Kobayashi!!!! Well, the starters scoreless innings streak ended when Aaron Laffey allowed a second inning run to the A's in yesterday's 4-2 win, but he started a new one, blanking the A's for the next five innings before Raffy B made things hairy late in this one. But it was Masa Kobayashi to the rescue, coming into a bases loaded jam and striking out The Sweeneys to secure the win. Tribe won 6 of 7 on the homestand, and sit a top the Central. Life is good, Buff is happy. It's The B-List.

FINAL SCORE				
Athletics (23-19)	0	1	0	0
Indians (22-19)	(1	st	1.5 GA MIN)	1

W: Laffey (2-2) L: G. Smith (2-3) S: Kobayashi (2)

A interesting contrast of styles: Aaron Laffey is a young inexperienced left-handed and Greg Smith is a young inexperienced left-hander. So here, by "contrast," I actually mean "exactly the same."

1) Aaron Laffey is no better than that other putz who gave up a run!

Of course, the "other putz" was C.C. Sabathia, and he won his game by pitching 7 innings of 6-hit 1-run ball with 2 walks and 9 Ks.

Laffey only gave up 5 hits and 1 walk, while striking out 6. In a very real way, we are comparing Aaron Laffey's start to C.C. Sabathia's start with a completely straight face ... especially since Sabathia has had poor starts, and Laffey has not.

Okay, Laffey's first start didn't end up looking very impressive, but we've covered that ad nauseum. (Actually, the end of that start nauseated me in Real Time, so it didn't take much discussion to reach that point.) Give the infield single to third a little more "oomph" and Blake steps on third for the first out and the subsequent grounders to first don't result in any runs, and now we're comparing Laffey to Cliff Lee instead. And not just some theoretical Cliff Lee 2005, but Cliff Lee 2008.

Alas, Laffey did break the mythical "starters' scoreless streak" pretty much single-handedly in the second inning: after a pair of singles, Laffey fielded a swinging bunt, wheeled, and threw the ball cleanly into the hole between the first and second basemen. It was a horrific, wretched throw, no doubt about it. But the run scored, and then no more did.

In fact, last time I worried aloud about how Laffey seems to be good twice through the order, then turns into a Very Average Pitcher in his third trip. A great majority of his hits before this game were yielded to batters seeing him a third time. In THIS game, Laffey gave up a pair of singles in each of the FIRST two innings, then another in the third. After that, Laffey rolled through the next four innings by facing twelve hitters: for those math majors out there, you'll see that this is the minimum. He did actually allow a baserunner, a walk of Frank Thomas after "losing" him after going 1-2 with a pair of fouls, but this

may have been simple prudence. The next hitter, Jack Cust, grounded into an inning-ending double play two pitches later.

Laffey's overall line is certainly good, but I'm far more intrigued by whatever it was that allowed him to saw through the Oakland lineup with near perfection after the third. Did he make an adjustment? Did he use his curveball more? Facing hitters for the third time through, Laffey faced 8 of the 9, striking out three (all swinging), including his final batter, and gave up zero hits and one walk.

Laffey did have an uncharacteristic 5:9 GO:FO ratio (as well as an uncharacteristic 6 Ks), but I don't think he suddenly morphed into a fundamentally different pitcher. But I am willing to consider him a guy for whom further minor-league seasoning holds little appeal.

(For those counting at home, the 21st out was a caught stealing.)

2) Managerial Back-Patters

With Raffy Betancourt's flowing orange robes beginning to bloom into gasoline-fueled flowers of flame, Inertia Man Eric Wedge shocked the Cleveland fan community by calling in Masahide Kobayashi to replace Betancourt. With the bases loaded and one out, Kobayashi unleashed a wild pitch that scored a run, but then struck out Sweeney One and Sweeney

Two to end the ballgame and earn his second save.

I will address the performances of the pitchers later, but for now, I want to focus on what this might mean for the Indians with respect to their manager. The Indians have lost a number of games in recent years because of horrific meltdowns by their titular closers. The generally-accepted practice with closers is that a closer closes, come hell, high water, or a bushel of runs. Once the save is blown, perhaps, the closer can be pulled, but it would be a tremendously gauche breach of closer usage etiquette to pull a closer while in the middle of brutal effort to lose the game.

Instead, Wedge took control of the situation, had someone else ready (this is key), and replaced his "closer" while the game was still winnable. Sure, Betancourt is only the Temp Closer, holding the spot for Joe Borowski, and it's less psychologically debilitating apparently to do this to the Temp, but the fact is, he did it.

Not only did he do it, he was PREPARED to do it. It's one thing to want to pull the pitcher after he allows three consecutive baserunners, but with few exceptions, a reliever must be warmed up to be able to come in. Wedge PLANNED for this contingency, then EXECUTED the plan with grace and effectiveness.

Now, there are confounds, not the least of which is Betancourt's historical role. He's not the "real" Shiny Capital-C Closer. And he's been pitching execrably. I happen to think the first factor is more important to Wedge, while the second is more my concern. And Kobayashi was a closer in Japan who HAS been pitching well. He's less likely to be fazed by the bases loaded trying to get the save than most other pitchers we've got. Time will tell if Wedge would consider making this move with Borowski on the hill. But he made the move after PLANNING to have the move available just in case, and for that I'm both encouraged and grateful.

