The Tribe accomplished two things yesterday in a 5-4 win over the Blue Jays: they won a series (which is unusual) and climbed out of last place by percentage points over the Royals (which is more unusual). In today's b-List, Buff recaps what is reasonable to expect from winner David Huff, lauds Ben Francisco's professionalism, and wonders if the whispers about Shin-Soo Choo being a platoon player should be put to rest once and for all.

| | | | | **FINAL** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Indians (38-58)** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Blue Jays (47-49)** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

W: Huff (5-4) L: Rzbvgaryufaysvczfharwfjhavztrasd (1-2) S: K. Wood (13)

We won a series! Look out, Kansas City, we're leaving you in the dust! Well, by two-tenths of a percentage point, but still.

(The A.L. Central is bad.)

**1) Highish Expectations**

I've been accused in the past of not being entirely fair in my assessments of David Huff, who frustrates me more as a symbol than as a major-league pitcher. Huff represents a couple of the things I have grown to dislike about the Cleveland Talent Evaluation Squad: a high draft pick that does not appear to have a lot of true upside, a guy who can pitch but has no real plus-plus or "out" pitch. He's left-handed, which is a plus for a biased observer like me, but his stuff looks very ordinary from afar.

In the interest of fairness, though, it should be noted that I did not see a lot of special stuff from Cliff Lee in his early years, although Cliff had better peripherals as a minor-leaguer. Still, comparing someone to Cliff Lee isn't entirely fair, either: Lee was considered a gem of the Expos' farm system at the time, and has blossomed in a way people could not necessarily have projected rationally.

So what IS it fair to demand from a 24-year-old rookie pitcher? League-average performance? See, "league-average" often gets tossed about in a perjorative fashion, when in reality, people tend to forget exactly how good a guy has to be to be BETTER than FULLY HALF of the starting pitchers in the MAJOR LEAGUES. A league-average pitcher is actually a very valuable commodity, and realistically, your rotation will have at least one starter (if not two) who aren't even at that level. Consider, in a vacuum:

#1 starter: much better than league average
#2 starter: better than league average
#3 starter: league average
#4 starter: not quite league average
#5 starter: below league average

I mean, with the normal understanding of the term "average," this is what the typical major-league rotation should theoretically look like. Sure, you have some teams with four guys who are better than league average, and those teams have the finest staffs. And some teams are the Washington Nationals. Average is calculated on a league-wide basis, not team-by-team. But it's probably not unreasonable to claim that 90% of the teams in the majors are trotting out at least one below-league-average starter and the majority probably have two, just by the nature of the definition of "average."

Ostensibly, the 4 and 5 slots are filled by guys who aspire to raise their major-league pitching to the average level, and often those guys are inexperienced. In a fortunate world, you are not using Tomo Ohka or Russ Ortiz in one of these slots, but the Indians had to bump everyone up a notch or two due to injuries (Westbrook) or flabbergastacular failure (Carmona).

So think of David Huff as a rookie, slotted in to the five slot, hoping to raise his level to league average. Well, looking at his whole season body of work, you have to say he has not done this. His ERA is 6.39, which is terribibble, and his WHIP is 1.58, which is poor. He has yielded 12 homers in 69 innings, which is

dreadful, asn his 39:20 K:BB ratio in 69 innings is simply not very good. And there are few ways to slice the data to make a case for some great development curve: his May was preposterously bad (10.97 ERA, .360 AVG, 7:6 K:BB in 10 2/3 IP), his June was right in the league average zone (4.84 ERA, .264 AVG, 19:9 K:BB, 35 1/3 IP), and his July has been pretty bad (6.65 ERA, .333 AVG, but 13:5 K:BB in 23 IP). The K:BB is actually kind of encouraging.

But more to the point, in Huff's last 10 starts, he has given up 3 or fewer runs 6 times, and 4 or fewer runs 8 times. True, he averages a dash under 6 innings per start (5.83), but 3 runs in 6 innings is called a Quality Start because it is a decent approximator of the line at which your starting pitcher is giving you a chance to win the game. Technically only 3 of these 10 starts count as QS's, but overall, Huff is kind of hovering in a Quality Cloud.

Yesterday's start was not atypical of this recent quasi-success: Huff did some very promising things (getting into the 8th inning, walking only 1 hitter, throwing 69 strikes in 103 pitches, inducing 9 swings-and-misses, 13:6 GO:FO ratio), some not-so-promising things (giving up 8 hits, only striking out 4 hitters), and one truly dreadful thing (7 of the 8 hits were for extra bases, including a pair of home runs). If there is one thing and only one thing I am allowed to change about David Huff, it would be the fact that the league sports a .538 SLG (.233 ISO!) against him, and that both sides of the plate pound him equally hard (lefties slug .594, .228 ISO; righties slug .508, .236 ISO). I mean, that's a lot of isolated power, synonymous with "a lot of extra-base hits." You can scatter 10 hits in a Nagyesque fashion if those hits are singles: if they're doubles and homers, you give up a boatload of runs and you lose.

There are some interesting names on Huff's "similarity index:" Ken Holtzman, Dave McNally, and Bob Knepper were pretty effective major-leaguers, while Casey Fossum, Rick Waits, and Noah Lowry were not. I see a bit of Doug Davis in Huff, personally. It bears mentioning that the 24-year-old Davis' debut season in Texas sported a 7-6 record with a 5.38 ERA and 66 K in 98 1/3 IP. Like Huff,

Davis was someone tater-prone (14 in those 98 1/3 IP), but ended up carving a solid NL career for himself. I would like David Huff to be better than Doug Davis, but ... he is probably About That Good.

