The Cleveland Indians have the fever, and the only cure, apparently, is More Kansas City Royals. (Actually, White Sox will do.) In today's B-List, Buff covers Jake Westbrook's first win of the season, Russ Branyan doing something other than strike out, a functional offense, the opponent's dysfunctional bullpen, and a surprising shift from the Indians' hitters. If the Tribe hopes to take a series from a non-Chicago opponent, they'll need Fausto to be good tonight, because tomorrow, the matchup is Greinke v. Huff.

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (12-18)	0	2	0
Royals (11-22)	0	0	1

W: Westbrook (1-2) L: Bannister (1-3)

People in Kansas City seem very nice. They haven't stormed the field, carried off the coaching staff, and thrown them into the nearest river. I would like to think Joe Posnanski has something to do with this.

1) Adjustment time

"[Jake Westbrook] still didn't have full confidence in his sinker, dropping his arm angle to offset his insecurity."

Wow.

I mean, frankly, I didn't have full confidence in his sinker, either, since he came into the game with a 5.75 ERA, 2 Quality Starts in 6, and 17 walks in 31 1/3 IP. But it sounds like Westbrook's interpretation of his troubles was that his pitches lacked either movement or deception, while my interpretation of his 4 hit batsmen and 4 wild pitches was that his pitches had PLENTY of movement. It was harnessing the movement to be something useful that was the problem. I'm not sure how dropping down would help this, but I may be misinterpreting Westbrook's actions.

More to the point, heck with my understanding: keep doing more of *that*.

Granted, the KC lineup is not the best, but it isn't the worst, either. Well, okay, it's pretty bad. Still, Westbrook not only made it through 6 complete innings giving up 1 run on 5 hits, he only walked 2 hitters and induced an insane 14:2 GO:FO ratio. Of the 5 hits, only 1 was for extra bases, a double by Mike Aviles that produced exactly nothing. (The run was allowed on a single, runner-advancing groundout, and another single.)

Now, look: I know jack about pitching motions and throwing an effective sinker. I threw three-quarters so it wouldn't hurt. But if you're doing something that produces a 14:2 GO:FO ratio and 1 run in 6 innings, well … yeah, do that some more. (Oddly, Westbrook's 2 FOs were the only ones for Cleveland pitching, as Wright and Ambriz combined for 4 Ks and 5 GO in 3 IP.)

(Note: Westbrook walked the first batter on 4 pitches, threw first-pitch strikes to 10 of 25 hitters, and induced 5 swinging strikes. There is room for improvement. On the other hand, the results were good.)

2) Bombin' Branyan

Until this game, Russ Branyan's nth stint with the Indians was more famous for Bruce Drennan comparing him to a ballerina than anything else. Consider this: in April, Braynan struck out 7 times in 20 AB, which is plainly bad. In May, he has struck out TEN times in 20 AB. In true "Three True Outcomes" fashion, he entered the game with 40 plate appearances and had 15 Ks and 5 BB, a 50% rate which is pretty inspiring.

He added the other outcome last night.

Branyan hit two homers off two radically different pitchers last night, one off Brian Bannister and one off Joakim Soria. Soria has been a bit homer-prone in recent weeks, so this is not the accomplishment it might have been considered in years past, but the fact is, Russ Branyan swung the bat, and the bat connected with the ball (a major plus and hardly a guaranteed event: Branyan went 3-for-5, and the two outs were both … strikeouts), and the ball flew over the fence by a pretty fair distance. There was no leaping catch narrowly avoided on these home runs.

Now, due the magic of small samples, these two shots singlehandedly make Branyan look like a viable corner infielder with a .250/.333/.475 line. I mean, he came into the game slugging .286. Russ Branyan has not suddenly become our third-most productive hitter on the strength of two home runs. He's still Russ Branyan. But a homering Russ Branyan is the valuable kind, so let's hope this "gets him untracked" or "wakes up his bat" or "staunches the gaping wound" or whatever it is kids say these days.

3) Speaking of "gaping wounds"

I thought maybe Rany Jazayerli and Joe Posnanski might be exaggerating the painful nature of the Royals' bullpen.

They are not.

The average American League bullpen sports a 3.86 ERA, allowing hitters to hit .248 against them. Cleveland's bullpen, for all its foibles and painful save-blowing and Raffy Perez fungusizing is right around average, with a 3.87 ERA, with opponents hitting .261. Kansas City's bullpen as a 5.28 ERA with opponents hitting .288 off them. Two eighty eight! Not good. They have lost NINE GAMES. That's … well, that's the **most in the majors**. Nine games lost by your bullpen is not helping anyone, especially poor Zack Greinke, who has taken to chewing wood screws and spitting them at a doll stitched in the likeness of Yoon Betancourt.

Anyway, KC's bullpen lived … um … *down* to its lofty *un*standards, with only something named "Dusty Hughes" escaping unscathed. Bruce Chen walked Grady Sizemore, who hits lefties as well as a six-foot inflatable clown, then gave up a single to left-handed Shin-Soo Choo. He then gave up a double steal and an RBI groundout to lefty Travis Hafner, who hits lefties at about the same rate as eight tires stacked on a tetherball post and set alight.

On comes Josh Rupe, whose first pitch is an RBI single. His 3-1 pitch to Branyan is an opposite-field single. He walks Jhonny Peralta, who swung at one of the six pitches he saw. And he walked in a run by throwing 1 strike in 5 pitches to Mark Grudzielanek. Rupe ended up throwing 6 strikes in 17 pitches, allowing 4 baserunners and retiring no one whatsoever. After the game, Raffy Perez got his autograph.