3) Grand Newtification Theory

Raffy Betancourt was bad. And he was bad because he has turned into a newt.

See, I don't think this is Betancourt "wilting once again in the face of the pressure of the closing role." After a nice stretch of outings in mid-April, Raffy Betancourt has simply been bad. Just plain bad. He has given up a run in 5 of his last 7 outings, and a couple of those weren't even in the closing role. In the 3-0 loss that punctured the pitching invincibility streak, he came in with the score tied: put back into his "comfortable setup role" and given, for sake of argument, 7 scoreless innings by Laffey instead of 9 scoreless

by Lee, and he'd have ostensibly been put in that same basic situation, 8th inning of a 0-0 game. And he pitched extremely poorly. As he has for about a month now.

I am not going to write off Raffy Betancourt: he's been very good for quite a while. And like David Riske and Eric Plunk before him, I really do think there's something to him not being Closer Material. (See, I don't think there are guys "especially well suited" to the closer role, but I do think there are guys "exceptionally poorly suited" to it. I have empirical evidence in Riske, Shuey, Plunk, and Karsay, after all.) I think Betancourt is more comfortable, more confident, what have you, in the setup role. It's also unfair to expect the same level of performance we got in 2007, when Betancourt was one of the top relievers in baseball.

But it's time to consider the possibility that Raffy is, right now, simply a guy whose turned into a newt and is not getting better just because we redefine his role.

4) Franklin Newtierrez

Speaking of turning into a newt and not getting better, Franklin Gutierrez took an 0-for-4 collar with a pair of Ks yesterday. He came to the plate with a total of 6 men on base. They did not score.

After a blistering .250/.292/.345 month of April, which is bad, Gutierrez has hit .139/.162/.194 in May. Yes, it's only 36 at-bats. Yes, he's already drawn one walk and struck out only 8 times in May. But look: wasn't part of the point of Gutierrez that he could pound left-handed pitching, so that if he learned to hit right-handers, he could be an everyday player? Well, he's hitting righties at a .256 clip: he's not doing it with any power or patience, but he he is holding his own. The problem is, he's hitting .182 against lefties (like Greg Smith) with a .229 OBP. That's his supposed "good" side! That's freaking awful!

Look, why am I picking on Gutierrez when lots of Cleveland hitters are struggling? Well, mostly because it's fresh in my mind that:

a) with runners on first and third and one out in the 3rd, Gutierrez struck out, producing nothing
b) with runners on first and third and one out in the 5th, Hafner stole second (!!!), then Gutierrez struck out, producing nothing
c) with runners on first and second and one out in the 7th, I called my shot in the game thread, calling for the expected strikeout ... and Gutierrez actually did something WORSE, grounding into an inning-ending double play

That's just infuriating.

5) There is no clever way to work "newt" into "Kelly Shoppach"

But it should be pointed out that contributing to the infuriation of (a) and (b) above was that Kelly Shoppach followed Gutierrez' strikeouts with his very own strikeouts as well.

6) Column Writer Head-Scratchers

I throw up my hands trying to understand Jhonny Peralta. Instead, let us simply congratulate him on his solo homer off reliever Elbow Blowout Casilla in the 7th and his infield-single-stolen-base combo in the first that indirectly led to two of the most preposterous sights in Cleveland 2008 baserunning lore. (With the bases empty, Peralta had these two hits; with runners on base, he grounded out and was hit by a pitch, which we might consider improvement.)

7) Preposterosity

If Jhonny Peralta and Travis Hafner can EACH steal a base off you, and you are a left-handed pitcher, I think someone needs to work with his pitching coach on developing a faster move to the plate or a better pickoff move.

If you are on base and are picked off by the gentleman described above, then you are not a good baserunner and might need to consider trading your spores for cells with more advanced mitochondria. (That would be you, Andy Marte.)

8) Encouraging signs

Ryan Garko had another extra-base hit, although it was really just a ground ball that snuck past the first baseman down the line. I'll take it (and it drove in the first run).

Ben Francisco responded to batting in the 3 hole by rapping out a trio of singles, including an RBI in the two-run outburst that was the third inning. He did not score.

Jensen Lewis appears to have put his early-season travails behind him and morphed back into the useful 7th-inning guy he showed flashes of last season.

Masa Kobayashi flashed an evil-looking slider to strike out both the batters he faced. He, too, has settled considerably since the first few weeks of the season, although he is more tater-prone than I'd like in a back-end reliever. Still, he sports a 13:2 K:BB ratio normally associated with guys like the pre-newt Raffy Betancourt.

Travis Hafner lined a clean RBI single to center and drew a pair of walks while only striking out once.

9) Completely False Statement for the Google Search Engine

Mark Shapiro clevely negotiated a "per pitch" contract with Jorge Julio, then mandated that every pitch over a threshold comes out of Eric Wedge's contract. The Players' Union would kill this idea, which is both silly and false. Fire Derek Shelton.