## 2) Admission of Bias

The truth must come out at some point, and I'd rather it be reported directly than whispered on the TMZs of the world: I am biased against Ben Francisco. And, yes, I am biased because Ben Francisco is "the b-word."

For all this time, I have hoped that Ben Francisco would develop into a solid major-league corner outfielder. His power was suspect, and now I suspect he has no power. His fielding was an open question, and now I find his fielding questionable. But when all is said and done, regardless of small pockets of good performance here and there, I find that the fact that Francisco is "the b-word" to be an unsurmountable obstacle to me viewing him as a valuable major-league player.

This is an admitted bias, and Francisco is not the only one to suffer my wrath because of it, but the fact is, I am biased against Ben Francisco, because of this.

Yes. I dislike Ben Francisco's performance because Ben Francisco is "the b-word." Ben Francisco is bad.

## 3) Credit Where Credit is Due Dept.

This having been said, consider the predicament Francisco found himself in in the 4th inning. Unable to get much going against Toronto rookie Marc Rumplestiltskin, the Indians finally loaded the bases on a single, a hit batsman, and a walk. Now, Rzassenfrazsen did not exactly have his best stuff with him on the mound: the first three hitters and four of the first five saw at least two balls, it wasn't until Francisco led off the third that Rumpleteaser showed any batter fewer than four pitches. Still, his stuff was powerful enough to strike out at least one hitter in each of the first three innings swinging, and with the bases loaded and one one out, Rapscallion struck out both Jhonny Peralta and Ryan Garko swinging, so he had something on the ball. So it was into this breach that Francisco was thrust, with the bases loaded and two outs in a scoreless game.

Now, imagine yourself Ben Francisco for a moment. You have to know that time is passing you by in terms of being considered an everyday player. You are having a poor season, hitting .249/.326/.384 on the season. You have posted the worst June in the entire American League (.141/.221/.176) for someone with 90+ plate appearances, and guys like Matt LaPorta, Michael Brantley, and Nick Weglarz are widely seen as better alternatives in the near future. In all likelihood, the only thing keeping you on this roster is your ability to play center field and be Not Trevor Crowe. At some level, it has to occur to you that you need to make some sort of grand, dramatic statement of your value, something like a 21-for-30 torrid streak or five homers in a week.

To Francisco's credit, he appears to know that he is not this type of player. And instead of trying to do too much, to be dramatically heroic, Francisco showed good patience against Rikitikitavi and drew a five-pitch walk to score a run.

I know I've been pretty snide and rude to this point, but I'm trying to be sincere here: that showed a level of patience and professionalism I probably wouldn't be capable of showing. Here's a guy who is probably fighting for his professional life, and he did a very professional thing. I'm still biased, and he's still bad, but that was a nice job.

**4) Makin' ‘em work**

Jhonny Peralta got a hit and a walk while striking out twice in 4 plate appearances. Not a great day at the plate: the hit was a single, and he neither scored nor drove in a run, but reasonably productive.

But, buoyed by the 10-pitch 4-foul swinging K in the 4$^{th}$, Peralta saw a total of 23 pitches in those 4 plate appearances, an astonishing 5.75 pitches per plate appearance. This was more pitches in 4 PA than Grady Sizemore, a patient hitter, saw in five, and more than the first TWO Blue Jays hitters saw in

EIGHT.

## 5) Please report to the Mezzanine for your signed photo of Bob Wickman

Sure, Kerry Wood didn't give up any hits and struck out a batter en route to his 13th save of the season, but after hitting Alex Rios ... with an 0-2 pitch ... in the head ... Wood paid little attention to the TYING RUN ON BASE, allowing him to steal second AND third before recording the final out on a borderline 3-2 called punchout.

Now, I understand that Chris Gimenez is not the finest catcher in the universe, that Alex Rios is a good basestealer, and Kerry Wood does not have a terribly long delivery, but those bases looked like they were well-stolen off Wood himself. And more to the point, did anyone feel CONFIDENT that Wood was going to seal that one up? You probably EXPECTED him to save it, but were you CONFIDENT?

Yeah, me neither.

(Side note: Kerry Wood threw a first-pitch strike to ONE of the FOUR hitters he faced. Throw strikes! Bob Wickman would be sad. Then he would drink beer and eat sausage. Nothing can keep Bob Wickman down for a long time.)

## 6) Sotto voce

If the Blue Jays had played even a *modicum* of defense, we would have lost the game.

## 7) Joeriffic!

Joe Smiff may have shortcomings, but coming in and getting a come-backer from Vern Wells on a

1-2 glorfball was pretty sweet. I'm not sure this is a guy I'm comfortable giving a lot of complete innings to, but he has some pretty nasty stuff when he can find the plate with both hands.

## 8) Ducks on the pond!

Shin-Soo Choo's two-run triple marked the only time in the game that the Indians got a hit with a runner in scoring position. The team was 1-for-9 on the day, including two failures each by Sizemore and Adorable J. Carroll.

Choo's shot was a nice piece of hitting: an opposite-field blast off the lefty Rabinowiczensteinergloben. Choo is hitting .250/.353/.455 off lefties this season, or in other words, better against the kind of pitcher that he purportedly *cannot hit* than any other Cleveland player other than Travis Hafner or Victor Martinez

hits *overall*. Sure, this says a bit about his teammates as well, but an .808 OPS is not shabby and properly identifies Choo as an everyday player rather than a platoon partner.