Five starts. Five wins. A 0.96 ERA. 37 innings pitched, 32 strikeouts. Just two walks. Tribe fans, we are witnessing something truly special right now with Cliff Lee. And this is a guy that a lot of you wanted to give away in a trade this off-season. Understandably, Buff is giddy about Cliffie's super start. And he writes about it, as well as the Indians 8-3 win over the M's last night, in today's B-List.

## FINAL

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**R**

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**Mariners (13-15)**

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**Indians (13-15)** (T 3rd 2 GB CHW)

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*W: Lee (5-0) L: Washburn (1-4)*

Even on a cold mid-week night, I would have expected a better crowd to watch Cliff Lee pitch.

**1) The bubble bursts, but there appears to be a layer of steel beneath it**

To say that Cliff Lee's fifth start was not as good as the previous three is a bit disingenuous: since his last three starts were Actually Historically Good
(Rany Jazayerli notes that the list of players since 1956 to throw three straight starts of 8+ IP, 3 or fewer hits, 1 or fewer walks, and 8+ K consists of ... Cliff Lee), a continuation of this would have been pretty unfair to expect. And, in fact, Lee's first inning suggested that it wasn't going to continue right off the bat: after retiring Ichiro Suzuki on a groundout, Lee got ahead of Jose Lopez 0-2 before yielding a single, and Raul Ibanez 1-2 before giving up a second single. However, he got out of the inning without any runs scoring, which is, after all, kind of the point.

He gave up a hit to the leadoff hitter in the second, but then induced a double play to begin a run of retiring 10 straight hitters. Another pair of singles marred the fifth, but a perfect 6th was punctuation by a 0-1 groundout, a three-pitch K, and a 1-0 flyout. Lee used up 82 pitches to get through those 6 innings of work, a leisurely 13 1/3 pitches per inning that put him on track to record another deep run.

A pair of singles to start the 7th proved to be the beginning of

the end, though, as that-day call-up Wladimir Balentien hit the 2-0 pitch over the outstretched reach of Franklin Gutierrez for the three-run homer that ended Lee's day.

Now, the inclination is to think that Lee got behind in the count and had to throw a belt-high fastball to Balentien, but if you watch the replay, it was actually a heckuva pitch. The pitch was on the outside black, and might have been called low if Balentien hadn't swing. It looked like almost a reverse cutter, moving down and perhaps away (it was hard to tell: it might be that I was just expecting something more like Lee's cutter, which will move *toward* the right-handed Balentien), but really, that was a good pitch that Balentien simply did a good job of hitting. It should be noted that although Balentien was indeed a last-minute call-up, he is well-thought-of in scouting circles and Mariners' fans have been clamoring for his roster placement for longer than we've been pining for, say, Ben Francisco. (Balentien is better.)

But look at the numbers when all is said and done: no, 8 hits, 3 R, and 3 Ks in 6 IP is not much in the way of a special outing. It's a Quality Start, and that's about it. But 7 of those 8 hits were singles, he induced the double

play grounder when he needed it, and in fact posted a "positive" GO:FO ratio of 9:6. Lee's bugaboo in previous years was that his flyball style of pitching made him prone to extra-base damage, especially home runs: yes, he gave up his first homer of the young season, but really, it was a shot that measured about 0.85 on the Vlad Guerrero scale of hitting pitches out that have no business being hit out.

Lee's other bugaboo in years past was the free pass, and this marked yet another start with no walks allowed. Now, I'm not a good enough scout to tell you over the 400K feed from MLB.tv whether Lee was significantly less sharp than the 400K feed from MLB.tv I saw against Kansas City, but it's not unreasonable to claim that Lee's command was better that night than it was last night ... and he was still able to post 6 shutout innings without all that much of a sweat. (The Mariners' offense isn't exactly Murderer's Row, but it's better than KC's.) In a sense, I don't think it's outrageous to claim that Lee looked awfully good without having his best stuff.

Which is very good news for Cleveland.

