.

5) Oh, the humanity!

Let me set the stage for the epic failure that made Saturday's loss extra-excruciating: after being throttled for two innings by Acceptable Lenny DiNardo, the Indians got two baserunners in each of the next three innings, but only pushed across one run on a pair of groundouts. Although the offense was having some trouble stringing quality plate appearances together, it wasn't looking like a hopeless morass of Schmoes on Parade. In the sixth, after Lewis heroically finished his third innings of work, Travis Hafner and Victor Martinez broke through with a pair of singles to chase DiNardo: although Jhonny Peralta then whiffed against reliever Joey Devine, Ryan Garko worked (the proper word choice) a walk to load the bases with one out.

Franklin Gutierrez made a terrible decision to swing at an unhittable 3-1 pitch and lofted a fly to short right that couldn't advance anyone. David Dellucci followed with his first RBI as a pinch-hitter by drawing an heroic walk. And then Casey Blake looked about as preposterously inept as possible by grounding an 0-2 pitch into a force that would have been about a nonuple play had there not been two outs at the time to finally squelch the rally.

Still, the offense showed some signs of life, and it seemed a foregone conclusion that the Indians were right back in the game, probably with a couple more runs in them: if the bullpen could continue to hold down the A's, the Indians would steal this game out from under Blundermona's ridiculous 8-walk start.

Out trots Raffy Perez, a titular high-quality reliever, to face lefty Daric Barton. After getting two strikes, Perez throws two awful sliders and walks Barton. Mike Sweeney then followed with a solid single on the second pitch.

Emil Brown hit for Jack Cust, who sports a putrid platoon split, and promptly hit the first pitch to center for a run-scoring single. And then the next pitch was a three-run homer to Mark Ellis.

After this, Perez settled in a retired the next three hitters, but this is hardly the point: in the space of six pitches, from having Barton at 2-2 and struggling to make contact (the 2-1 pitch was swung on and missed), Perez threw two balls to lose him and gave up three well-hit balls to completely blow the game out his posterior.

The offense continued to blow and it may not have made much of a difference, but something other than Compleat Self-Immolation there might have helped kind of a lot.

6) A quiet pronouncement

It is time to consider the possibility that Ryan Garko is the best hitter on the team.

Garko's line of .325/.460/.500 is no doubt at least partially a product of the small sample size of the young season. It would be better if Garko had more than 1 home run, or more than 5 extra-base hits out of 13. However, Garko has appeared in all 12 games this season, and exactly two of them were hitless. In the two hitless games, he walked twice in each of them. In eight of the twelve games, he has drawn at least one walk. Garko had at least one hit in all three games this weekend to extend his hitting streak to five. With runners on base, Ryan Garko is hitting .600/.750/.800. With runners in scoring position, he is 3-for-5 with 5 walks and has driven in 4 runs. Ironically, it is only leading off an inning in which Garko is unable to produce much.

Victor Martinez is a fine hitter and can switch-hit: Grady Sizemore is a powerful force from the leadoff slot and runs the bases much better than Garko. But it isn't outrageous to suggest that Garko is the best raw hitter on the team.

7) A round of culpas on the house

David Dellucci had a fine series, getting the pinch-hit walk to drive in the run Saturday (he later doubled pointlessly in the same game), smacking a double off Joe Blanton Friday night, and stroking a two-run single on Sunday to finish the scoring. Dellucci is also riding a five-game hit streak and scored a run in the game before as a pinch-runner. His .273/.467/.409 line still looks ridiculous to the naked eye, but he has as many extra-base hits as singles and has a brilliant 6:2 BB:K ratio as a hitter.

I remain unconvinced that Dellucci has the actual strength to hit the ball over the wall, but it should be recognized that of all the Indians' myriad ills, David Dellucci is far down on the list.

8) Blue Moon Special

This having been said, anyone with the "Dellucci doubles, Jason Michaels singles him home" teaser bet probably made lots and lots of money. Michaels collected a pair of hits over the weekend to raise his OPS all the way to .315. He now has as many RBI on the season as Kelly Shoppach garnered with one swing. He hurts my eye.

9) The blackest hole this side of Calcutta

Given the choice between living in Calcutta and watching our third basemen, I would still rather watch our third basemen. Let's retain *som e*
perspective. But Casey Blake is "hitting" a spiffy

.143/.211/.200, which Andy Marte's low-sample .200/.200/.200 dropped on the "strength" of a 2-AB, 2-K performance Sunday in which he was able to lay down a sacrifice bunt. Blake has managed to sprinkle in three errors into his work, however, something Marte has yet to accomplish.

Our corner outfielders are stuggling mightily, but third base makes them look like Ubermenschen (Dellucci), or at least Adequate (Franklin Gutierrez, OPS .567). (Nothing makes Jason Michaels look less Jason Michaelsy.)

10) Box Score Follies

Travis Hafner also had at least one hit in all three games and is now tied for the team lead in RBI with 8 (3 this weekend).

Jamey Carroll reached base three times on a single and a pair of walks and scored each time for one of those magical "1 AB 3 R" box score lines.

Jhonny Peralta hit Cleveland's only home run of the series and only struck out three times. With 9 Ks, he is only 4th on the team behind Hafner (12), Sizemore (11), and Gutierrez (10).

Grady Sizemore stole his third base on the season: Cleveland

baserunners have stolen 5 bases and have only been caught once. The player caught was Travis Hafner, suggesting either a botched hit-and-run or an aneurysm by the third-base coach.

The only players to have more walks than strikeouts are Garko, Dellucci, ... and Carroll. (!!!)

The Indians have given 167 at-bats to players with OBPs under .262. 133 of them have gone to players who slug under .305.

Joe Borowski pitched a perfect inning. Masa Kobayashi needed 6 pitches to throw a perfect inning Saturday.