The Indians avoided a weekend sweep at the hands of the Twinkies with a 4-2 win on Sunday, and now stand at 7-12 on the young season. In the Monday B-List recap of the weekend set, Buff talks about the resurgence of Cliffie, the emergence of Aaron Laffey, the badness of Mark DeRosa so far, and the bullpen ... which had a pretty good weekend. Also, it's now apparent who will be the daily target of Buff's angst this season a la Ramon Vasquez and Juan Rincon. That man is Tony Graffanino.

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W: Blackburn (1-1) L: Carmona (1-3)

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W: Slowey (3-0) L: Pavano (0-3)

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Indians (7-12)

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W: Laffey (2-0) L: Perkins (1-2) S: K. Wood (4)

Well, the Cavs looked good.

1) Meet the new boss, completely different from the old boss

Cliff Lee has posted two nice starts in a row and is looking a lot more like the successful version of himself, but there's an argument to be made that for the second season in a row, the left-handed starter we thought was the clear Ace, at least partially due to his Defending Cy Young Award Winner status, won't even be the most-successful left-handed starter on his own *t eam*
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Before anyone rushes off to misinterpret this, I am not touting Aaron Laffey for the Cy Young Award in 2009. He walks too many guys. He doesn't strike out enough guys. He puts too many guys on base.

And Zack Greinke is very very very much better than Laffey is.

(As an aside, were my track record for Favorite Players not what it was, I would admit that Greinke is the non-Cleveland player I enjoy watching more than any other. This is partially due to his early-career struggles, but the man is simply flat-out astonishing to watch at this point.

If you don't watch any games that don't involve Cleveland, you really should.

He is That Good.)

What I AM saying, though, is that part of what makes a starting pitcher successful is when he has a strength and plays to maximize this strength. Lee did this last season with his fastball command and late movement. Laffey looked tremendous at points in 2007 because of his exceptional ability to get batters to beat the ball into the ground: in 2008, this ability was far less pronounced, with the predictable result (more hits, more runs, more pitching in Beefalo).

Now, it bears mentioning that on May 27th last season, Laffey had just finished making his 6th start of the season, giving up 1 ER in 6 IP against the White Sox: at that point, Laffey had given up 4, 0, 0, 0, 2, and 1 ER in those six starts.

Four of the starts were for 7 complete innings, and he sported a 1.59 ERA (although a sort of hard-luck 3-3 record).

So it's not like Laffey hasn't had early-season success before.

Heck, as late as June 24, he had made 10 starts: EIGHT of them were Quality Starts and his ERA was 2.83.

There's no guarantee this is going to last.

Here's what I like about this three-game stretch, though: certainly his near-historic ability (and yes, I am calling it an "ability," because he has been a fundamentally groundball pitcher for quite a while now) to induce double plays is tremendous and useful. Following his record-tying 5 consecutive innings with a DP in his last start, Laffey got another 2 yesterday, and ended several other innings with routine groundouts with a runner on 1st but two outs, meaning he got the same net effect without necessarily being credited with the result.

But that's not the entire package: another part of this is that Laffey has kept the ball in the park

and has given up only three extra-base hits, all doubles.

With the bases empty, batters slug .286 off Laffey, which is very low.

With a runner on base, they slug .267.

With a runner in scoring position, they slug .067.

Let me rephrase this: with a runner in scoring position, opposing hitters slug OH F&@^ING SIXTY SEVEN.

Now, this is plainly unsustainable. No one holds opponents to a .067 AVG, much less SLG. Th is is a small-sample gork.

If Aaron Laffey finishes the season with an ERA under 3.00, I will be shocked beyond belief ... and this is a season after he carried such an ERA deep into JUNE.

Guys who walk 4.8 guys per 9 innings while striking out 4.2 guys per 9 innings are getting lucky to post an ERA of 2.41.

(His BABIP, for those who believe in such things, is low at .268, but not super-ultra-no-way lucky/low.)

The sustainable parts of this, though, get to the KIND of pitcher Laffey is and could be. The part I'm pretty confident in is sustaining a low slugging percentage: Laffey locates well and has good movement.

If some of those ground balls sneak through the infield, his ERA may rise and he'll give up more hits.

