The Indians morphed from a 10-straight-loss team into a 4-straight-win team at the expense of the Tampa Bay Rays, and Buff recaps the weekend by touching on the comparable Matt Ginter, the All-Star starting pitcher Cliff Lee, a glimpse of what might have been from the bullpen, and enough hitting to slake the thirsts of Cleveland fans everywhere.

FINAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R	E
Nondenominational Rays (55-37)	0									0	
Indians (39-53)	1									2	0

W: All Star Lee (12-2) L: Shields (7-6)

FINAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R	E
Unspecified Rays (55-38)	0									3	
Indians (40-53)	0									0	

W: Indefatigable Matt Ginter (1-0) L: Garza (7-5)

FINAL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	R	E
Indeterminate Rays (55-39)	0									0	
Indians (41-53)	0									0	

W: Poachin' Tom Mastny (1-2) L: Kazmir (7-5) S: Kobayashi (5)

Now THIS is a team that would be fun to root for! Cleveland, I mean. I'm not sure humans are capable of putting "Tampa" and "fun" in the same sentence without a negative qualifier ("We had fun in Orlando because we weren't in Tampa.").

1) All-Star Tuneup

Let me preface anything I say about a pitcher except Juan Rincon with the acknowledgement that the Rays are ice cold. They came into the series hitting something like 2-for-28 with runners in scoring position, and didn't leave hitting any better. They were swept in their previous series and appear to have a teamwide case of The Yips as an offense. (Jonny Gomes' defense is less "yips" and more "reptilian.") In any event, I would caution against drawing any broad, sweeping conclusions about the quality of any individual Cleveland pitcher because of his performance against the clearly-struggling Rays.

So although I would love for Cliff Lee's SEVEN SWINGING STRIKEOUTS to be a harbinger of dominance to come, I have to temper this by noting that Tampa struck out 10, 8, and FOURTEEN times in the games this weekend. Matt Ginter struck out a guy an inning, and it isn't inconceivable that he will deliver your mail next year. Jeremy Sowers struck out TWO men an inning, and that plainly IS inconceivable. Still, Lee did strike out 7 guys in 6 complete innings, and all seven were flailing away, most at strikes: Lee threw a typical 70 strikes in 104 pitches and walked only one batter. He did give up a pair of doubles in his 5 hits, but with runners on base:

1st: Three swinging Ks
2nd: groundout, popout, popout
3rd: bunt popout, groundout, swinging K
4th: swinging K, F-8, swinging K
5th: swinging K
6th: groundout, F-9

So this is pretty incredible: with runners on base, Lee held the Rays to hit 0-for-15 ... ZERO for FIFTEEN. Granted, as I said, this is not highly unusual for the Rays over the past week or two, but that's pretty

awesome. I mean, **two** of these balls were hit with any authority ... heck, only eight of ‘em were hit fair.

Of course, not so awesome, if you're paying attention, is that the Rays for zero for **FIFTEEN** with runners on base. In the first FOUR INNINGS, the LEADOFF man got on base. I mean, he sawed through everyone after that and gee that's swell, but putting the first batter of an inning on base is not the optimal strategy. And, if you'll notice, none of the six innings is missing in the list above, meaning that not one of Lee's innings was the clean 1-2-3 variety.

Obviously, this is nitpicking of the very highest order, and Lee was quite excellent yet again. Word has filtered through that he will actually be the starter for the AL tomorrow night in the All-Star Game, so huzzahs for Mr. Lee.

2) Welcome to the bigs!

Matt Ginter is the kind of guy you normally find in a AAA rotation: without a signature skill or overpowering stuff, he's been toiling in relative obscurity in case the major-league roster suffers some sort of short-term shortage, like, say, two guys on the DL and a third traded to Milwaukee. This is pretty much The Reason Matt Ginter Is Signed, and once Fausto Carmona is sufficiently healed, it will be back to Beefalo for Mr. Ginter.

In the meantime, of course, being Matt Ginter is a damned fine thing to

be.

