After retiring the first fifteen Indians in order, Royals' starter Luke Hochevar consulted with pitching coach Great Cthulhu and went completely insane, coughing up 4 runs in an inning punctuated by two of the more egregious balks you'll ever see. This allowed Justin Masterson to win his fourth game after a very shaky first inning, and the Tribe tacked on enough insurance runs to weather Tony Sipp's first meltdown of the season.

Also, Jack Hannahan.

No, really.

Jack Hannahan.

Don't worry, it doesn't make sense to Buff, either.

FINAL

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4

5

6

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Indians (13-5)

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Royals (11-7)

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1

W: Masterson (4-0) L: Hochevar (2-2) S: C. Perez (6)

Both teams' pitchers combined to throw 144 pitches out of the strike zone for a 57% strike rate, which, on a scale from 1 to shitty, is shitty.

1) What an odd, smelly material you've chosen for your bookends!

I wrote briefly last time Justin Masterson pitched about the fact that Masterson hasn't really faced a lot of adversity yet:

At some point, it will be necessary to see how Justin Masterson adjusts to adversity, whether this is not having his best stuff, falling behind early, having the defense fail behind him, an extraordinary performance from the opponent, a few flat pitches with rotten location, or a combination of all of them.

Well, let's run down the list:

a) Not having his best stuff

Here, I'm going to include things like "command" and "throwing the ball remotely close to the strike zone." Masterson walked 5 batters in 6-plus (the plus stands for Extra Fail!) innings and 61 strikes in 103 pitches overall, and fell behind a number of hitters who didn't simply pound the first pitch, which Masterson laid into the heart of the zone with distressing frequency.

Not only is 5 walks atrocious by itself, it yields a dismal 3:5 K:BB ratio, and Masterson couldn't even generate his customary ground balls, ending with an 8:7 GO:FO ratio that is buoyed by a double play.

b) Falling behind early

Luke Hochevar mowed down the Tribe in order in the top of the first, while Masterson coughed up a run in the first three batters en route to a 2-run first. He was awfully fortunate to escape with only a 2-run deficit: he left the based loaded, and tried very hard to walk in a third run.

He had Matt Treanor, a poor hitter, down 0-2, then threw three straight out of the strike zone to fill the count.

He was able to get Treanor to pop out to end the inning, but … look, Matt Treanor isn't any good.

After this, of course, Hochevar gave up nothing whatsoever through 5, so Masterson was pitching from behind most of the night.

c) Having the defense fail behind him

Well, no. This one doesn't apply. This is a separate bit of happiness altogether, but it doesn't apply.

d) An extraordinary performance from the opponent

Hochevar applies.

e) A few flat pitches with rotten location

Batters came into the game with a total of 3 extra-base hits off Masterson, all doubles. Alex Gordon tripled on the first pitch he saw as the third batter of the game.

That was the only pitch that Masterson got really punished on, though.

One way to look at all this is to consider Masterson's first and last innings (considering the 7th as his last despite no batters being retired) as the "bookends" of his start.

Those "bookends" were pretty friggin' bad, what with 3 hits, 2 walks, and 2 runs in the first, and a pair of walks in the 7th.

In between, Masterson threw 40 of 60 pitches for strikes, giving up 3 singles and 1 walk in 5 innings of work. In each of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th innings, he recorded two outs via the ground ball, and faced one over the minimum because.
In the 5th

, he hit Chris Getz, probably mistaking him for a White Sok, but retired the next three.

And while he did inexplicably walk Treanor on four pitches in the 6th after a mound visit from Nyarlathotep, he made it through that inning unscathed as well.

I mean, those five innings were pretty darned effective. So while the overall performance bordered on “poor but lucky,” it’s at least encouraging to see that Masterson doesn’t necessarily *need* favorable situations to pitch well.

2) Evidence of Masterson’s issue with lefties

Kila Ka’aihue was 2-for-2 with a a walk off Masterson to raise his average to .179.

3) The drought

The big story of the game appeared to be Hochevar's flirtation with perfection. By locating and moving his pitches around the strike zone, Hochevar didn't just retire the first 15 hitters in a row, but not one of the Indians he retired hit the ball with anything approaching authority in the process. While Hochevar has skill, this would have been a real David Palmer no-hitter.

Now, it was interesting in one respect that Manny Acta's "Big Idea" was to get Hochevar working out of the stretch. This may certainly have contributed to the success the Indians ultimately had in the 6th, but on further thought, this might be the most worthless strategy tip in the history of baseball:

Player: Skip, we just can't get on base against this guy.
Manager: I know just what to do! Just get on base, and then it will be easier to get on base!

I mean, that's circular reasoning, right? If a plan requires you to do something you simply cannot do in order to be successful, is that really a plan?

Lumberjack: My axe won't cut through this tree's iron bark!
Supervisor: Well, just cut through the iron bark, and the inside of the tree will be much softer and easier to cut!

I am reminded of the problem of putting 8 cars in 7 garages.

