The Tribe took two of three over the weekend from the Bronx Bombers, getting solid performances from Paul Byrd and Jeremy Sowers, and losing a 1-0 heartbreaker of a pitchers duel yesterday. As he does every Monday, Buff recaps the weekends worth of Indians baseball, paying special attention to the starting pitching efforts, the resurgence of Kobayashi, and Raffy B as a closer. Buff also gives us fresh installments of terror on the basepaths, adventures in relief pitching, and as always ... the Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine.

FINAL				**RE**
Yankees (12-12)	0	1	0	2
Indians (11-12)	1	0	0	0

W: Byrd (1-2) L: Pettitte (3-2) S: Betancourt (2)

FINAL				**RE**
Yankees (12-13)	0	0	0	0
Indians (12-12)	0	3	0	0

W: Kobayashi (1-0) L: Ohlendorf (0-1)

FINAL				**RE**
Yankees (13-13)	0	0	0	0
Indians (12-13) (	2nd 2.5 GB CHW	**)**	0	0

W: Wang (5-0) L: Sabathia (1-4) S: Rivera (7)

The Indians took the weekend series thus far because our old, homer-prone pitcher beat their old, homer-prone pitcher, our reliever in his first full major-league season beat their reliever in his first full major-league season, but our Ace threw

one bad pitch and their Ace did not. The parallels are eerie, right down to the youngish second baseman who can't hit a lick this season.

1) Welcome back, lefty

Ah, where this would normally be the heading for Jeremy Sowers' first appearance of 2008, it's really about the return of a much more important pitcher: the Real C.C. Sabathia. I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that the quality of Sabathia's season is going to have a heckuva lot more bearing on the success of the Indians this season than the quality of Jeremy Sowers'.

Real Sabathia (not a football team in Uruguay) made his first appearance of the season against the Royals last Tuesday, but this came with a few caveats. One, he was out of the game after the sixth inning, having used up a whopping 43 pitches in the first two innings alone. Two, because it was the Kansas City Royals, who are attempting to be the first team in recent history to finish at or above .500 without major league hitters in their lineup. And three, despite striking out 11 guys, Sabathia still walked a couple and looked more "sharp" in comparison to his billiard ball past than in a real, context-free way.

I'm going to go out on another limb here and suggest that this counts as Actually Sharp.

Yes, he lost the game, but you know, the other guy wasn't exactly potted meat. In 8 complete innings of work, Sabathia threw 78 strikes in 111 pitches, much more like the accurate command he showed last season. After walking Alex Rodriguez in the first inning on four pitches (which, with two outs and a runner on first, smacked a lot more of "Gee, Shelley Duncan or A-Rod: you know, I think I'll take my chances with the super ugly guy" than it did of any serious blunderbussery), Sabathia didn't give up another walk and struck out 7 of his 8 hitters (including Toxic Avenger Duncan). Of Sabathia's 33 pitches out of the strike zone, 10 of them came in the first inning alone. He did give up a pair of

extra-base hits in his set of 4 base knocks, but look: that line is basically in line with what we just got finished praising the heck out of Cliff Lee for posting a couple weeks back. 4 hits, 1 walk, 1 run, and 8 Ks in 8 innings is simply very good stuff.

The pitch that Melky Cabrera hit out of the park was clearly a pretty bad pitch: an elevated changeup that didn't appear to fool Cabrera much. But consider his reaction to each extra-base hit:

5th:
Cabrera: home run
Jose Molina: Ball, Strike (swinging), Strike (Foul), Strike (swinging)
Damon: Ball, Ball, Strike (foul), Strike (looking), Strike (swinging)

6th:
Jeter: double on 3-2 pitch
Abreu: Strike (looking), groundout
Rodriguez: Strike (looking), Strike (swinging), Ball, Strike (swinging)
Duncan: Strike (looking), Strike (swinging), Foul, Ball, Strike (swinging)

That's five batters, 15 strikes, five balls, 7 swings and misses, and 4 Ks. That's a pretty good reaction to adversity, and doesn't even mention the pickoff of Robinson Cano right before the homer to Cabrera. I can't tell you for certain that Sabathia is "all the way back" and "on a roll" and "here we go," but I can tell you that complaining about this start would be pretty petty and misguided.

2) Well, you too, I suppose

Look, I just don't get it, okay?

Invariably, right-handed pitchers with good control that seem to keep hitters off balance are compared to Greg Maddux, and left-handers with good changeups who pitch "cerebrally" get compared to Tom Glavine, or perhaps if you're older, John Tudor. I get that. Despite the fact that there are far more Paul Rigdons and Chris Nabholzes out there, the inclination is to see the best in a young pitcher and get excited about the possibility of a long career. Jeremy Sowers is a very likeable pitcher, a smart guy out of Vanderbilt who "knows how to pitch" and showed flashes of real goodness last season. But I'm just going to go ahead and say what I've got in late April 2008: there is less "there" there than I want there to be.