Ginter is sort of in the Paul Byrd / Scott Elarton mold of middle-aged men with ordinary stuff, but to Ginter's enormous credit, he performed at the top of his capabilities with 5 shutout innings. Two key elements of Ginter's success are two things a pitcher of this ilk simply must do to be successful:

a) minimize hit damage by limiting extra-base hits
b) keep guys off base via the free pass

It's hard to ask for more in these departments than the Indians got from Ginter: he sprinkled five hits through the 5 innings, but all five were singles. And of the 20 hitters Ginter faced, he walked exactly none of them. Ginter pounded the strike zone with 45 strikes in 67 pitches, and was rewarded with 5 strikeouts, all five of which were swinging. His biggest trouble came in the first, as two of the first three hitters singled, but induced a sad ground ball and a first-pitch popout to get out of the "jamlet." Part of Ginter's charm was apparently his seeming-hittability: after Aki Iwamura took a couple pitches, four of the next six hitters were retired on the first pitch, and the other two waited no further than the second. In an interesting bit of either strategy or skill-lacking, Ginter started each of the seven hitters in the 4th and 5th innings with a first-pitch ball: the generous interpretation of this was that the Rays were apparently up there hacking and he wanted to see how far they'd go. Still, his best inning was his last, a 1-2-3 inning that finished his night.

Apparently, Ginter reported to feeling a tweak in his hamstring in the 4th, so knew the 5th was his last inning. Also, Eric Wedge wanted to have his first appearance in the majors in several years end on a positive note, in line for the win with a 7-0 lead. Either of these factors is sufficient for me by itself: in combination, they make the move to lift him more or less obvious. When all was said and done, Ginter's debut was a heckuva outing, and more huzzahs all around.

3) Can't touch this

I've been around the plate,
But rarely in the zone,
Walk batter, walk batter, walk batter, walk batter
And I look like Juan Rincon
-- M.C. Sowers, "Please Don't Hurt 'em, Jeremy"

It's a little hard to say that Jeremy Sowers pitched a good game, giving up 2 runs in 4 innings including a balk (I have now completely given up trying to understand what constitutes a balk in major-league baseball) and SEVEN walks. I mean, seven walks in 4 innings, including four in

one inning, is almost stuff of legend. With 7 walks and 8 Ks in 4 innings, we're talking about Young Bobby Witt territory, or possibly my days with the Polish American Club team in the North Hill Little League. Sure, you could claim there was some umpire squeezing here and there, but the ball he threw to walk in the run was no closer than eight inches to the plate, and another walk might have bounced but for the glovework of Sal Fasano.

On the other hand, it's hard to say that Sowers pitched totally poorly, either: he only gave up three hits, and they were all singles. He did strike out 8 guys, which is a lot of guys, and SEVEN of them were SWINGING. In the inning in which he walked four guys, he struck out three. And two of those swinging Ks came with runners at first and second in the 4th, so although he had 10 baserunners, only two of them scored (only one because of an actual hit).

In a sense, it's a little bit of a shame that Sowers couldn't have gotten one more inning to try an pull his first win of the season out of his buttocks, but really, he was at 93 pitches and ... he walked seven

guys! The third inning alone took 41 pitches to complete. I don't think anyone was all that surprised to see him leave the game.

Hey, I saw some good things from Sowers in this game. With the enormous caveat that the Rays swung and missed a lot all weekend, he did get seven swinging Ks. Maybe this will give him some confidence to trust his stuff more and nibble in a less Nagian fashion. If I have to sacrifice some of the strike zone to keep the ball in the park, certainly 2 runs is better than 8, but I'd rather have two cakes and eat one.

4) The 90-win bullpen in action

At the beginning of the season, I based my prediction on the expectation that the bullpen, such a marvelous instrument last season, would be able to approximate that success rather than implode like

the 2006 version. With Raffy Betancourt turning into a newt, Joe Borowski's deal with the netherworld expiring, and various other issues, the 2006 version came to the fore and the season is already effectively over.

This weekend was more what I was thinking when I make my prediction:

Friday: Raffy Perez enters for Cliff Lee, gives up 2 singles (one per inning), but whiffs two and pitches 1 2/3 scoreless innings.
Eddie Mujica then relieves Perez, strikes out the final hitter of the 8th, then pitches a scoreless ninth with one single and no walks.

Saturday: Raffy Betancourt relieves Matt Ginter and pumps two hitless innings past the Rays, walking one but striking out two.

Masa Kobayashi gives up a two-run single to his first batter, but retires the next hitter and pitches a perfect ninth with a K.

