The Indians lost a squeaker last night, 10-1, and Buff bypasses the rather mundane badness of David Huff's latest servantpiece to first address the amazing specialness that is Jensen Lewis. He also addresses the nearly-unbelievable nature of Minnesota's batting lineup, which was nearly matched by the Cleveland lineup, as well as pointing out how tremendous Joe Mauer is and how tremendous other Indians are not.

FINAL	1	2	
Twins (53-53)	0	2	0	0
Indians (44-62)	0	0	0	0

W: S. Baker (9-7) L: Huff (5-6)

Well, of course the Twins pounded us: they were almost a *five-hundred team*!

1) A Special Talent

I normally start these columns with a lengthy description of the starter, because he normally plays the biggest role in the outcome of the game and provides me with the most material. That's not necessarily false about this game, but there was one player who did something so special, so extraordinary, that I felt I would be remiss in starting anywhere but there.

With two runners on base and two outs, David Huff was mercifully lifted from the game in favor of Jensen Lewis, who entered to face the right-handed hitter Carlos Gomez. Now, Gomez does not have a pronounced platoon split, insofar as he is capable of making outs at heroic rates against either left-handed (.300 OBP) or right-handed (.294) pitching. The advantage comes more from the fact that his laughable power against portsiders gets degraded to "pitiable," from a .407 SLG to a feeble .362. Carlos Gomez is Minnesota's answer to Luis Valbuena, except he can hit same-handed pitching at the same Lilliputian clip as he hits opposite-handers (while Valbuena shifts more from "dwarf hamster" to "paramecium"). Anyway, Gomez rocketed the first pitch he saw from Lewis, an execrable hanging breaking pitch of no sort, over the left-center field wall and made a 5-0 shellacking and 8-0 blowout.

Lewis has now given up 10 home runs in 41 2/3 innings this season, which is really quite an incredible clip. How incredible? Well, you have to be careful with rate stats: there's this poor sap for Caliheimgeles who gave up a home run and recorded two outs, giving him an astonishing 13.5 HR/9 rate. I mean, that's plainly unsustainable, although it does make for a nice conversation starter at parties. Chad Fox has a hilarious .667/.800/2.000 line because he gave up two TRIPLES and two walks while recording equal numbers of "outs" and "sproinged elbow tendons." The most-horrific performances on the first page of a sortable stats guide are mostly single-digit-inning guys, and although there's some trainwreck aesthetics to such things, they aren't very meaningful statistics.

So, let's draw the line at some significant number of innings, say, 30. Of all pitchers who have pitched at least 30 innings, Jensen Lewis' HR/9 rate of 2.16 is sixth-highest. In terms of ISO (isolated power, or SLG-AVG), his .270 is third-highest. The two guys ahead of him, Josh Geer and Brett Myers, are either hurt (Myers) or Josh Geer (Geer).

(Let us pause here for a moment to marvel at the performance of Josh Geer this season, who pitches for SAN DIEGO. He has pitched 59 2/3 of his innings in PETCO, and also gets to pitch in Dodger Stadium and Not Candlestick. He has given up 27 home runs in 102 2/3 innings, and he pitches the great majority of them in pitcher's parks. If he were given the 270 innings it took for Bert Blyleven to set the major-league record of 50 homers allowed, he would, at this pace, allow SEVENTY-ONE HOME RUNS. This is a mammoth feat. However, what a lot of people forget about Blyleven's record is that at least part of the REASON he was allowed to give up 50 homers was that he was still a quality pitcher with a 4.01 ERA and 270 innings. Geer has a 5.96 ERA. He is not going to throw 270 innings. I am not sure I would recommend 270 more innings for Mr. Geer in his career. However, I am amused by ESPN's player page:

Experience 1 year
College Rice
Salary 2009: $0

Well, I think I see the attraction for the San Diego front office here.)

But back to Lewis: before this season, Lewis had allowed 9 homers in 95+ innings, which is a nice-enough rate. You can pitch in the bigs with a rate like that, especially if you strike out 86 guys and post a 3.30 ERA. ERA is a quirky measure for relievers, but that's a good K rate and a reasonable amount of skill keeping the ball in the park. In those 95 innings, Lewis allowed a quality .256/.329/.392 line, or an ISO of .136. That's fine.

THIS season, he has given up 43 hits ... and 10 have been home runs. 9 have been doubles. Two have been triples. This means that of the 43 hits, 21 have been for extra bases ... almost HALF. That's obviously what we statistically-minded analysts like to term, "shitty." Also very bad.