Hughes was good, and Soria made one mistake to Branyan, but really now: that's a pretty crummy job by the 'pen there.

4) A treatise on Plate Discipline

The term "plate discipline" gets thrown around a lot, and is often misconstrued as being measured by "number of walks." Yes, good plate discipline will often have walks as a by-product: if you learn to lay off pitches out of the strike zone, you get to walk more often.

But real "plate discipline" isn't solely about not swinging at balls: it is also about swinging at pitches you can hit well while avoiding swinging at pitches you are likely to hit poorly. If the first pitch of a plate appearance is a nasty back-door slider at the bottom of the knees, well, what are you going to do with that pitch, anyway? Better wait for a more-drivable pitch later in the at-bat. If there are two strikes, of course, you have to swing at that pitch, but on the first pitch, it might pay off to wait for a fastball or something at the belt or a breaking pitch that isn't quite so high-quality. The art of plate discipline is all about maximizing your chance of getting a productive swing.

Hidden in here is that sometimes, that pitch comes early in the count. You don't want to automatically take pitch after pitch and never swing until you're down 1-2. Again, you want to avoid swinging at the pitch you can't hit well, but the flip side is that you DO need to swing at the pitch you CAN hit well.

Through the first four innings, Cleveland hitters made 18 plate appearances. FOUR of them took strike one looking. They had two hits on the first pitch.

Now, seven of those "first pitches" were called balls: that seems like the appropriate way to treat the first pitch in this case. Don't swing at a pitch out of the strike zone. But I was a little surprised at the number of times Cleveland hitters made solid contact with the first pitch. For the game, the Indians took strike one 14 times (4 in the 8th and 9th), took ball one 17 times, swung and missed 3 times, fouled off twice, put the ball in play for an "out" three times (once Jhonny Peralta reached on an error), and singled four times.

Consider this: if you look only at balls in play, the Indians hit .571 on the first pitch. They reached base five out of seven times if you count the error positively. And even if you count unproductive swings, the Indians went 4-for-12 by swinging at the first pitch (reaching base 5 times). That's pretty impressive.

Now, is this a shift in philosophy for a team that has already racked up 240 Ks (3rd most in the AL)? Or is this a reaction to facing Brian Bannister, who doesn't have the best stuff but can be crafty when ahead in the count, as well as simply throwing hittable first pitches? I can't tell you that. But it DOES show good "plate discipline" in the truest sense of the word.

5) I am ready

For Asdrubal Cabrera to stop sucking.

Since returning from the strained quad (injured in a game in which he was 0-for-3 with a K), he has posted a pair of Size Five collars, striking out 4 times in the process. Yeah, it's two games, but it raises two questions:

a) Is Cabrera really healthy?
b) Is it good when your LEADOFF MAN goes 0-for-5?

Yeah, okay, I know the answer to one of those.

6) Mighty Mark!

Mark Grudzielanek marked (hee hee!) his return to Kansas City with a fine night at the plate, going 1-for-2 with a pair of walks, one of which drove in a run. In his past nine games, Grood has gone 12-for-34 with 4 walks, a .353/.421/.353 line that serves very nicely for a middle

infielder, even one that remembers watching “Love Boat” and “Good Times.” He was the only Cleveland hitter to get a plate appearance and not strike out.

Note that Brian Bannister throws with his right hand, Mark Grudzielanek hits right-handed, and Luis Valbuena hits left-handed. I’m not saying the bloom is off the Rosebuena, but … yeah, I’m probably saying that.

7) Check that man’s eyes

Weird small-sample split: Jhonny Peralta is hitting .327/.435/.538 at night, which includes his 2-run double from last night.

He is hitting .068/.173/.159 in day games.

I wish I could say this was a pattern, noticeable from the past, and something that suggests something more than tiny numbers and Justin Verlanders. Just in case, I’m for giving Andy Marte the start Thursday.

8) Ho Hum Dept.

Austin Kearns went 2-for-4 with a walk, scoring 3 runs and driving in 1. He is hitting .346/.416/.538 on the season.

Jamey Wright recorded six outs. His GO:FO ratio was 4:0.

The Royals’ master plan of pinch-hitting with hitters that bat .000, .114, and .189 did not produce any runs. Or hits. Or baserunners. Some laughter, though.

9) Terror on the Basepaths!

Grady Sizemore stole two bases, including one as the front half of a double steal with Shin-Soo Choo. Although replays suggested he was, in fact, safe, it was a close-enough play that manager Trey Hillman was tossed from the game for arguing the call.

(Actually, it could be argued that Hillman knew Sizemore was safe and simply wanted to leave the ballpark. I infer this because immediately after he was ejected, five hundred Royals fans streamed out of the stands onto the field and began arguing with the third base umpire in the hopes of being ejected from the ballpark, so they could leave early with a clear conscience.)

Sizemore now has a nice 4:1 SB:CS ratio; Choo's 6:2 is not as good but is at least break-even.

10) Grasping at hopeful straws

Although Travis Hafner did not have a hit, he did drive in a run. It is interesting to note that he is hitting .304/.467/.478 in May after a dreadful Peraltan April. Another encouraging sign is that he struck out 17 times in 67 AB in April, but has only 4 in 23 AB in May, a much more manageable total. Maybe he actually IS swinging the bat better. (Against righties. Lefties … oy.)