## 2) My father's brother Charles resides in the domicile

One more point about Lee: the highlights of the game show the wonderful large, slow curve which froze Adrian Beltre for a strikeout. Lee's curveball has always been a source of glee for Indians fans, and many became frustrated last season when it appeared he simply wouldn't use the damned thing. When he commands it, it looks like a tremendous pitch to have in the arsenal.

However ...

What the highlights are unlikely to show is the curve Lee threw to the nine-foot Richie Sexson in the fifth: after getting ahead 0-2 and inducing Sexson to foul off a pitch, Lee blooped in a curve that Sexson took for a ball. He then grounded out to third, and the at-bat was pretty mundane.

But the curve was a ball because it was *high*.

I want you to think about this for a moment: Richie Sexson is simply enormous. He's not quite Randy Johnson or Chris Young the pitcher, but he can look them squarely in the nostril. The man is just huge. And Lee's curveball, a pitch that moves quite a bit but travels at a pretty slow speed, was not in the strike zone because it was *too high*. That means that it was approximately eight feet off the ground when it got to the plate. Okay, maybe not eight feet. And frankly, maybe it wasn't really too high. (Real-time, I thought the ump missed the call, but slow-mo replays suggested he was at least plausibly right.)

Anyway, I guess the point is twofold:

a) It seems really silly to claim that Cliff Lee would pitch better if he used his curve more, if only for the fact that the three-run homer raised his ERA from 0.24 to 0.96 on the season: it may be that tinkering with Cliff Lee at this point is a foolish thing to do
b) The Zito Curve is only a valuable weapon if thrown WELL, and if that only happens ½ the time, perhaps leaving it in the bag for special occasions isn't a bad plan.

Obviously, if Lee could throw the pitch more or less perfectly every time, it would be a great thing to pull out more often. On the other hand, if he CAN throw his fastballs perfectly nearly every time, and the curve is used more as a diversionary tactic or strikeout pitch, I'm not sure that's something to complain all that much about.

## 3) Outfield Revisited

After a couple of games off to rest a sprained ankle, Grady Sizemore returned Tuesday and promptly responded with a pair of doubles, representing a large percentage of the Cleveland offense. He was joined by David Dellucci's two hits (including an RBI double) and Franklin Gutierrez' three singles. Last night, he hit the third pitch from starter Jarrod Washburn over the right field wall for a leadoff homer; he would also draw a pair of walks, double again, and score from first on a double into the left field corner. With the four extra-base hits in two games, Sizemore has raised his hitting stats to .287/.402/.446: the OBP is great to see from the leadoff man, and his SLG is rebounding into useful territory.

Dellucci, hitting .283/.371/.500 on the season to lead the entire team in OPS, sat against the lefty Washburn to allow Jason Michaels to start: although Michaels' season stats are still quite putrid (a .276 SLG is truly shockingly bad), Michaels did extend his hit streak to 5 games with a double to the wall off reliever Ryan Rowland-Smith. After a comical start in which Michaels boasted an almost-unfathomable .260 OPS (OPS!), Michaels has gone 9-for-25 (.360) with three doubles and a pair of walks in his last eight games. This does not qualify as a large sample, but it does qualify as major-league, at least.

Meanwhile, Franklin Gutierrez drove in three runs with a pair of RBI singles last night, marking his third consecutive multi-hit game. He has raised his season numbers to .276/.323/.402, which is not yet good for a corner outfielder, but since April 12 he has gone 20-for-62 (.323) with 5 doubles and a homer: he still sports a lousy 5:20 BB:K ratio, but at least for now, his bat can play at this level.

When asked to address the biggest weakness on this team, no sane fan would have picked Sizemore, but most

would have chimed in that our corner outfielders (along with third base and closer) were primary needs, where "primary need" is defined here as "gaping, sucking wound." However, at least recently, there is evidence that ... y'know, maybe it *isn't* exactly going to keep us from being competetive.

