Nothing like the Devil Rays visiting town for a little late season confidence booster. In todays version of The B-List, Buff examines Paul Byrd's start last night, and his future with the team. He also mentions Grady as a potential MVP candidate, wonders why Jason Michaels is still hitting second, and endorses Garko to hit behind Pronk next season.

Nothing like the Devil Rays to make you feel ept.

1) The intersection of mediocrity and accountability

Consider this outing: 6 IP, 1 R, 4 H (2 XB), 2 BB, 3 K. That's pretty good, right? So take away the first-inning yips, and Paul Byrd threw a nice game. He threw a lot of pitches and wasn't very accurate, but the Devil Rays aren't a very patient lot at the plate and he got people out without much damage.

Of course, you can't take away an inning. If you take away an inning from the Pirates-Astros game last night, the Pirates no-hit the Astros and go to extra innings tied 0-0. They lost 3-0 because all nine innings count. So Byrd, too, must count a lousy first inning in which he gave up a pair of singles, a double, and a homer, stranding a runner on third to avoid more damage than the 3 runs he gave up.

I like Byrd's mouth more than I like his arm at this stage in his career. He has consistently gone out of his way to shoulder the responsibility for losses, even when his outing isn't that poor, and when his outing is that poor, he doesn't shy away from blame or the press. It seems to have infiltrated the rest of the team, too, as I've seen similar interview statements from Westbrook and Lee. It is notable that the two guys I didn't see it from, Jason Johnson and Ramon Vazquez, are not on the roster. Now, I'm not sure how much of this is Byrd and how much of this is Wedge et al: Byrd may simply be reinforcing the team philosophy, but he does it well.

"I can't say enough about my teammates ... it feels good to win, but it's just a small feel-good ... the Cleveland fans have been great; Shapiro put his confidence in me and I felt like I couldn't answer. I have to figure out why and that starts tomorrow, so I can get it done next season."

This having been said, Paul Byrd would, in my opinion, be a lot more successful in the National League. He still has stuff and guile, and he made it through the season (31 starts: raise your hand if you honestly expected the chronically-injured Byrd to make 30+ starts) without any real health issues. For some reason I thought he was older than his listed age of 35.

Anyway, Byrd's an awfully expensive 4th starter, but if you ignore money and consider that his role, we could do worse. I wouldn't mind seeing him traded to the NL, but it wouldn't irk me to see him in an Indians uniform in April 2007, either.

2) It still counts as development even if the player is great and the pitcher is a Devil Ray

With Tampa leading 4-2 in the bottom of the seventh, reliever Shawn Camp had one of those inexplicable pitch sequences that helps illustrate why baseball is such an interesting game:

Strike (looking), Strike (foul), Ball, Strike (looking), Kevin Kouzmanoff got wazoo Strike (looking), Andy Marte hit by pitch

I mean, this guy is in total control, right? In the sixth, he gave up a single but struck out Garko and induced a pair of groundouts. Then he toys with Kouzmanoff, trying to get him to fish at 0-2 before polishing him off, and starts Marte off with a strike. Then he *hits* him. It's not just a game of inches, it's a game of *feet*. He was cruising, then missed about as badly as you can.

So with Grady Sizemore coming to the plate, Tampa manager Joe Maddon brings in lefty specialist Jon Switzer to face the left-handed Sizemore, who has struggled against lefties in his career (and this season). How do I know Switzer is a lefty specialist? Because he holds left-handers to hitting .220 with a .650 OPS, and right-handers tattoo him to the tune of .321 and .912.

Switzer throws one pitch. Sizemore hits one home run. If Sizemore is going to become a legitimate candidate for League's Best Player (something I have seen bandied about), he is going to have to hit left-handed pitching better than he has.

But not better than he did last night.

3) The Bob Wickman Commemorative Save

Rafael Betancourt has been many things this season, but this is the best Really Big Bob

moment I've seen since the man himself. Relieving Matt Miller to start the ninth, Betancourt gave up a single to Binky Zobrist, then a second single to Rocco Baldelli. With two on and the Rays' arguably-best hitter at the plate, Betancourt throws nothing but strikes and gets Carl Crawford swinging in four pitches.

Baldelli stole second on the K, so Betancourt intentionally walked Greg Norton, who is in the process of setting the record for Most Times Looking Pretty Good After Being Washed Up, to load the bases for Ty Wigginton and Jorge Cantu.

Strike (foul), Strike (swinging), Strike (swinging), Wigginton gets wazoo Strike (looking), Strike (swinging), Strike (swinging), Cantu gets wazoo

Six pitches, six strikes, four swing-and-misses, 2 Ks. With the bases loaded. