We may have established a new rule for the season: send Buff on vacation! While Buff was out, the Tribe swept the Tigers in a four-game set, and last night won its second in a row against the Twins. In today's B-List, Buff talks about what he missed, Justin Masterson's fearless approach, the ins and outs of bunting, lauds two relief pitchers he had recently thought dead, and comes up with a surprising conclusion about the relative quality of some of Cleveland's outfielders...

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (40-54)	0	0	0
Twins (49-45)	1	0	0

W: R. Perez (3-0) L: Mijares (1-1) S: C. Perez (9)

So, I'm thinking that if there were three or four All-Star Breaks during the season, the Indians would definitely be A.L. Central contenders. I would say that everyone except Fausto got a break, but then, he didn't appear in the game (thanks, Joe!), either.

0) Quick catch-up

I was impressed that Mitch Talbot was able to weasel out of so much trouble, including bases loaded with no outs leading to zero runs. I thought Jensen Lewis pitched well in what could be his farewell performance. I was astounded by Jeanmar Gomez' calm throttling of the Tigers' lineup, especially since he hasn't been very good in AAA this season. He clearly has major-league stuff, although doing that 30 times in one season is a bit rarer than doing it once in a Bud Smith Commemorative Outing. I was gratified that in a matchup of Fausto Carmona and Justin Verlander that it was Verlander who blinked. I was astonished to see Andy Marte make multiple excellent defensive plays on Saturday, and relieved when he went back to being Andy Marte on Sunday so that I could enjoy the rest of my weekend without the threat of falling frogs and rivers of blood. The bullpen's collective performance was exemplary. The Indians held the Tigers to 8 runs TOTAL in FOUR GAMES. Brennan Boesch turns out to be a regular guy.

But by far … by FAR … the highlight of the weekend was the three-run homer by Jhonny Peralta. Already one of the slowest professional athletes on the planet, Peralta was further hobbled by a fever on Friday and Saturday that sapped his strength and endurance. I know that when I get sick, I feel extra-terrible when I have to exert myself, so I can only imagine what Peralta was thinking as he rounded the bases. I assume that by the time he was halfway to third base, he was gassed, and upon rounding third, was actively hallucinating that he was being pursued by a "Death by Monkeys" mushroom cloud, or alternatively a chorus line of dancing child-sized frosted doughnuts doing a short routine, Garfield-style, around home plate,

encouraging him to complete his run. It is one thing for Ryan Raburn to have opened the bullpen gate with his awkward leap (reports that he "fell through the gate" were a bit exaggerated), but quite another for Peralta to "motor" all the way around the bases.

For perspective, this Yahoo article notes that Peralta's 16.74-second "dash" was actually slower than five REGULAR home run trots in 2010. (Hat tip to Mickey Ferguson for pointing me there.)

Here's something to keep in mind, though: the center fielder had to leap at the wall to try to catch the ball. Peralta hit that ball a long, long way. A couple feet higher and this is one of the more boring three-run homers ever hit. This was hardly a "cheap" homer.

Anyway, I liked a four-game sweep of Detroit.

1) The rest will do you good

Justin Masterson could have had a more-auspicious beginning to his game. He might not have given up an extra-base hit to the first left-handed hitter he saw, for example, or not thrown a wild pitch in each of the first two innings, or not walked a right-handed hitter he had down in the count 1-2, or fielded his position well enough to avoid yielding a bunt single to Nick Punto, who is Nick Punto.

However, Masterson retired 9 of the next ten in the third through fifth innings, and the hit was an infield single. He gave up a double to Joe Mauer in the 6th, but struck out very left-handed Jason Kubel on four pitches (two swings-and-misses) before finally being lifted in the 7th after a pair of singles. In fact, if not for two of the most incredibly-weak RBI singles thereafter, Masterson would have exited having given up only 1 run in 6 1/3 IP; as it was, he still got a Quality Start out the bargain, although not the Win.

Here's the thing: it's not just that Masterson settled down and sawed through a Twins lineup that is more "solid" than "dangerous," it's that he got his strikeout mojo back (7 Ks) without resorting

to trying to make the Perfect Pitch (1 BB). Included in this were a three-pitch swinging K of Thome with men on first and third, a swinging K of Mauer, a second swinging K of Thome with a man on base, and the aforementioned K (looking) of Kubel with Mauer in scoring position. Why single these out? Because these are not just good hitters and/or powerful hitters, they are LEFT-HANDED hitters. I can't say I'm good enough at pitch recognition to tell you he's found some new Confoundment Pitch or something, although if I had my "druthers," I'd have Masterson ask Talbot to show him that tailing changeup. I can say that when Justin Masterson strikes out left-handed hitters in the heart of the order with runners on base, he is like two thousand times more effective than the guy with a near-6 ERA he has flashed at other points this season. I will avoid getting too carried away by one outing, but … it was a good outing.

2) Bunting for shame and loss

One of the thoughts that runs through a lot of fans' heads when someone plays The Shift against a hulking left-handed slugger is that if the slugger would simply push a bunt, ANY kind of bunt, down the third base line, they'd have an instant single. In the 21st century, when OBP is duly recognized as King and we value the slugger who will accept a walk, this seems like the equivalent thing: the slugger is giving up the chance to get an extra-base hit, but generally The Shift is only played with the bases empty and he's not giving up a run-producing opportunity except for that paltry chance of a homer. Certainly the current version of Travis Hafner would be better served by taking this base, for example.

It is with this idea in mind that a guy like Howie Kendrick can bunt his way into the hearts of millions (or at least several) by noting that the Indians' defensive alignment (notably, the 2B was playing back) was conducive to a bunt single. I mean, this is not rocket science: if you have a skill, and this skill is likely to translate into success, and the circumstances are aligned to take advantage of this skill, then you will attempt to use that skill. John Stockton could shoot a three-pointer … but if Karl Malone was open on the pick-and-roll, by golly, Stockton would pass him the ball. Stockton was decent enough at shooting the three. Three is more than two. But two points in the hand are worth three in the bush, so to speak.

So consider the 6th inning, when Shelley Duncan hit a bases-loaded two-out two-run single to give Cleveland a temporary 3-1 lead in a matchup of starters having strong outings (Kevin Slowey's stats are very hard to distinguish from Masterson's: same Ks, same BB, same runs, one fewer hit but two fewer outs). With runners on first and third, Trevor Crowe dropped down a bunt.

It is not altogether obvious what the Whole Team Thought Process was here. Perhaps Crowe was given the bunt sign. Perhaps Crowe chose to bunt himself. Did he see something in how Nick Punto was playing at third? Did he think Jesse Crain had the kind of delivery that makes him fall off the mound and be in a lousy position to field a bunt? (This contributed to Kendrick's play, for example: Chris Perez might as well fall flat on his face after throwing one of those max-effort fastballs.) I didn't get a chance to interview Crowe after the game, as I was a thousand miles away and he doesn't know who I am.

Here's the thing, though: if Hafner gets The Shift, but bunts the ball hard to short (where the 3B will be playing) instead of medium down the line, he'll be out. If Kendrick dribbled his bunt too slowly, Perez could have fielded the ball (I dunno, with his face or something), but a deep 2B is only valuable to the bunter there if he can get the ball PAST the pitcher. Ultimately, you still have to EXECUTE the bunt. A bunt is not a guarantee. It is generally easier to bunt a ball into fair territory in some manner than it is to get a solid base hit, but it is not as easy as, say, making an uncontested layup. And to bunt a ball WELL … well, look: if it were SIMPLE, Wile E. Taveras would be a credible leadoff hitter.

Anyway, it's not that Crowe's idea was bankrupt or foolish … what it required was a HIGHER-QUALITY BUNT. Crain fielded the ball and threw Crowe out and that ended the inning. But bunting in that situation, when you see a particular defensive alignment and have a particular level of skill, is not *a priori* a bad play.

3) On the other hand

Joe Mauer's bunt was truly flat-out ill-conceived. Huzzah!

4) Game Log Follies

The game log says that Raffy Perez gave up back-to-back RBI singles to Denard Span and Orlando Hudson to tie the game at 3 in the 7th.

