The weekend featured some very fine pitching combined with very bad hitting, so much so that with one exception it's largely impossible to tell which was which. Felix Hernandez is very good, so his shutout was no surprise, but to believe that Luke French has suddenly become Steve Carlton stretches the imagination further than it's comfortable being stretched. In this B-List Four-Pack, Buff addresses the pitching, Punyball, the awesomeness of Chris Perez, and expresses dismay at yet more Terror on the Basepaths.

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (54-81)	0	0	0
Mariners (53-82)	1	0	0

W: French (4-4) L: Carmona (11-14) “S”: Aardsma (27)

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (55-81)	1	0	2
Mariners (53-83)	0	0	0

W: Talbot (9-11) L: Pauley (2-7) S!: C. Perez (18)

FINAL	1	2	3

Indians (55-82)	0	0	0
Mariners (54-83)	0	1	0

W: F. Hernandez (11-10) L: J. Gomez (3-3) S: Aardsma (28)

FINAL	1	2	3
Indians (56-82)	0	0	0

Angels (66-72)	0	0	0

“W”: J. Lewis (4-2) L: Rodney (4-2) S: C. Perez (19)

In the 70 half-innings played over the 4-day set of games, 69 of them featured zero or one run(s).

1) Let's just get this out of the way now

Feliz Hernandez is an outstanding pitcher. Although C.C. Sabathia is much more likely to win the Cy Young award this season because his team is much better, it would take a significantly weird argument to convince me that someone in the American League has pitched measurably better than Felix Hernandez this season.

Hernandez' 8 shutout innings were the EIGHTH time he has given up 0 earned runs in a game, the shortest outing of which was the 6 2/3 innings he pitched against Cleveland on August 15th. In six of the other 8, he has gone at least 8 innings. Remarkably, he lost one of those games and got a no-decision in two others. In his last 23 starts, he has given up more than three earned runs ONCE. He has given up exactly three earned runs four times. This means that in 18 of his last 23 starts, the opponent has scored no more than TWO earned runs. His ERAs by month since June:

June: 2.36
July: 2.15
August: 0.82
Sept.: 0.00

I am predicting Felix Hernandez to post a negative earned run average in October. Sadly, because of his team's offense, he may still get a no-decision.

So here is my cogent, well-reasoned, and thorough analysis of why Cleveland hitters scored zero runs on Sunday afternoon:

Felix Hernandez is really, really good. And the Indians' hitters … are not.

This having been said, the Indians were shut out on Friday night as well. They were actually no-hit deep into the 7th inning by ex-Tiger Luke French. Here is my cogent, well-reasoned, and thorough analysis of why Cleveland hitters scored zero runs on Friday night:

I have no f&#*ing idea.

He's *Luke French*. He had one ground ball out and 14 flies. He fooled people with his changeup, his location, and a pre-game hypnotist. Watching the game was akin to shaving with a live weasel: it was painful, and ultimately still failed to accomplish much of anything. I will leave you with the comment I submitted for ESPN's Power Rankings:

Getting shut out by King Felix no shame, but nearly getting no-hit by Luke French is like appointing Jessica Simpson Secretary of State: technically possible, but ill-advised, poorly executed, and humiliating.

In retrospect, "ill-advised" should be replaced by "a bad strategic approach." In my defense, I'm supposed to keep it to 25 words.

2) Extra Bonus Shame!

In case the Indians' performance against LUKE F*@&ING FRENCH wasn't humiliating enough, it masked arguably the best start of the season for Fausto Carmona. It's hard to say without reservation that a start is "finest" when the performance includes 5 walks in 8 innings, but still, the man gave up 4 hits (all singles, one of which was an infield hit), got four swinging Ks in the first three innings (and all 6 of his Ks overall were swinging), and gave up 0 runs over his last 7 innings. He was reasonably efficient as well, requiring only 103 pitches to sail through the 8 innings of work.

Overall, Carmona had an uncharacteristic 13 swings-and-misses while retaining his customary 13:4 GO:FO ratio, including a pair of double plays to end the first two innings. Only one player

got as far as second base after the first inning: Frank Gutierrez walked and stole second and accomplished nothing else whatsoever in the inning.

The five walks are still troublesome, of course, and the run in the first was a direct result of the first one. After a leadoff infield single, Fausto walked Chone Figgins on four straight, meaning that Gutierrez' single up the middle was good for the RBI of the game. I highly doubt Carmona was worried about Figgins, I think he was just wrestling with his command early on. But the rest of the performance was masterful.

