In a special four-game B-List, Buff addresses the amazing Tuffy-Rhodes-like performance of Andy Marte and wonders if maybe he can seamlessly dovetail into the standing role for "clueless slider-swinging occasional-pop third baseman" in the future. He also addresses Jeremy Sowers reprising Gene Kelly, Aaron Laffey changing into a different pitcher, a number of very bad pitching performances, and whether Luis Valbuena is really actually good at catching and throwing a baseball.

FINAL	1	2		
Indians (57-70)	1	0	0	0
Orioles (52-76)	0	1	0	0

W: R. Perez (3-2) L: J. Johnson (3-5) S: K. Wood (17)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Indians (57-71)	1	1	0	0
Orioles (53-76)	0	2	0	3

W: Berken (4-11) L: Carmona (3-9)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Indians (58-71)	0	0	0	1
Orioles (53-77)	1	0	0	0

W: R. Perez (4-2) L: C. Ray (0-2) S: C. Perez (1)

FINAL	1	2	3	4
Indians (58-72)	0	0	0	0
Orioles (54-77)	0	0	4	0

W: Matusz (3-2) L: Masterson (4-6) S: J. Johnson (7)

This is probably the most-interesting Orioles team since Roberto Alomar spit.

1) Super Hollywood Feel-Good Prodigal Comeback Heartwarming Action! ™

For one series, at least, perennial punching bag Andy Marte forced his

way into a serious discussion about the 2010 roster, something that didn't seem possible as recently as a month ago.

Sure, he was hitting well enough in Columbus, but lots of guys can Manto their way through powerful AAA numbers. The fact is that Marte had been, to this point in his career, just another data point on the long list of "Reasons Not To Trade For Atlanta Prospects," because somehow they either correctly identify the lousy guys before anyone else does or cast some sort of Confundus Curse on them on their ways out the doors. And with the emergence of Luis Valbuena allowing a rightward shift of the remaining infielders, there's no longer an obvious place at third base waiting for Marte to emerge.

Now, I've spoken quasi-eloquently (I believe my words were, "Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaaaaaaah!") about how I feel about Andy Marte at first base, and these concerns still apply: if I did not care for Ryan Garko's production at the Cold Corner, I am hardly likely to be wowed by Marte's, even if he reaches his offensive potential. But let's put that aside for the time being: first base is open, it allows Marte to play regularly, let's go with that.

Marte did have a 10-game hitting streak ended with a 4-PA collar on Sunday, but the fact is that he did have a 10-game hit streak, not to mention a brief one-game appearance with over an .800 OPS after Saturday's game. Of course, it wasn't just the fact that he had at least one hit in each of the first three games of the series, but rather the dramatic and productive nature of two of these hits:

Thursday: with the Tribe down 1 and two outs, Matt LaPorta fought back from a 1-2 count to foul off a pair of two-strike pitches and eventually singled to center. Patiently waiting for nominal closer Jim Johnson to throw a strike, Marte pounded a 3-2 mistake from Johnson over the left-field wall to give the Tribe the 5-4 lead they would hold for the victory.

Saturday: after the umpires decided that letting Jeremy Sowers throw water balloons in a downpour was a fine way to spend a fifth inning, giving the O's a 2-1 lead, Marte followed a pair of singled by Valbuena and LaPorta with another 3-2 smash over the wall, this one off a low-quality slider by Chris Ray, to give the Indians a 4-2 lead they would never relinquish.

The second homer wasn't quite as dramatic, being that it was in the 6th inning with 1 out instead of in the 9th with 2 outs, but it sure FELT like the Tribe was largely defeated after falling behind and sitting for (nearly) two houts. Both homers were well-struck, though.

Consider this: the current third baseman is hitting .276/.337/.414. He has decent pop (normally something like 20-HR power), and reasonable patience at the plate (about a walk a little more than every three games, offset by just under a K every game). He has a strong arm but limited range. He will swing at more sliders low and away than just about anyone on the planet, and goes through stages in which he seems

clueless at the plate and other stages in which he will drive the ball with authority all over the ballpark.

Andy Marte is now hitting .275/.333/.438 on the season with 3 homers in 23 games, something like 20-HR power. He has reasonable patience at the plate (7 walks in 23 games, but 16 Ks). I actually couldn't tell you a heckuva lot about his defense at third. He will swing at more sliders low and away than just about anyone on the planet, and goes through stages in which he seems clueless at the plate and other stages in which he will drive the ball with authority all over the ballpark.