Here's the thing, of course: Lewis was tremendous in Columbus: if I recall, he had 18 shutout innings with like 12 hits and 28 strikeouts. Jensen Lewis is not going to get better by pitching to the Jeff Mantoes and Mike Aubreys of the world. He's not. Jensen Lewis has the talent and stuff to be a major-league pitcher, and there's no reason not to give him the reps in order to see if he can recapture this sort of skill.

But really now: he gave up a home run to CARLOS GOMEZ and gives up 2.16 HR/9 this season. That's really something else. "Else" having no points in common with "good," I mean.

2) Less Special, but More Boring (Goodness Value: Similar)

It's reasonably hard to come up with new an interesting things to say about David Huff at this point: I think it's pretty clear that Huff is not developed enough to be a prime contributor to a playoff-calibre rotation, but also reasonably accurate to say that he has the potential for major-league stuff. His 6.81 ERA is obviously

dreadful, and giving up 7 runs on 11 hits in 4 2/3 innings is simply a bad game. Huff isn't very good right now, but he has elements of his game that suggest that he is capable of being good later. This is part and parcel of starting a 24-year-old rookie, and the majors is where he needs to develop the skills he'll need later.

Instead of harping on what KiltedFool once called "the malaise of the jejune," I'll just point out a few things that struck me from Huff's start:

a) He threw first-pitch strikes to 21 of the 25 batters he faced, including the first 8 and all 5 batters in the 4th. In fact, four of the five batters in the 4th inning started in an 0-2 hole, and he struck out two of those batters swinging. Even though these two batters where Delmon Young and Nick Punto, who are each horrific batters, this is still quality work.

b) He only got 4 swings and misses, as opposed to 21 foul balls. All four of the swinging strikes were strikes three, and all 4 of his strikeouts were swinging. Now, I'm not clever enough to be able to tell you exactly what Huff did on those four pitches, whether he should go to that well more often (or if doing so would prevent him from getting Ks over the course of a game), or whether he's got some sort of "grand plan" by which he tries to pitch to contact early in the count and finish hitters off with two strikes, but the fact is, he showed that he is CAPABLE of finishing hitters off with two strikes, at least four times last night, and this is encouraging.

c) He threw 69 strikes in 94 pitches, which is quite good. He gave up five extra-base hits, including a pair of doubles to Orly Cabrera, which is pretty bad.

It seems intuitively obvious that Huff isn't an overpowering pitcher, but has some ability to get guys out. Limiting the extra-base hits would help a lot: consider Cliff Lee's 2006, in which his averagy 4.40 ERA was at least in part due to the fact that he gave up 47 doubles and 29 homers in 224 hits. This season, he has yielded 32 doubles and 10 homers in 169 hits. That's a lot better, and at least part of that has come from getting better command of his fastballs and developing a little more late movement. Comparing Huff to Lee is a fool's errand, and I'm not trying to do it, but I'm saying that a pitcher who gives up a lot of extra-base hits is both capable of changing this and is more successful at the major-league level when he does.

(To be pedantic, though, I don't know HOW Huff should approach doing this. But he should. Because a 6.81 ERA really blows.)

3) The joy of the jejune

Each of Tony Sipp and Chris Perez threw a perfect 16-pitch inning with a strikeout. Sipp in particular managed 11 strikes in 16 pitches, which is a lot more accurate than he normally is.

More encouraging, Sipp and Perez each induced 2 swinging strikes, as many as they had balls put into play. Having this kind of ability really gives a reliever more chance at success, especially when combined with strikes: Sipp threw a first-pitch strike to each of his three batters, Perez to two of the three.

(For comparison's sake, Jensen Lewis threw a first-pitch strike to 3 of his 7 hitters and collected exactly ZERO swings-and-misses. Tomo Ohka was 3-for-5, also with zero swings-and-misses, but ... c'mon, he's Tomo Ohka.)

4) Serial badness

The average hitter in major-league baseball hitws .261/.332/.417, with slightly higher numbers in the A.L. than in the N.L., where the thousands of plate appearances given to pitchers are almost perfectly offset by Albert Pujols all by himself. That's almost a perfect 1-in-3 percentage for getting on base in the major leagues.

So it makes a bit of intuitive sense to consider a .300 OBP a sort of Mendoza Line for getting on base: really, if you get on base fewer than 3 times in 10, you're a pretty bad hitter. You can make up for this with astounding defense, or maybe devastating power, or perhaps a lifetime supply of free doughnuts. The "intangible" things that baseball men like to value gradually shift over the years.