4) Leadoff 2.0

When is it a good idea to have a guy with a .413 OBP hitting 7th?

Well, the quick, dismissive answer is “in April, when guys who aren’t really .413 OBP guys will have OBPs of .413.” .413 is awfully high for anyone, and Mike Brantley is unlikely to finish the season with this OBP.

But it seemed like an awfully nice thing to have in the top of the 6th when Brantley, somewhat accustomed to leading off an inning, led off against Hochevar and lined a clean single to center to break up the perfect game (and no-hitter, obviously).

I’m not going to get into some psychological investigation of whether the subsequent balk rattled Hochevar to the degree that he was all but stripping naked and running in circles, but certainly the hit and Brantley’s baserunning threat had some impact.

Brantley got to lead off the next inning as well and drew a walk after fouling off a 3-2 pitch. For the game, he reached base three times in five trips to the plate.

5) Everybody hits!

It's noteworthy enough when everyone in the lineup gets on base at least once, so I usually … well … note it. Sure enough, Grady Sizemore was the only Cleveland player without a hit, but he did draw a walk in his 5 trips to the plate.

But it's that much more noteworthy in that the Indians did not actually even START playing offense until the sixth inning, meaning that the other 8 players each got a hit IN THE LAST FOUR INNINGS. Asdrubal Cabrera, Travis Hafner, and Jack Hannahan got 2 apiece!

6) Small Sample Size Theater

After blasting a two-run double down the right-field line off Tiny Tim Collins, Hannahan is now hitting 7-for-12 against left-handed pitching on the season, with 2 singles, 3 doubles, and 2 homers. This adds up to a .583/.643/1.333 slash-line that defies belief.

Over the previous three years, Hannahan hit .223/.309/.364 off right-handers, but an unsightly .198/.284/.264 off lefties in 197 AB. This is why he normally sits against left-handed starters, and why opposing managers want left-handed relievers to face him.

So has Hannahan turned some Magic Corner in his career? Of course not. But he's been hot against lefties, and it's fun to watch, so why ask for more than that?

7) A Parade of Blunderbi

After Masterson walked the first two hitters of the 7th inning, Raffy Perez came out to face the lefty Alex Gordon. He immediately started Gordon off with two pitches out of the strike zone.

Fortunately, he was able to compose himself and retire Gordon on a 2-1 fly out.

Vinnie Pestano then came in to face the dangerous righty Billy Butler. He immediately started him with two pitches out of the strike zone.

Fortunately, HE was able to coax a fly out as well.

However, he then walked Jeff Francoeur on five pitches, which borders on the absurd.

With the bases loaded, Pestano got Mike Aviles to strike out looking, but Pestano ended up throwing more balls (7) than strikes (6) in all.

Joe Smiff then started the next inning by falling behind Kila Ka'aihue 3-1 before getting HIM to fly out on a pitch that may have been ball four (on a full count, though). He then struck out Matt Treanor on a pitch out of the strike zone, proving that the worst that can happen when you throw Matt Treanor a strike is nothing at all.

And then Tony Sipp. Oh, my goodness. He walked Chris Getz on five pitches and somehow got Billy Butler to pop out on a 3-2 pitch after falling behind 3-1.

A couple of the strikes he DID throw were … low-quality.

An RBI double to Melky Cabrera and a home run to Francoeur ON AN 0-2 PITCH!

(It was grooved.)

His strike-to-ball ratio was a lousy 13:9.

Chris Perez threw three pitches, two for strikes. While he doesn't belong under this heading, I was awfully tired of Cleveland relief pitchers at that point.

8) Pet Peeve

I understand the Save Rule, and with the score 7-5 with two outs, the tying run was on deck when Chris Perez retired Aviles. It was a save, and good for him.

But listen: shouldn't the number of outs you record be at least equal to the number of outs you record? I mean, really now.

9) Signs of life

Carlos Santana drove in a run with a solid RBI single.

Shin-Soo Choo blasted a “fliner” into the gap for an RBI double, then alertly took the extra base when the throw went to the plate. (Well, about 8 feet over the plate, but still.)

Travis Hafner hit a ball the other way for a poke-double down the left-field line.

Both Choo and Hafner drove in runs with two outs.

10) Managerial Second-Guessers

Look, this doesn’t even rise to the level of “Head-Scratcher:” this is admittedly post hoc analysis, even if the thought occurred to me at the time as well. Here is Justin Masterson’s sixth inning:

Foulout
First-pitch flyout
First-pitch single
Four-pitch walk to worst hitter in world
Popout

When Masterson is most effective, he induces ground balls or gets people to miss. None of the outs were on the ground, and he certainly wasn't locating well.

I understand that he had thrown only 90 pitches through 6 innings, he was quite good after the first, and he's been our Ace, but … boy, it doesn't take a lot of foresight or hindsight to suggest he wasn't really "on" at that point.

Bringing him out for the 7th … eh, not my favorite move.

But it beat having Asdrubal Cabrera sacrifice bunt with a 6-2 lead in the 7th.