Now, look, this isn't entirely fair to Sowers, who did a credible job in a spot start on Saturday. He was an admirable fill-in for the injured Jake Westbrook and should be a quality short-term replacement. The Yankees are an exceptionally patient team and generally score a lot of runs, and Sowers held them to three in 5 1/3 innings, giving up those three only because David Dellucci made another poor play on what became a bases-loaded triple given up by reliever Jensen Lewis. But Sowers wasn't particularly accurate, throwing only 55 strikes in 98 pitches. He wasn't especially effective, giving up 7 hits and a walk with only 3 punchouts. And he wasn't especially efficient, giving up a baserunner in each inning (albeit one on an error by first baseman Ryan Garko), and gave up two singles in each of the 4th and 5th innings before loading the bases in the 6th on a single, walk, and HBP. He was okay ... and that's about it. About the most impressive thing he did was induce a double play grounder to end the 5th, which was all the more impressive in that he posted a scary 4:8 GO:FO ratio, much in line with his stats last season.

I mean, I'm irrationally disposed toward groundball pitchers like Westbrook, Carmona, and Aaron Laffey, who gets the ball tonight. I understand that I'm biased here. And this doesn't even necessarily play into the current infield defense we're putting up. But Sowers is going to lose this game as often as his team wins it, and right now, I'm just not all that excited by the prospect.

3) Refining the Good Paul Theory

Once upon a time, in a galaxy exactly where it is right now, I opined that Paul Byrd had to throw a high percentage of strikes to be effective. Byrd had an impressive string of innings with no walks because he works so frequently in the strike zone, and this is really the only way he can get by, because he's just so damned hittable that giving guys free passes often ends up in the guise of free runs as well. In his early starts, Byrd seemed to be having trouble with his control, and gave up a couple of real clunkers before righting himself in his last couple starts.

The problem with throwing lots of strikes is that occasionally Byrd can throw too many strikes: on Friday night, Byrd threw a somewhat hard-to-believe 59 strikes in 77 pitches. This had the good news of providing a number of efficient, low-pitch-count innings, and he wafted through 5 2/3 innings. The bad news was that three of his six hits were of the taterian variety, and he left clinging to a tenuous 5-4 lead at that point.

Here's a problem I hadn't really noticed before, because it always seemed like Byrd could give up a hit to virtually anyone on the planet not named Tony Pena Jr.: the Yankees trotted out a left-=leaning lineup against the right-handed Byrd, hardly something requiring earthshattering unorthodoxy. He's right-handed, send up the lefties. And, shoot, two of the hitters are switch-hitters anyway (Jorge Posada and Melky Cabrera). But of the four extra-base hits given up by Byrd, four of them were by pure left-handed hitters. Of the six hits total, six were by lefties. Of the seven left-handed hitters in the lineup, five got hits. The two righties went 0-for-6.

This season, Byrd has an unearthly platoon split:

LHB: .339/.373/.613
RHB: .222/.255/.356

This is actually in line with his three-year performance from 2005-2007:

LHB: .330/.362/.494
RHB: .257/.282/.427

Now, the fact that the OBP-AVG is low all around is great, but ... look at those numbers! The average (AVERAGE!) left-handed hitter this season is Jim Thome. Over the three years before that, it's a little better, say, a mere Roberto Alomar. I mean ... great googly moogly, that's really awful.

I'm not sure there's much to be done about this at this point in the season, or in fact Byrd's career at large. He is what he is. Short of picking up a screwball or a changeup with more left-to-right movement, even the suggestion from early in the season isn't going to make Paul Byrd effective against left-handed hitters. Against a lineup with more than, say, *two* of them, Byrd is sort of a Wallenda waiting to happen.

Anyway, he pitched okay and we won the game, but ... regardless of Official Role, Byrd should be considered our fifth starter, and whatever goodness we wring from the spot should be taken for the good fortune it is.

4) Adjustment period completed

Early in the season, I was not a big fan of Masahide Kobayashi's penchant for putting multiple runners on base. He seemed to have just enough "stuff" to get out of his own messes, but frankly, a guy with a WHIP of 2 is simply not that valuable a guy.

One of Kobayashi's problems was really commanding the strike zone: he seemed to go to three balls a lot, walking a few of them, and generally looking like a guy who had spent too much time learning major-league strategy from Jorge Julio. However, on Saturday, Kobayashi picked up his first major-league win with two sparkling innings of work, giving up a pair of singles, but whiffing two and walking

nobody. More to the point, it took him an efficient 16 strikes in 23 pitches to get there.