At this point, Jhonny Peralta is a more-valuable player than Andy Marte. He has had a LOT more success at the major-league level, to the point where I can say his numbers are a bit low (from the SLG perpective: actually, his numbers are right in line with his .270/.335/.433 career numbers). He can play shortstop, something that, to the best of my knowledge, Andy Marte cannot, making him more versatile. Right now, Peralta has virtually no platoon split, within .005 in each of the three "slash stats" in his numbers against righties and lefties: Marte has a split, but his numbers against lefties are based on such a tiny sample as to be meaningless.

Now, I've always been a Peralta fan, to a point near irrationality.

He held his own in the majors at a very young age. He's always played a better shortstop than his reputation, although I will admit that it isn't exactly sparkling. And he seems to be able to remain calm and steady through just about anything, as he was one of the few offensive players to really perform well in the 2007 playoffs.

But here's the fact: Jhonny Peralta makes 4 million dollars and will make more next year. Andy Marte makes the minimum and will ostensibly do so again. And I could make the argument that, with notable caveats (experience, versatility, durability), they are essentially the same player from the standpoint of what they would be doing with the Tribe.

I don't see both guys on the 2010 roster. Here's a thought, though: in the current economic climate, it is entirely possible that Andy Marte would net you a better trade return than Jhonny Peralta. I am not making a blind recommendation, but I think you have to listen to offers for BOTH players and choose whichever package helps the most, where the evaluation *includes* the cost of the player you *keep*.

2) Hazard Pay

Jeremy Sowers was neither Super Great nor Super Awful on Saturday. He got a swinging strikeout and induced an inning-ending double play, but his first run was given up to a guy he had walked and the extra-base hit that drove him home was a left-handed hitter (albeit an All-Star calibre one). He threw 51 strikes in 77 pitches, but more than a hit an inning and two walks in 4 2/3 innings.

Of course, the reason he only pitched 4 2/3 innings is that it rained for two hours, causing a 1 hour 37 minute rain delay. I say this to emphasize the fact that Sowers was pitching in a rather absurd circumstance, and the fact that Cesar Izturis' "tripe" was worth three bases was due at least in part to the fact that outfielders Shin-Soo Choo and Grady Sizemore were hampered by the water skis they were forced to don as part of their normal fielding attire.

3) Of all the paragraphs with interesting insight, none live here

Aaron Laffey pitched one of the least-memorable games I can not really remember on Thursday, wafting through 5 2/3 innings, being victimized by an error and some predictable blunderbussery (3 more walks) en route to a no-decision of no importance.

I am wondering, though: with another non-notable 8:6 GO:FO ratio and the news that he worked a lot on throwing a 4-seam fastball in his minor-league rehab stint, this may signal a shift in the KIND of pitcher Laffey is. Sure, he got a double play when he needed one (after, I should add, the leadoff four-pitch walk in the 6th), so he still has a sinker, but it is possible that Laffey is mixing the non-sinker into his repertoire more often to become a less one-dimensional twice-through-the-order kind of starter.

With this pseudo-insight in hand, it is possible that Laffey's horrifying walk totals are at least partially-due to him learning to command a different pitch while retaining the command on his previous pitches. Consider: Laffey walked 12 in 49 1/3 innings in 2007, then 31 in 93 2/3 innings in 2008. His 41 walks in 90 IP this season marks another increase, and a third consecutive decrease in his K:BB ratio as well (2.08, 1.39, 1.12). This seems like something going in the wrong direction, even for a 24-year-old starter.

On the other hand, if Laffey is learning to pitch in such a way that allows him to go deeper into ballgames, this end result would certainly be welcome. Laffey is averaging just shy of 6 innings per start (one out short), after averaging 5.85 in 2008 and 5.48 in 2007. He is

averaging more pitches per start (98.6, vs. 93.4 and 80) and is allowing a lower AVG by opponents (.257, vs. .281 and .287). And even with allowing more balls to be hit in the air (he actually sports a "negative" 0.95 GB:FB ratio this season), opponents are only slugging .348 off him (as opposed to .411 in 2008 and .388 in 2007).