Sunday: Tom Mastny (2 IP, 2 swinging Ks), Eddie Moo (1 1/3 IP, 2 Ks, 1 swinging), Raffy Perez (2/3 IP, 1 swinging K), and Masa Kobayashi (1 IP, 1 swinging K, save) combine for five PERFECT innings. The Indians retired the last 17 Rays in order.

Mujica has been something of a revelation, looking a lot more like the guy I touted for a couple years as a potential closer and strike machine, than the guy who comes up and Rincons all over the place before being sent back. I envisioned his role belonging to Jensen Lewis at the beginning of the season, but more weapons are more, after all. I will take it. (I'm

also going to fall short of *expecting* it.)

As for Kobayashi, note that the innings he started, both ninth innings, were perfect with a K. Yes, he gave up two inherited runs, and maybe he's one of those relievers who is more valuable as an inning-starter. Still, if you were looking for a Traditional Closer in the role in which Eric Wedge is most comfortable, you would have to think Kobayashi is the pitcher currently on the roster (I will stop short of "in the entire system" until I actually see Jeff Stevens throw a pitch in anger) most suited to that vocation.

Mastny ... Mastny ... I have given up trying to explain Tom Mastny. I don't think there is a performance script you can concoct for Tom Mastny that I would consider

"surprising" without involving dirigibles and tropical fruit. I got two perfect innings. I'll happily take it. I felt like I was getting away with something.

5) Wait, wasn't there something missing there?

What, you mean the Juan Rincon Random Pitch Show?

Great googly moogly, of all the people in the world who know where an individual Juan Rincon pitch is going to go, the list does not include Juan Rincon. Or his catcher. Or me.

Juan Rincon doesn't just *miss* the strike zone, he *eschews* it. He *re jects* it. He *mocks* it. He is Andy Kaufman, trying singlehandedly to redefine what we consider "pitching" through absurdist action that makes us uncomfortable. The fact that Brian Slocum was sent down to make room for Matt Ginter while Juan Rincon was allowed not only to stay on the roster but actually throw pitches hints at the level of awesomeness of Brian Slocum. (Hint: zero.)

Anyway, 8 strikes in 19 pitches, 2 singles, and 2 walks later, Rincon left the mound, leaving us all to wonder if maybe, like Kaufman, he would be more enjoyable if he stuck to Elvis impersonations and playing the bongos.

6) Managerial Back-Patters, or Epiphany

Something finally sunk in this weekend: Eric Wedge has Vision.

I'm not saying that he's a visionary, or that I agree with everything Wedge does, or even that he's a particularly good manager. What I mean is that Eric Wedge manages with something specific in mind, and perhaps it would be better to evaluate his moves accordingly.

I think Wedge has a vision of what the Cleveland Indians Must Be in order to Win a Championship as Currently Constructed. Not necessarily what will win each individual game, but what the team has to do in order to make and win in the playoffs. It has to get a certain

level of performance from the starters. It requires This Player to perform at This Level in This Role. And really, if things don't go right, the team might win a couple more games here and there, but it isn't going to win the championship unless all those things go right.

Last season, things DID go right. The starters DID perform the way they had to, until the very end. The bullpen DID have people perform exceptionally well in specific roles, most notably Raffy Betancourt and Raffy Perez setting up Joe Borowski as closer. The offense DID have people perform certain roles, like Victor Martinez and Asdrubal Cabrera. And he kept trotting Travis Hafner out there because, really, the offense really is going to have a problem if Hafner can't do at least part of what he's capable of.

Which explains a lot of this season: the team really is championship-calibre ONLY IF Hafner and Martinez are producing. If they aren't, other manipulations of the offense are little more than rearranging deck chairs. If Betancourt can't set up, there really aren't that many good options. The team just isn't good enough to go all the way without key players producing key performances in key roles. Sure, a minor tweak here or there might push us closer to a .500 team, but to be EXCELLENT, to be REALLY GOOD ENOUGH, the team NEEDS a list of things to happen, and if those things don't happen, for better or for worse, Wedge appears to be of the opinion that it doesn't matter enough to get away from the Vision of a Championship.