Caveat: drawing conclusions about a pitcher based on his result vs. Seattle is a risk.

3) Powering through vs. the Dead Cat Bounce

If Carmona's performance was masterful, Mitch Talbot's wasn't far behind. Hitting his spots with better precision than he has in … months, Talbot sailed through 6 shutout innings before giving up an unearned run on an error, HBP, and Raffy Perez letting his runner score. Overall, Talbot finished with 6 2/3 innings, 5 hits (4 singles, 1 double), ONE walk, and SIX strikeouts. And his 64:30 strike-to-ball ratio is something that you'd actually use as evidence of good performance. (Note how I have clevely omitted Fausto's.)

Still, here is a nagging thought I am having about Talbot's first win since JUNE. It does seem perfectly reasonable to contend that Talbot's command was better in this start than it had been since about mid-July:

July 17: 5 IP, 1 ER, 2 BB 4 K
July 24: 5 2/3 IP, 5 ER, 1 BB, 8 K
July 29: 2 IP, 1 ER, 4 BB, 1 K (to DL)
Aug 14: 4 IP, 4 ER, 3 BB, 2 K
Aug 19: 4 2/3 IP, 2 ER, 4 BB, 2 K
Aug 25: 6 IP, 6 ER, 3 BB, 2 K
Aug: 30: 5 IP, 5 ER, 3 BB, 2 K

In each of his last five starts, Talbot had walked MORE guys than he'd struck out. Not even the same number, but strictly more. Of course, a good K:BB ratio doesn't mean success in and of itself: see the July 24 game. But it does indicate a combination of "stuff" and "control," especially when combined with runs allowed. I'd say July 17 was Talbot's last Actually Good start. Still, that thought is nagging at me … oh yes, here it is:

Caveat: drawing conclusions about a pitcher based on his result vs. Seattle is a risk.

4) Lambs, sacrificial and otherwise

Meanwhile, Jeanmar Gomez lost against Felix Hernandez largely on the strength of not being Felix Hernandez. He certainly pitched acceptibly well, giving up 7 hits in 6 innings, being touched for 2 runs while posting a 3:0 K:BB ratio. I certainly like zero walks. The lone extra-base hit off Gomez was a solo shot by Russ Branyan, who does that sort of thing. He got some misses (11 in 102 pitches), threw strikes (70:32 strike-to-ball ratio), and completed the 6th inning.

Gomez has made 8 starts thus far this season, and exactly ONE of them was bad. In fact, speaking purely of runs allowed, only one start has been short of excellent: fully SEVEN of them feature 2 or fewer runs allowed. He doesn't go as deep into games as King Felix, so he's not nearly as valuable (or experienced or physically large), but … seriously, that's pretty good stuff.

Caveat: drawing conclusions about a pitcher based on his result vs. Seattle is a risk.

5) Caution: objects in mirror may be further away than they appear

Carlos Carrasco made his second straight Quality Start of the young (for him) season, giving up two runs on 6 hits to the Angels Monday in 6 full innings. Carrasco has flashed some very encouraging signs in his second Kuppa Kawfee, with a low WHIP of 1.13 indicating that he's limiting both hits AND walks. I'm always concerned about walks with a yoot like Carrasco, and last year's disastrous 5-game stint feature three separate games with 3 walks apiece, as well as three games in which he walked at least as many hitters as he struck out. So the fact that he's

posted 4:1 and 6:2 K:BB ratios in his two starts is very encouraging.

When I saw Carrasco last season, I didn't get the impression that he was nibbling, but his command was pretty poor, and he left a lot of pitches in the middle of the hitting zone. His walks weren't due to approach, but rather because he just wasn't all that good at hitting spots in the strike zone. This season, I don't attribute his improvement in the K and BB areas to any sort of newfound "aggressiveness:" he always had that. It's just that he had "aggressiveness" in the manner of a professional boxing opponent leading with his chin:

"Here's my best stuff: see if you can hit it!"
"Um … okay, yeah, I sure can." *bam!*
"Boy, he sure can."

Still, while I don't get to use my "Seattle" caveat for Carrasco's start, let me just say that in his first start he allowed 2 homers in 7 1/3 IP. Against Caliheimgeles, he allowed only 1 homer in 6 innings … but also 2 doubles and 1 triple. That's a lot of extra-base hits in one outing. More troubling, all four extra-base hits were from right-handed hitters (Mike Napoli had both of the doubles).