So it was reasonably amazing to find that EACH team had THREE men in the lineup who could not be bothered to post at least this meager number:

Joe Crede: .293 (.234 AVG)
Delmon Young: .286 (.261)
Carlos Gomez: .296 (.240)

Chris Gimenez: .288 (.200)
Luis Valbuena: .288 (.231)
Trevor Crowe: .267 (.205)

On the Cleveland side of the ledger, you see three players who are getting their first real taste of major-league action and whose numbers are fraught with small-sample-size dangers: just last week, for example, Gimenez was hitting .250/.328/.442. A couple collars make him look even more punchless than he probably really is. Crowe and Gimenez have a mere 153 AB COMBINED. They may also be pretty bad, but it's kind of hard to say for sure.

The Minnesota trio, however, is much more impressive, in that ... they are *dancing with the guys who brung 'em*, so to speak. They CHOSE **THESE** guys. Creded at least has some pop, if not any actual working body parts, and Gomez is an astonishing fielder, but Young is hitting .261/.286/.338 and plays LEFT FIELD. I mean ... wow.

And this leaves off Nick Punto, who is hitting .210/.314/.258 and has over 260 plate appearances ... and Matt Tolbert's 150 PA of .178/.272/.275 ... and Alexi Casilla's 175 PA of .166/.266/.204 ... and I have to mention Punto again because he makes FOUR MILLION DOLLARS. And is still Nick Punto! They signed Nick Punto ... to an extension ... on PURPOSE!

5) Raw, unvarnished envy

Despite having such ridiculous performances littering their lineup, the Twins are 9th in major-league baseball in OPS, and 6th in the A.L. (behind Cleveland). How do they do that?

Because they have Joe Mauer. And you don't.

Joe Mauer faced three different Cleveland pitchers yesterday. He hit a double off each one.

Mauer is hitting .359/.428/.602 this season, with 18 homers and 60 RBI. The only reason to vote for Justin Morneau as Most Valuable Twin is because you hate Joe Mauer.

Now, I understand that Morneau is a fine player. He really is: he hits .309/.391/.589, and has 28 homers with 88 RBI. That's a lot more RBI. I'm not one of those draconian anti-RBI statheads who think RBI have no value whatsoever. They're information, and information is good. They aren't a standalone measure, but they do tell you something.

But consider this: the three players who hit in front of Joe Mauer are the 9 hitter, someone of the Punto/Tolbert/Casilla ilk, with an OBP of around .280, then Denard Span, a fine leadoff hitter

with a .374 OBP, and now Orly Cabrera with a .322 OBP. One of these men gets on base at even a league-average clip. The three hitters in front of Justin Morneau are Span, Cabrera, and Joe Mauer, who gets on base at a FOUR TWENTY EIGHT clip. I wonder if this has anything to do with Morneau having more RBI than Joe Mauer.

Consider this specific instance: Justin Morneau came to the plate FOUR TIMES yesterday with a runner in SCORING POSITION. Three of them were Joe Mauer, who doubled immediately before to get there. To Morneau's credit, he went 2-for-4 and drove in two runs. That's good! I am taking nothing away from Justin Morneau here.

But he's not Joe Mauer.

By the way, did I meantion Morneau is the 1B and Mauer is the CATCHER?

Don't hate Joe Mauer!

6) Speaking of Joe Creaky

I didn't think Joe Crede was a worthwhile gamble because I expected him to break down, but I don't think it was a stupid or misguided move. I just wouldn't have done it. The Twins were well within their rights to try it, and Crede is by all accounts still a good defensive third baseman. It hasn't worked out great, but it wasn't a ridiculous move, just one I wouldn't have done.

Jhonny Peralta is now hitting .277 on the season. Even in a somewhat-poor season for Peralta, he has a higher AVG and OBP (.343), and a comparable SLG (.411 to Crede's .437) to Crede. Also, he is able to tie his shoes without sounding like microwaving popcorn.

Just sayin'.

7) The offense

Was pretty much Jhonny Peralta (2-for-4, 1 double, 1 R) and Travis Hafner (2-for-4, 1 double, 1 RBI). Andy Marte had a hit, so huzzah!

The Indians went 1-for-4 in with runners in scoring position. 1-for-2 of it was in the 9th inning. (It was not a good offensive

night.)

8) Sotto Voce

Grady Sizemore's OBP of .326 is below league average. He leads off.