## 4) Today's Spit Take

With an RBI double over Suzuki's head in the 5-run fifth, Casey Blake extended ... extended! ... his team lead in RBI to 19.

## 5) Magical Opportunity Lost

Ryan Garko missed a chance to get a big inning rolling in the first when he hit a sacrifice fly with runners on 1st and 3rd with no one out. However, he did make a plate appearance without an official at-bat, making his box score line 0 0 0 1.

In Garko's next plate appearance, he walked and scored, making his line 0 1 0 1.

In Garko's next appearance, he cleverly induced Washburn to hit him in the ... "thigh," putting him on base, where he came around to score to make his line 0 2 0 1.

I was sort of hoping for the Four False Outcome night in which Garko laid down a sacrifice bunt, but sadly, there were two outs at the time of his next appearance, and he simply popped out. I couldn't decide after the fact which amused me more: a final line of 0 2 0 1, or the vision of Ryan Garko bunting.

(It's the former: the latter is not amusing, but horrifying.)

# 6) Squander Ball in Theory and Practice, Part I

After Jason Michaels hammered a double on a high pitch from Rowland-Smith, Rowland-Smith showed that this was the apex of his command of the strike zone, walking Asdrubal Cabrera on 5 balls in 6 pitches and walking Grady Sizemore on 4 balls in 5 pitches.

Jamey Carroll then popped out to shortstop, and Victor Martinez, after taking a thoroughly preposterous swing at a slider that may or may not have bounced off the plate, grounded into a sweet 5-4-3 double play.

When you load the bases with none out and manage to score zero runs by making 1.5 outs per batter, that is truly squanderrific.

By the way, Asdrubal, any time you'd like to stop swinging at the eye-high fastball would be good with me. Really. Start tonight. I'm okay with that.

## 7) Squander Ball in Theory and Practice, Part II

Let's just say this: when the first four batters of an inning reach base and you score one run total, you have done a bad job.

Here's a tip: Ichiro Suzuki was known as a very good defensive right fielder because he has a terrific arm. They moved him to center. So trying to score from second on a broken-bat single to Suzuki seems like a ... er ... suboptimal decision.

(Now, in fairness, this is a snap decision, and it took pretty much a perfect throw from Suzuki and lousy

slide from Blake to gun him down at the plate. But, y'know, you might want to take into account the quality of the outfield arm you're trying to force to make a good throw: I mean, Suzuki's median throw is "very good," so that seemed like a low-quality risk to take.)

Oh, after the putout at the plate? Foulout on 3-1, K swinging. Also not good.

**8) Everybody hits!**

The two Indians not to get a hit each walked: four Indians got a pair of hits each (Sizemore, Martinez, Gutierrez, Shoppach). And despite 11 hits, 4 walks, a completely egregious error, and a testicle strike by Washburn, the Indians only left 7 on base and three in scoring position. Eight runs is neat. Let's start doing that more often.

# 9) Bullpen Checkup

Jensen Lewis started five of his seven batters off with a first-pitch strike: he gave up 1 walk and no hits in two scoreless innings of work. I'm not sure I understand the fans' beef with Lewis: yeah, it'd be nice if he were more dominant and threw more strikes, and he will give up a long hit, but generally speaking he's been an asset.

Jorge Julio threw 9 strikes in 12 pitches to record a scoreless 9th with a K and a single allowed. The single was by other call-up Jeff Clement, which was almost caught by a diving Sizemore. Clement was hitting about .394 in AAA and arguably becomes Seattle's best hitter immediately. I actually do understand the beef with Julio, but the fact is, he's looked good lately.

# 10) A cry for help

I **totally** want an "Eric Wedge High Achiever" T-shirt. If they make them large enough for a grown man (as opposed to "adult," I suppose), say XL, I will trade either a book or a minor-league hockey T-shirt of the Austin Ice Bats for one. (Yep, I'm serious.)

# 11) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro is an Eric Wedge High Achiever. (Possibly not.) Fire Joel Skinner.