My eyes watched Denard Span hit a feeble Nerf™ blooper in front of Crowe in left, and Hudson

roll a ball between third and short that spent more time on the ground than off it.

Perez started the year with a BABIP around .833 and in April and May looked like DFA-bait, posting ERAs of 5.14 (.414 AVG allowed) and 9.00 (.364 AVG), posting K:BB ratios of 5:5 in each month. That's a bad pitcher. Since then, he's pitched 19 1/3 innings, giving up 19 hits and 2 earned runs. He still has a bit of trouble with the walks, but at least this is a useful reliever at this point.

5) Box Score Follies

Fun note from the 11-inning win over Detroit Saturday: except for Joe Smiff's two outs, all Cleveland pitchers sported ERAs under 4.00:

Talbot: 3.89
Jen Lewis: 3.52
Herrmann: 2.50
C. Perez: 2.48
R. Perez: 3.74

This is impressive in that there's no way I would have predicted sub-4 ERAs from any of Talbot, Lewis, or Herrmann, and Raffy Perez looked flat-out BROKEN in May and has somehow stuffed his ERA under the 4.00 line.

6) Speaking of Joe Smiff

Since blowing up in a horrific game in Cincinnati June 25th, Joe Smiff has appeared in 12 games. He has pitched a total of 8 innings and has given up TWO hits (both against Texas July 5th, a game he WON). He has walked 3 hitters and has not given up a run, for a 12-game stretch of 0.00 ERA and 0.625 WHIP. He has 6 Ks.

Smiff really DOES seem to have come back from his minor-league stint with more than he had before. He still has a delivery that probably precludes him from having a more-featured role, but he has become a valuable relief pitcher. Anyway, he threw 5 strikes in 7 pitches in a perfect inning of work, which is pretty damned efficient.

7) Ho Hum Dept.

Chris Perez got his 9th save.

Carlos Santana went 2-for-3, drew a walk, scored the game-winning run from first on a double, solved the Poincare Conjecture, and telekinetically plugged one of the leaks in BP's well.

8) Welcome back!

Asdrubal Cabrera returns!

Okay, he went 0-for-5 and gave up an infield single and didn't get the thirty-seven hopper by Hudson, but … Asdrubal Cabrera returns!

9) Objective incredulity

Shelley Duncan may be our most offensively-productive non-catcher.

Now, look: I am perfectly aware of Shelley Duncan's limitations. He is a comical outfielder. He is not very fast. He would likely be over-exposed playing every day. His sample size is very, very small. He strikes out kinda frequently (33 in 84 AB). He is thirty years old. He looks like Dave Duncan. (Technically, he IS Dave Duncan: his MIDDLE name is Shelley.)

But with a scorching .345/.457/.621 July, Duncan was hitting .286/.368/.512 overall for the season. This is a higher OBP than Travis Hafner. This is a higher OBP than JOE FREAKING MAUER. He trumps Austin Kearns in all three "slash stats." This is a higher SLG than Shin-Soo Choo. He has a **higher OPS** than Choo.

This is not to suggest that Duncan is a more-valuable player than Choo, and certainly NOT anything CLOSE to Mauer, who is having an off season. But right now, he is significantly more valuable than Hafner, and if I were a contender, I'd probably be willing to claim Duncan on August waivers and work out a deal for an A-ball arm or something. Look at some of the DH's in the American League and tell me Shelley Duncan couldn't hit at least that.

Duncan is almost certainly not REALLY a long-term, sustainable .286/.368/.512 hitter. I mean, that's a REALLY GOOD hitter. As I said, that's not too far away from Shin-Soo Choo. But … I'll say this: if you wanted to chart out what could reasonably have been expected from Shelley Duncan this season, he has exceeded it by a significant jolt.

By the way, under the same heading, Jason Donald now has 15 doubles. Did you know that? I did not know that. I was not CLOSE to knowing that. I figured 8, maybe 9. Fifteen!

Trevor Crowe is hitting .327/.373/.418 in July. He hits very poorly right-handed, though.