Staked to a 4-run lead, Aaron Laffey is unable to complete a fifth inning to get the win, so the win goes to the second reliever, because the first reliever … um … because … er … because I don't understand the official scoring rules, apparently. How is the guy who balked in a run more deserving than the guy who whiffed the 4 and 5 hitters with the bases loaded? Because the balk call was bogus? Okay, that's ANOTHER thing I apparently don't understand.

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (33-49)	0	1	3
Rangers (31-47)	0	0	1

W: J. Smiff (1-1) L: O. Beltre (0-1)

Always nice to be the one taking advantage of the bandbox.

1) The transformation continues

When we first met Aaron Laffey, we saw a man slinging the ball from a low arm slot, inducing scores of groundballs and double plays and losing on strange nonsense like botched bunts. He “pitched to contact” in the sense that “everyone made contact,” but the results were encouragingly Faustonian.

Now, a couple years and a couple bounces of the yo-yo later, Aaron Laffey has returned the rotation with more of a four-seam fastball and less of a sinkerball and some pretty good results and I hate them anyway.

The good news: in the three starts since his last call-up, Laffey has better strikeout stuff: 5 K in 4 IP, 5 K in 6 IP, 3 K in 4 1/3 IP. That's 13 K in 14 1/3 innings, a brisk 8.16 K/9 that would actually best Justin Masterson's rotation-leading 7.32 K/9 by nearly a whole strikeout per 9 innings. Whether this is the four-seamer or better breaking stuff or an approach to the strike zone that can euphemistically be termed "egalitarian" (no spot within in a one-foot extension of the strike zone is preferred to any other) is unclear.

The bad news is that this isn't really the product of any actually bat-missing stuff. The Rangers swung and missed a paltry 4 Laffey offerings last night, while fouling off a ludicrous 26. Josh Hamilton did strike out swinging against Laffey, for example … on the *thirteenth pitch*. After seven or eight fouloffs, I'd be tempted to just hit the guy so he'd leave the batter's box, I'd be that tired of looking at him.

The other bad news is that Laffey no more pound the strike zone than he digests granite: in those three games, he's also walked a total of 8 batters for a rate of 5.02 BB/9, even higher than his season rate of 4.725, which is a seriously high rate.

So while it was good for Laffey to give up only 1 earned run in 4 1/3 innings, and for four of the five hits allowed to be singles (including two to Jason Donald at short), the fact is that Laffey ran out of gas in the FIFTH INNING because he'd already thrown about 80 through FOUR. (He finished with 58 strikes in 101 pitches, a lousy rate.)

Now, why am I being harder on Laffey than, say, Mitch Talbot, who has done largely the same thing recently? A few reasons:

a) I remember when Laffey could retire people on efficient ground balls
b) Fair or not, I now consider David Huff and Aaron Laffey to be extensions of each other
c) I hate walks
d) The game lasted 3 hours and 42 minutes and made me cry

Ahem ahem ahem … is this thing on? Thank you.

THROW STRIKES!

(And either keep that arm slot and develop a wipeout slider or come up over the top if you want to be a power pitcher. Hint: develop the slider.)

2) Give that man the game ball!

Joe Smiff won his first major-league game last night by pitching 1 2/3 scoreless innings. Three of his five outs came via the strikeout, and he allowed two singles that amounted to nothing, largely because two of those strikeouts came against Vlad Guerrero and Nelson Cruz with runners on base.

3) Give that man a facsimile of the game ball!

Yes, Frank Herrmann gave up a run on three hits in only 1 inning of work. Of course, the run came when Joe Smiff was called for a balk with Herrmann's runner on third base, but he did put two guys on with only one out and that's not very good.

Of course, the inning before, Herrmann came in with two runners aboard and loaded the bases on a poked single by Guerrero. He then struck out Josh Hamilton and Nel Cruz to end the inning without further damage.

Anyway, I understand why Laffey didn't get the win: he didn't go 5. After that, it's the scorekeeper's discretion, and he chose Smiff because … he did record the most outs, I guess.