It would seem that the advent of replacing the middle infield with ostensibly-better defenders should be a big boon to a guy like Laffey, but it would also seem that Laffey has changed his pitching in such a way to take minimal advantage of this. All of this is poorly-supported and somewhat inferred rather than fact-based, but it's worth considering as we head toward 2010.

4) Please don't make me write about David Huff

Hey, some things work out.

5) Please don't make me write about Fausto

Carmona, either.

Great googly moogly.

6) Or Jensen Lewis

Really, now.

7) Or Justin Masterson

"We'll just keep working hard. When I figure this all out, maybe I'll be a good pitcher one day."
-- J. Masterson

Uh ... yeah. Whatever.

Here's one reason to be encouraged: Masterson got 13 swings-and-misses from the Orioles. And although his final numbers are poor (5 2/3 IP, 8 H, 5 R, 4 ER, 4 BB), he did strike out six guys and had four scoreless innings. I mean, look: Masterson hasn't started a lot in the bigs and he does have a live arm. It's more interesting watching Justin Masterson pitch than nine-tenths of the left-handed starters we have (Huff, Sowers, Scott Lewis, Jackson, and half of Laffey ... I guess it only SEEMS like we have 10 boring left-handed starters). He's a front-runner for the 2010 rotation and has the only swing-and-miss stuff in the nominal 5-man setup right now (Westbrook, Laffey, Sowers, Huff, Masterson, modulo Carrasco, who I wouldn't know from a spicy chicken sandwich).

It would be hard to argue that he's been good as a starter in 2009, though.

8) Stat of the day

Raffy Perez had been 0-0 with an ERA of 18.00 in games

in which Andy Marte hit a home run. Since then, he has gone 2-0 with an ERA of 0.00 with 2 Ks and a WHIP of merely 0.75 in such games. Clearly a massive adjustment has been made by Perez the Elder.

9) Epiphany explained

I was a bit flip in comparing Jess Todd to Ferd Cabrera, so let me explain: I thought Ferd Cabrera would be great.

I don't mean "he had talent." I don't mean "he had good stuff." I mean "Ferd Cabrera will gain national recognition for being an extremely successful relief pitcher." I watched the guy and could not CONCEIVE of him NOT being at least Raffy Betancourt.

He was not at least Raffy Betancourt.

Ferd Cabrera broke my heart. And Jess Todd, bless his youthiness, bless his power arsenal, bless his boyish face that suggests either an extra in "Footloose" or perhaps a Bill Callahan's punter, is breaking my heart. It is one thing for a guy with Jensen Lewis' "stuff" to come up an suck. To have Jess Todd's stuff and STILL suck is just heartbreaking. To his credit, he struck out the only batter he faced Sunday. But his Thursday and Friday were ... not as good.

(They sucked.)

10) What a great trade!

Who said Mark Shapiro didn't get anyone of consequence this summer, trading veterans like Mark DeRosa, Cliff Lee, Ryan Garko, and Victor Martinez? Look at this new guy, Matt LaPorta! His gritty full-count single preceeded the Marte homer on Thursday, he got two more hits (including his 3rd homer) on Friday, and his single in front of Marte's homer on Saturday was only one

of the FOUR hits he collected in a 4-for-4 night. Getting this guy this summer was one of the ...

... wait, what? We got him *when*?

I think I confused myself.

11) Honest opinion sought

One of the exciting things about Luis Valbuena is that he is hitting with a lot more frequency and authority than could have been reasonably expected. As a slick-gloved light-batted middle infielder from Seattle, it was assumed that Valbuena would be a big asset with the glove, especially allowing Asdrubal Cabrera to slide back to short, and we would accept some limited offense from

Valbuena in the meantime.

But let me ask the naïve question here.

Is Luis Valbuena actually a good second baseman?

He made his 9th error of the season Thursday, and although errors are not the only or best way to measure the quality of a fielder ... isn't that kind of a lot of errors for a guy with 76 games and 300 PA to have made? Granted, 4 of the errors came at shortstop, and his fielding percentage at 2B is .983. But I don't know defensive statistics very well and don't really watch him very carefully. I am honestly looking for email (buff@theclevelandfan.com) here. Is Luis Valbuena a good defensive second baseman?

12) Chris. Perez.

Yeah.