The Indians took their second series of the year because Cliff Lee was back to being CLIFF LEE! instead of an ordinary guy. Buff looks at Lee's performance this season compared to last and to some of his contemporaries, lauds Victor Martinez, wonders if the Ryan Garko Era is over, and thinks Brent Lillibridge is a bad hitter. The Indians head to Tampa, but The B-List stays right here.

FINAL	1	2	3	
White Sox (15-18)	0	0	0	0
Indians (13-22) (5.5 GB)	0	0	0	2

W: C. Lee (2-5) L: Buehrle (5-1)

There aren't many games with a faster pace than a Lee-Buehrle matchup. The game only took 2:23 to play, and that includes an inning by Raffy Betancourt and enough of a rhubarb to eject both Jermaine Dye and Ozzie Guillen.

1) Context is King

I don't want to compare the start of Cliff Lee's 2009 season to his start in 2008, because his April last year was historic and it wouldn't prove much. On the other hand, in the box score you can see that Lee now sports a 3.00 ERA, which is quite good, and exactly matches that of Mark Buehrle, who absorbed his first loss of the season yesterday.

It wasn't so long ago that Lee's rather poor first outing led some to question whether 2008 was a Steve Stone Cy Young season, and his second wasn't very good, either. However, he seemed to find something, some adjustment or grip change or rhythm, that put him back into the groove he had last season. How close? Well, let's look at those 6 starts:

6 IP, 7 H, 1 R, 3 BB (10 baserunners)
8 IP, 9 H, 2 R, 1 BB (10 BR)
8 IP, 5 H, 0 R, 0 BB (5 BR)
7 IP, 12 H, 3 R, 1 BB (13 BR)

8 IP, 7 H, 1 R, 2 BB (9 BR)
7 IP, 6 H, 0 R, 1 BB (7 BR)

Now, those aren't completely terrific numbers. They're quite good, but it's not like Lee is no-hitting anybody. For perspective, that 6-game stretch would translate into a WHIP of 1.23, but a sparkling ERA of 1.43.

Here's where I admit that I'm a math guy, but a stats dilettante. My wife is a stats wizard and does them for a living: I ... I know what "standard deviation" means. I probably know more about stats than the guy on the street, because that guy is homeless. But I view stats as useful to do two things:

a) explain what DID happen
b) express a series of likelihoods about what WILL happen

I've learned lots of little "gotchas" about stats, like "Gambler's Fallacy" (the coin has a 50% chance on the next flip, the previous 100 flips do not influence it in any way) and "Significance" (a hypothetical 8-for-13 streak by Yadier Molina does not now make him an offensive power). I know that the larger the data sample, the more likely it is to give you a full picture. Cutting out one part or another by definition "loses information."

But here's why I think it's okay in this case to start looking at Lee's season from Game Three: I think Lee is pitching fundamentally differently starting at that point than he was on April 6. If you ask, "Which Cliff Lee is the real one?", well, the answer of course is, "All of them." But in terms of goal (b), to try to predict the chances of Lee's future results, I think this six-game stretch has the right predictive power.

And here's the reason: because Lee's 2008 was predicated on having superior command of his fastball, and that is what I have seen from these six starts as well.

I did not see this in the Opening Day start against Texas. I don't get to simply remove this start because it is inconvenient to my impression of Lee as a pitcher, but I am removing it because I SAW a different KIND of pitching from Lee in that game (and the next, when he was still "figuring it out" from what I could see) than in the last six. Of course, I'm not a scout, and I'm certainly not Cliff Lee, and I'm admitting to being a lay statistician. This may be invalid, and you can write me to tell me so.

Anyway, Lee was in prime form, throwing first-pitch strikes to each of the first three hitters and inducing each one to ground out. His second inning was perfect, punctuated by his first swinging K. In fact, he struck out 9 in 7 innings and 7 of them were swinging. That's exceptional. He faced the minimum in the 3rd by inducing a double play after Alexei Ramirez broke up the perfect game with a bunt single. He faced the minimum in the 4th and 5th as well with 1-2-3 innings. And then he got into his first trouble in the sixth by giving up another single to Ramirez (this one a flare to left between swinging Ks) and following this with a bloop single to right and an infield single by Scott Podsednik. With two outs and the bases loaded, Lee pitched to Jermaine Dye: in, out, out, in, out, in. The sixth pitch was a perfectly placed ball on the inside corner: Dye didn't think so, but the replay sure made it look like a good pitch to me. Anyway, Dye and Guillen were ejected, but the point is, Lee approached that batter masterfully. (I should say that his strikeout of Brent Lillibridge showed the same kind of mastery, moving the ball in and out and ultimately making Lillibridge look silly. A lot of pitchers make Lillibridge look silly (Roy Halladay, Tom Wakefield, Brian Bannister, Barack Obama, Rich from "Imagination Movers", Eric Cartman, Mary-Kate Olsen), but it was masterful nonetheless.)