But those hits are likely to remain singles and a couple extra doubles (primarily down the lines), not big blasts, and it will still take multiple hits to score off him.

(This is where it would REALLY help to CUT DOWN ON THE F&#^ING WALKS, Aaron.)

The part I'm less confident about but am at least intrigued by is an ability to retain composure

and still throw his Best Stuff with runners on base. It's obviously better to keep runners off base altogether, but some pitchers give up runs because they pitch worse out of the stretch or tighten up with a guy on second or try to be "too fine" (also known as "Charles Nagy Syndrome") ... it's only three starts, but right now, Laffey does not seem to be that kind of pitcher thus far.

2) How fine is the line

And yet, almost in the same breath as all the glowing (if hesitant) praise for Laffey, we look at Fausto Carmona's start and wonder if maybe the fine line between 5 GIDPs and a sub-3.00 ERA and guy giving up nearly a run an inning while having ever *better* groundball stuff is really virtually invisible.

"Better" groundball stuff? Consider that Laffey induced 12 groundball outs to 6 in the air: Fausto induced 10 groundball outs and ONE in the air.

He struck out seven guys to Laffey's 1; he walked only 2 to Laffey's 4.

If you watched the actual pitching, you would have pegged Carmona's sinker as the far superior pitch: the Twins looked pretty ridiculous at points trying to hit the darned thing.

But Carmona's problem is that he throws enough pitches that DON'T make hitters look ridiculous that his overall numbers suffer terribly: with the bases empty, opponents STILL slug .479 off him: with runners on base, this becomes an unfathomable .619. Carmona's real problem is that he has no pitch that reliably attacks left-handed hitters: righties hit a mere .188/.235/.375 off him (still way too much power: more than half his hits allowed are for extra bases), but lefties are hitting .345/.449/.638 against him.

Sure, the sample is small, but ... I mean, that's Albert Pujols territory.

Sure enough, two of Carmona's runs Friday came off a Jason Kubel double and a Justin Morneau solo homer.

His two runs in the 7th came after allowing a pair of singles, then a wide array of infield grounders yielded by Raffy Betancourt.

Those were kind of fluky.

Doubles and homers are not.

I was very encouraged by the strikeouts, the majority of them swinging. Carmona induced 11 swinging strikes in all.
That's very good.
But unless he finds something to keep left-handers from treating him like Joe Smiff, Carmona isn't even effective, much less a front-of-the-rotation starter.

3) The kind of deep, thoughtful analysis you've come to depend on

Carl Pavano is bad.

4) Post hoc analysis, or process vs. result

With the bases loaded in the 3rd inning, Ryan Garko came through with a big two-run single to left that ended up producing the 2-run margin of victory. Garko's had a terrible last week, but is hitting pretty well this season, posting a decent-enough .273/.396/.409 line.

Having a first baseman slug .409 is actually pretty lousy in this era, but a .396 OBP is quite good and Garko has a brisk 9 RBI in 53 plate appearances, something that would project to over 100 given nominal full-time play.

Garko's RBI totals tend to outstrip his peripherals: part of this is that he's hitting .318 with runners on base and .385 with them in scoring position, while a lame-assed .227 with a .273 SLG with the bases empty. Hey, that's the way you want that split to go if it has to go one way.

And his single was very clutch, something that gave Laffey a 4-run cushion and let him attack hitters without worrying about a single shot giving up the lead.

But go back and watch the replay of that hit: that was an AWFUL pitch to hit. It was on a two-strike count, so you can't necessarily take that pitch, but the ball was breaking down, diving out of the strike zone, and Garko had to kind of reach for it.

It's exactly the kind of pitch that by all accounts should have been a weakish ground ball to short and ended up with all of us railing about what a stupid thing it was to swing that way of that pitch.

It's a funny thing: since Garko lifted it up over the shortstop and it looks in the boxscore like a smashed liner to left-center, the inclination is to proclaim Garko some kind of masterful clutch hitter, but man, that was a terrible pitch to hit. The fact that he did doesn't necessarily make me feel a lot more confident in Garko as a hitter.

5) Overdue but welcome

Mark DeRosa was a nice acquisition: to expect him to match his 2008 numbers was probably misguided, as the NL simply has lesser pitching at this point, but he's versatile and professional and a pretty patient hitter.