The sample size is obviously ridiculously small to draw any conclusions, but while a .245 AVG and .288 OBP allowed are perfectly fine numbers, a .531 SLG allowed is scary. In addition, he's currently holding lefties to a .111/.238/.167 line that cannot be sustained by *anyone*, even Randy Johnson.

Ultimately, I'm happy with Carrasco's outings and see him as a viable choice for the 2011 rotation. He may start the year in Clumbus, he may start in Cleveland. But he's no Super Obvious Lock for the bigs, as there are red flags to be found in his two starts this season.

6) Punyball

Talking about the offense Friday and Sunday is pointless (except for one thing, addressed below), so we'll focus on the Saturday and Monday games.

The first run Saturday was one of the smallest imaginable: Shin-Soo Choo walked, stole his 17th base of the sesaon, and scored on a single by Travis Hafner. In the second, Tofu Lou Marson stroked a double to the wall, but he then advanced on a bunt single and scored on another single; Mike Brantley, who had bunted his way on, scored on the third consecutive single (by Choo). Finally, in the 4th, Jason Donald got ANOTHER bunt single, advanced on a groundout to third, then scored on Brantley's single pulled through the hole.

Monday's runs weren't quite as small, but the first two did score on plays that weren't hits: Hafner scored on a sac fly, and Luis Valbuena (yes, Luis Valbuena!) drew a bases-loaded walk off Dan Haren. This was the third consecutive walk allowed by Haren, showing that he had either paused to place his hands in a bowling ball shining machine or had gone temporarily insane. (I cannot think of another reason to walk LUIS VALBUENA on four straight pitches.) The game-winning run was a garden-variety single (by Choo) after a double (by Brantley).

7) By the way

Since the beginning of August, Mike Brantley is hitting .295/.345/.400. This isn't crazy good or anything, but it's arguably the best leadoff hitting we've gotten in quite some time. It also suggests that after an atrocious start, Brantley appears to be capable of holding his own against major-league pitching.

Caveat: small samples either way, and it looked that way last season, too.

8) Terror on the basepaths!

Oh. My. God.

While it is great that Shin-Soo Choo stole a couple more bases and did a fine job igniting a very

cold offense, he was still doubled off TWICE: once on a liner to second when he was on first, and a second time on a fliner hit to LEFT FIELD when he was on SECOND BASE. Yeah, you didn't think he'd catch it, but … don't you have to be a LITTLE more careful than THAT?

Lou Marson wasted one of the actual baserunners allowed by Luke French (he walked three to go with the one hit) by getting picked off by the left-handed French.

Later in the game, Trevor Crowe coaxed a walk off Borowskian closer David Aardsma, and on the first pitch to Brantley, he took off for second. He was … not safe. Brantley then singled … and Asdrubal Cabrera singled … and Aardsma later threw a wild pitch. If you do the math, without Crowe getting Happy Feet, he potentially scores on the wild pitch.

Finally, Cabrera managed to get picked off by first by catcher Jeff Mathis on a Ivan Rodriguez Snap Throw.

For completeness' sake, Tofu Lou went 1-for-2 catching stealers on Monday, and Chris Gimenez went 1-for-3 catching stealers against Seattle on Sunday. (Jeanmar Gomez picked off Chone Figgins in that same game.)

9) Around the bullpen

Generally speaking, each relief pitcher did a fine job that falls under the "but it was Seattle" clause. A few notable exceptions:

a) Tony Sipp entered Saturday's game with two men on base. They were sacrificed to 2nd and 3rd.
Sipp threw back a mighty yawn and struck out Mike Saunders swinging.

b) With two men now in scoring position and two outs, Chris Perez entered the game and struck out Matt Tuiasosopo on four pitches. He then retired the side in order in the 9th for his 18th

save; the last hitter struck out swinging.

c) Raffy Perez was unspeakably bad in that game, giving up 4 hits, including a solo shot by Russ Branyan, who doesn't hit lefties well in general, and recording ONE out.

d) Joe Smiff threw a scoreless inning against the Angels.

e) Jensen Lewis won Monday's game in the third-cheapest way imaginable, facing one hitter and striking him out. (Cheaper ways: being on the mound when runner is called out for a baserunning infraction, Tony LaRussa pulls team off field and forfeits while you're on the mound.)