Now, I certainly might be taking some liberties with my interpretation here. Maybe what appears to be intransigent stubbornness is

really stubborn and intransigent. But I look at things like continuing to trot Betancourt out there, and giving him innings in which to "find himself," and continuing to trot Borowski and Hafner and Martinez out there long after they appeared to be pleasantly golden brown, and continuing to insist that David Dellucci can play baseball to be indicative of such a process. I mean, some of these things still seem pretty asinine, but I think I have a better idea of the thought process behind them.

In this regard, I was pleased to see Ginter lifted after five: let his first start in four years end on a high note, give him confidence for another start, and reward the guy for his minor-league toiling. You might need that performance againt sometime. I liked bringing in Betancourt and giving him a second inning. I even liked the use of Juan Rincon in that regard, until I hated it:

you might need Juan Rincon next year, might as well see what you've got. In a sense, the Vision has changed from 2008 Championship to 2009 Championship, and the moves appear to have changed accordingly.

7) Hitting on all cylinders

I feel like I should congratulate Grady Sizemore, who had a hit in each of the three games, except ...

... I should also mention Jamey Carroll, who had a hit in each of the three games, except ...

... I would be leaving out Ben Francisco, who

had a hit in each of the three games, except ...

... this would slight Jhonny Peralta, who had a hit in each of the three games, except ...

... I wouldn't want to ignore our right field platoon, Franklin Gutierrez and Shin-Soo Choo, who combined (Gutierrez Satuday & Sunday, Choo Friday) to have a hit in each of the three games, except ...

... that would leave out the DH platoon, where David Dellucci had hits Friday and Saturday while Ryan Garko had a hit Sunday.

Which would leave out the two extra-base hits

and 5 RBI Garko collected as a first baseman, the three hits Casey Blake had after being held hitless Friday, or the 2-for-4 with his first home run since April 2007 by Andy Marte.

On Friday, Marte was the only Cleveland hitter not to reach base (Blake and Kelly Shoppach drew a walk each). On Saturday, Shoppach was the only player not to get at least one hit. And on Sunday, every Indian reached base at least once. It was kind of like watching the Anti-Indians.

8) Special Note

Of Peralta's 5 hits, three were for extra bases, and two were home runs. Of the six runs he drove in, FIVE came with two outs. After

starting the year with a preposterous 300-point difference in hitting with runners on base versus with the bases empty, Peralta is now hitting .279/.319/.488 with the bases empty and .245/.299/.430 with runners on base. Sure, the second set of numbers isn't very good, but considering how far they've come, it serves to remind people that this was a small-sample gork more than any failing as a "clutch hitter."

Ryan Garko hit his first homer in over a month. Marte hit his first homer in over a year. Frank Gutierrez got his first hit since Nixon resigned, ending an 0-for-32 streak. Francisco had a pair of doubles against James Shields and another against Matt Garza.

9) By the way

If that was your first exposure to Matt Garza, don't think that's the pitcher he is. His command was clearly off, and the pitches the Indians hit for extra bases were way up in the zone. Kudos to the Tribe for taking advantage, but Garza didn't show you why he's considered a prime piece of Tampa's surgence.

10) Hilarity at the ballpark

There is only one explanation for Joe Maddon to send Jonny Gomes into right field: he hates Jonny Gomes.

Peralta's "double" that drove in a run Friday was a fly ball that Gomes could not have played worse if he'd butted the ball with his head. The routes Gomes takes on fly balls

resemble those of a video game player who thinks he is controlling one player when he is actually controlling another. I am not convinced Jonny Gomes has stereoscopic vision.

Ryan Garko's three-run "double" on Saturday was a deep bloop single that both the center fielder and right fielder used as an opportunity to show off their entry in the Synchronized Diving event in the Beijing Olympics. It wasn't nearly as egregious as Gomes' various follies, but ... well, you have a certain mental image of a "three-run double," and that wasn't it.

Three Cleveland Indians were thrown out on the basepaths Saturday, conjuring images of 2006. Ben Francisco did a great job hustling an extra base on a single ... then shrewdly overslid

the base and was tagged out. Joel Skinner used his patented "Gomes-O-Vision" to decide to send Jamey Carroll into the jaws of Certain Death to be thrown out at home by roughly 0.85 Garkoes. And Jhonny Peralta ... well, look, if I could tell you what Jhonny Peralta was thinking on that play, I'd be committed. It was that crazy. Maybe he had to go to the bathroom. That was Jhonny Being Manny or something. I got nothin'.