But he sure has been pretty bad thus far.

On Sunday, DeRosa's lousy .195 batting average was finally dropped down out of the 2-slot in the order in favor of Asdrubal Cabrera's .339; these are small sample size number that will probably equalize more in the .270 range for each player, but Cabrera certainly has the capability of hitting higher than that, and reality of actually doing so to this point in the season.

(For what it's worth, Cabrera rewarded Eric Wedge with a 2-for-3 day, including a double, and a walk in four plate appearances. DeRosa was 0-for-3 with a pair of Ks.)

Statistics are most valuable in large datasets: the more data points there are, the less outliers influence the overall conclusions, and the more real, general tendencies come to the fore. 60 plate appearances is not a large dataset.

It is a puny dataset.

But I will tell you this: as a fan, I am happy to see Cabrera in the 2 slot for two reasons:

a) Cabrera is hitting very well, is a switch-hitter, has shown good strikezone control (12 BB, 13 K in 69 PA), has more speed than much of this lineup, and is not Mark DeRosa

b) Mark DeRosa IS Mark DeRosa

Look, even without the unnecessary cheap shot, Cabrera is posting a ridiculous .456 OBP to this point. Taking advantage of this by giving him an extra plate appearance every game (the difference between #2 and #9 in the order) seems prudent, yeah?

6) The Bullpen of ... Goodness?

Masa Kobayashi gave up a pair of solo shots on Saturday to punctuate a 7-1 loss. That was pretty bad.

Every other Cleveland reliever gave up ZERO RUNS.

Now, admittedly, if you're talking about inherited runs allowed, Jen Lewis gave up the single that produced the two runs charged to Laffey, and Raffy Betancourt did the same for Carmona. The se guys weren't entirely flawless.

But Betancourt allowed this sequence: an infield single to third (on which the guy on third didn't score), a FC to 2nd (out at home), a run-scoring grounder to 1st, an intentional walk to re-load the bases, an infield single to 2nd

, and a 3-pitch swinging K when he'd finally had enough of his infield.

I mean, geez, that's not bad at all.

After Raffy's other appearance on Sunday, of course, we were treated to the continuing Tony Sipp Show: all Sipp did was come in to face the power lefties in Minnesota's lineup (Morneau and Kubel) and whiffed them both swinging. It is obviously early, and I'm not ready to write off Raffy Perez (who chipped in a scoreless inning with a hit and a K Saturday), but it isn't inconceivable that we are seeing the evolution of the pen with Perez becoming an early lefty and Sipp morphing into ... well ... what Raffy Perez has been for the past two years.

Kerry Wood finished his 4th save with a strikeout on a nasty curveball. Vinnie Chulk produced two scoreless ... nay, *perfect* innings.
Even Joe Smiff pulled two scoreless one-hit two-K innings out of his posterior.

In all, the bullpen pitched 9 2/3 innings, struck out 10, walked 3, and only gave up Kobayashi's two meaningless runs.

If THAT corner is turned, this team can win.

7) Well, I mean, if they *hit*

For a team that had walked so often in the first three weeks of the season, it seemed a bit incongruous for them to go three consecutive games without drawing a single base on balls. But then, two of those games came against the Twins, who are literally KNOWN for throwing strikes.

Going back to the heyday (if, in fact, there was a heyday to be had) of Carlos Silva, the Twins have been a franchise that has been exceptionally stingy with the free pass.

But look, the team scored six runs in three games, and two of them came because Ryan Garko reached for a terrible pitch out of the strike zone. That's no way to run an offense. It was bad enough that the Tribe attempted three steals on Sunday, getting caught twice, trying to manufacture something out of ... well, something, but less than a lot, I guess.

It wasn't even like they squandered a lot of opportunities, either, leaving 6, 7, and 6 men on base.

They just ... didn't ... hit.

It doesn't really look much better in the short term, either: the next series is Boston, and no pitcher has been hotter than Tim Wakefield.

8) Obligatory Mentions

Jhonny Peralta snapped an 0-for-22 streak with a single.

Shin-Soo Choo, Asdrubal Cabrera, and Victor Martinez each had hits in all three games.

Grady Sizemore had a pair of multi-hit games.

Tony Graffanino must go.