Lee experienced a similar 7th, including his first truly bad plate appearance, a walk to Wilson Betemit on 5 pitches. Really, there was no other hitter that either walked or hit the ball with any real authority. There were two other weak singles in that inning, but Lee got Carlos

Quentin to loft a harmless fly to end the inning.

But here was kind of the point of the stats discussion above: Cliff Lee now sports a 3.00 ERA with a pretty nice 42:13 K:BB ratio and a 1.41 WHIP. These numbers aren't as good as last season's, but his stats over the past 6 games are. Given some 22-25 more starts, and the badness of the first two starts could ostensibly be washed away. He is already close in peripherals to his 2.54 ERA of last season: his K rate of 7.00 is actually slightly higher than last year's 6.85, although he will have a lot of work to do to approach last year's K:BB of 5.00 (it is 3.23 now, still good). Cliff Lee could end up posting essentially the same numbers as last year, and will have this much chance of winning the Cy Young: zero point zero.

Who is a better pitcher than Cliff Lee? Well, there are a bunch of pitchers having better seasons than Cliff Lee right now. Let's be fair here. Zack Greinke's season has been truly awesome. Lee's ERA is tied for 9th among qualifying pitchers, and of the guys in front of him, only a couple look like real gorks (Dallas Braden and Joe Saunders come to mind). But look: consider, say, Roy Halladay's last 6 starts:

7 IP, 8 H, 1 R, 0 BB (8 BR)
8 IP, 8 H, 5 R, 0 BB (8 BR)

7 IP, 8 H, 3 R, 1 BB (9 BR)
8 IP, 10 H, 3 R, 1 BB (11 BR)
8 IP, 6 H, 1 R, 2 BB (8 BR)
9 IP, 5 H, 1 R, 0 BB (5 BR)

In other words, Halladay has 3 more innings, but has given up 7 more runs. Halladay has had the better season thus far, but he's not pitching significantly better than Cliff Lee.

Mark Buehrle, by the way:

6 1/3 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 0 BB (2 BR)
6 2/3 IP, 8 H, 3 R, 3 BB (11 BR)
6 IP, 6 H, 2 R, 3 BB (9 BR)
6 IP, 7 H, 3 R, 0 BB (7 BR)
8 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 2 BB (3 BR)
7 IP, 7 H, 4 R, 1 BB (8 BR)

Two truly superior starts, certainly fewer overall hits, but significantly more runs.

But see, here's the issue with the Cy Young:

Halladay: 7-1
Buehrle: 5-1
Greinke: 6-1
Lee: 2-5

Greinke might end up making this all academic, but Lee has no chance at a repeat Cy because his team doesn't score when he pitches.

By the way, "Poor" Johan Santana, "criminally unsupported" by the New York Mets, is 4-2 in 7 starts. (Yeah, he's better than Lee.)

2) (*gush*)

May I take a moment to look at Victor Martinez' season to date? Sure, he hit a home run in the first to give Lee his

lead and ended up going 3-for-4 on the day, but look: Martinez is hitting .385/.469/.630 on the season. That's spectacular, and probably unsustainable at that level, but it's really, really good.

He is now hitting .410/.500/.795 off left-handed pitching. (He hits .375/.456/.563 off righties; in the past, he's had less power from the right side of the plate). So when it comes to left/right, he doesn't have a significant platoon split, posting over a 1.000 OPS from each side.

Consider this: he has a .912 OPS vs. Detroit and a .955 OPS hitting in the Rogers Centre. **These are the ONLY DATA SPLITS THAT RESULT IN AN OPS UNDER 1.000** (except Grass v. Turf, which is really the same as the Rogers Centre).

Home and away.
Day and night.
April and May.
Against Boston, Chicago, KC, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and Toronto.

In Fenway, Jacobs Field, Kauffman Stadium, Rangers Ballpark, and Comerica.
Catcher and first baseman.
With none on and with runners on.