4) Give that man a copy of the facsimile of the game ball!

Of course, the description above makes it sound like Smiff was uniformly calm, cool, collected, and effective despite the singles he allowed: after all, he struck out Nelson Cruz with two men on.

One of the strikes was … stressful.

With a 1-1 count, Cruz went with Smiff's outer-half offering to line a ball down the right-field line, well out of reach of Austin Kearns (since it was about 30 feet over the wall). It obviously had the distance, but it wasn't entirely clear if the ball crossed in front of the fair pole or hooked behind it.

Originally called fair, the ball was ruled foul after a correct application of the replay rule.

5) Message to FIFA

Read that last sentence again.

6) Chicks dig the long ball, the long ball, the long ball, and the long ball

Facing a rookie in his second start, the Indians served notice to the Rangers' brain trust that Omar Beltre may not be the best fit for the Ballpark in Arlington. Carlos Santana hit a ball roughly 0.72 parsecs off Beltre in the 3rd, and a few batters later, Matt LaPorta hit a two-run shot of more human proportions.

Later, Jayson Nix drove a pair of two-out offerings over the left field wall, one off Dustin Nippert and another off Alexi Ogando, one of whom I've actually heard of.

Conbined with a pair of doubles from Jason Donald and an RBI double by Jhonny Peralta, the Indians had more extra-base hits (7) than singles (5) in scoring 9 runs.

7) Ducks on the pond!

We left 11 men on base and STILL scored 9 runs. That's pretty prolific stuff: of course, homers will do that (hard to leave a guy on base on a homer). But the Indians actually went 3-for-10 with runners in scoring position: not sure you can ask for a lot more than hitting .300 there.

Note that the Indians were able to leave 11 on base even after scoring 9 runs on 12 hits because they walked 6 times AND got plunked thrice.

8) So, who got hit?

Well, first, it was Austin Kearns, who got hit by Beltre.

And then it was Austin Kearns, who got plunked by Nippert.

And then it was Austin Kearns, who got smacked by Ogando.

All of this injurious contact finally necessitated the removal of the struck player, so of course, Matt LaPorta was replaced.

9) Wait, what?

Okay, it wasn't actually because of being hit by pitches: on a Very Bad Throw (or, in more

common terms, a “Jason Donald”), LaPorta was forced out of position, and as Elvis Andrus churned past first to beat the throw, he clocked LaPorta on the back of the head with his elbow. This caused the ball to disappear into a timespace vortex and allowed Julio Borbon to score from first, but more importantly, appeared to actually unconscionify LaPorta for a couple minutes. (This doesn’t sound like a long time, but try this: hold your breath for two to three minutes. It’s kind of a long time to see someone unconscious.)

Anyway, LaPorta’s CT was “negative,” which means more to actual medical people than it does to me: I think that’s more like “no skull fracture, and he didn’t have a stroke” than “everything is both hunky and dory.” However, it was reported that he had “concussion-like symptoms,” so it bears being extra careful with LaPorta, who has had trouble with head injury in the recent past (getting beaned).

10) Hot up the middle

Donald may have played comically in the field once again (two infield singles, one error), but he also stole two bases (2nd once, 3rd once) and went 4-for-4 with a pair each of singles and doubles. He is now hitting .280/.321/.439, which is technically the best of any Cleveland infielder, including both corners.

In the meantime, Nix raised his average as an Indian to .286/.342/.629, which is plainly unsustainable, but does suggest that the front office saw something I sure didn’t in picking up Nix off waivers. I wondered before if playing third might have been causing Nix troubles at the plate with Chicago, but the White Sox blogger I mentioned before said it may simply be a function of getting regular playing time.

Now, this brings up an interesting point: would Andy Marte actually flourish with more-than-sporadic plate appearances?

To this I say, “Who cares?” No. I’ll see more Nix. Less Marte would be fine. Make it so.