Given a second outing Sunday in relief of Sabathia in a 1-0 game, Kobayashi calmly fired 8 strikes in 12 pitches to finish a perfect ninth. The four non-Ks Saturday, two of which came with runners on first and second, were ground balls; the three Sunday were all in the air. Granted, Derek Jeter's ground ball through the middle took a fortuitous bounce to become the double play that ended the threat, but it was still a nice piece of pitching that suggests that Kobayashi is getting his sea legs under him.

5) The pressure was not quite debilitating

Much has been made of Raffy Betancourt's old save stats, in which he converted barely half of his opportunities. This glosses over the fact that a number of his "blown saves" were not done from the comfort of the closer's ninth inning bases-empty role, but rather were simple runs given up earlier in the game. With Joe Borowski in the role last season, Betancourt thrived in his more customary setup role and people wondered if maybe the two were jointly miscast. This, too, overlooks the fact that Borowski was really only useful in that one role (pitching at the start of the ninth inning with a lead), while Betancourt could be used more valuably to get the opponent's toughest hitters out in the toughest situations.

Given a real Capital-C Closer opportunity Friday, Betancourt responded:

Rodriguez: Strike (foul), Ball, pop out
Matsui: Strike (looking), Strike (swinging), Strike (swinging)
Posada: Strike (swinging), Strike (foul), fly out

8 strikes in 9 pitches, 1 perfect inning. Against the heart of the order. Ask me if I

would have felt as confident with Borowski in that situation.

6) Jholtin' Jhonny!

With two outs in the bottom of the 5th Friday, after Paul Byrd had given up the second of his three taters, Travis Hafner fought back from 0-2 to single the other way. Victor Martinez pulled a single off Andy Pettitte, and Jhonny Peralta strode to the plate to the audible wincing of some thousands of Indians fans. After all, Peralta had to this point been a far better hitter with the bases empty than with ducks on the pond.

On a low-quality 3-1 pitch, Peralta gave the Indians a lead they wouldn't relinquish. On the night, Peralta went 2-for-4 with 4 RBI (he had driven in the previous Cleveland run on a single in the first). He also had a single and a run on Saturday. He took a collar against Wang, but that didn't do much to separate him from his teammates, as the majority of the lineup joined him in West Ineptitude.

Oh, by the way, all four of Peralta's RBI Friday came with two outs.

7) Terror on the basepaths!

The Indians spent the weekend trying to manufacture scoring opportunities: Jamey Carroll stole a pair of bases Friday, each off a left-handed pitcher (one off Pettitte, one off ex-Tribesman Billy Traber), and Grady Sizemore stole one off Traber as well. On Saturday, Carroll stole off the righty Kyle Farnsworth (as a pinch-runner, no less), while Sizemore was caught for the first time this season. And on Sunday, trying to get something going off Wang, David Dellucci was successful in his attempt while Franklin Gutierrez failed in his.

This doesn't include the PAIR of sacrifice bunts Gutierrez laid down Saturday trying to push across the winning run that wouldn't occur until the bottom of the ninth.

8) Adventures in relief pitching

Although Jensen Lewis did give up the triple that cost Jeremy Sowers his three runs, his 3 Ks in 1 2/3 scoreless (for him) innings suggest the germ of an effective reliever in there. And Raffy Perez sawed through 2 1/3 hitless innings, yielding only one walk in retiring 7 of the 8 Yankees he face in only 23 pitches (17 strikes: a big improvement over early-season Raffy).

9) Quote in context

One of the Yankees (I believe it was Johnny Damon) lamented that with Posada hurt, it seemed like they had gone a while with only 22 or 23 guys on the (25-man) roster.

Since my team employs Tom Mastny and Andy Marte, I am confused as to what his point is.

10) Performances of note

Asdrubal Cabrera temporarily raised his average to .232 after a brilliant 2-for-2 game Saturday that featured him drawing two walks as well. His performance Sunday invokes the Thumper Rule.

Franklin Gutierrez hit a solo shot immediately after Peralta's three-run homer.

Victor Martinez' clutch bases-loaded single ended the game (positively) Saturday off Ross Ohlendorf.

David Dellucci filled in at the leadoff spot Sunday in place of the mildly-injured (knock, knock) Grady Sizemore. This was an inspired choice, as Dellucci is not the fastest player, but does have superior (thus far) on-base skills. He got a hit and drew a walk off Chien-Ming Wang, representing over a third (including the stolen base) of Cleveland's offense on the day. He also had a hit and an RBI Saturday.

Ryan Garko did not dump toxic waste into Lake Erie. I am at a loss to say something more glowing about Mr. Garko.

11) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro is taking a correspondence course from the DeShawn Stevenson School of Opponent Taunting. As this is possibly the first sentence in the history of mankind to pair "DeShawn Stevenson" and "school" or "education," I consider its falsehood to be self-evident. Fire David Dellucci's depth perception.