Martinez has five hitless games. In those five games, he drew 1, 2, 0, 2, and 2 walks, meaning he has one game in which he didn't reach base. He leads the AL in walks and has 10 more walks than strikeouts. His OPS went over 1.000 in the third game of the season ... and has never fallen below 1.000 since then. In 59 plate appearances in May, he sports an OBP over .500. He not only hasn't gone consecutive games without a hit, he's only once had two hitless games out of four ... and in each hitless game walked twice.

Wow.

3) Gark smash!

Martinez wasn't the only Cleveland hitter to drive one

over the wall against Buehrle. In fact, he wasn't even the only Cleveland hitter to drive one over the wall against Buehrle with two outs. Ryan Garko duplicated the feat, and with a runner on base, it resulted in twice as many runs as Cleveland began to pull away for Lee.

This is a welcome sight, as it is Garko's first homer at home and pulls his home SLG over .300 for the first time. Yes, THREE hundred. On the season, Garko is hitting .272/.365/.395: that's a decent-enough AVG and OBP clip, but the power is Tynerian.

It might be time to seriously consider the possibility that Ryan Garko is simply a platoon player. In the three-year sample from 2006-2008, a span of some 1250 PA or so, Garko hit lefties at a .315/.392/.502 clip. It's only more like 350 PA, but that's a decent-enough sample, and pretty good numbers. Against righties (a much bigger sample), he hit .271/.339/.428, which really isn't very good at all, much less for a 1B/DH.

This year is more of the same: with the blast off the

left-handed Buehrle, Garko is now hitting .333/.429/.542 against lefties, but a meager .246/.338/.333 against righties. I mean, when your SLG is less than your OBP, you better be a defensive wizard (no) or really fast (extra super triple no).

All this makes me a bit sad, because I like Garko a lot, but the facts are in, and they say that he's not good. (For reference, Ben Francisco is worse, hitting .218/.299/.333 against righties and .348/.400/.478 against lefties.) The Matt LaPorta Era isn't coming. It's here.

4) The heck with you, I'm doing what I do

Raffy Betancourt came in in relief of Cliff Lee in the 8th. He threw a first-pitch strike to each of the four hitters, giving up only an infield single to (wait for it) Scott Podsednik. He threw approximately 128% of his pitches on the outside corner.

Hey, if this is working, I'm all for it. It appears to give Raffy confidence. It appears to be pretty effective. It seems like part of Lee's success is his ability to move in and out and change the hitter's sight zone. But I'm going to stop arguing with Raffy about it and I'll take the scoreless inning, thank you very much.

5) Small Ball!

It's hard to talk seriously about playing "smallball" in a game in which we scored 3/4^{ths} of our runs on home runs, but the 4th run bears mentioning: Matt LaPorta drew a five-pitch walk from Buehrle, then advanced to second on a sacrifice by Kelly Shoppach. Grady Sizemore then drove the next pitch to center to plate LaPorta.

Now, Martinez later singled with two outs and

maybe this wasn't strictly necessary, but having that run in pocket made me feel better about Lee facing Dye with the bases loaded, and it's nice to know that the team can score on a pair of singles if necessary.

Of course, it's nice to know it can blast a pair of homers, too, but hey.

6) Welcome back!

The triumphant return of adorable utility infielder Jamey Carroll was ... well, he went 0-for-3. But he started a 5-4-3 DP! That has to count for something, right? (Yes: two outs.)

Well ... he's still adorable, anyway.

7) Sotto voce

Kelly Shoppach can't really hit well enough to be an everyday catcher.

8) Bottom means dregs

The 6-7-8-9 hitters for the White Sox yesterday:

Josh Fields: .235/.318/.339
Wilson Betemit: .257/.316/.400

Alexei Ramirez: .223/.261/.282
Brent Lillibridge: .154/.247/.185

I mean, that's pretty dreadful. A DH who's slugging .400? Two guys slugging below .300? No OBP over .320? Those guys can't hit a lick, man.

Not like these guys!

Ryan Garko: .272/.365/.395
Jamey Carroll: .000/.000/.000
Matt LaPorta: .222/.364/.444
Kelly Shoppach: .217/.356/.350

Well, okay, that's still pretty bad. But at least

the three guys not making their debuts have OBPs over .350. I mean, really.

Note: those four White Sox represented 4 of the 8 times the Sox reached base.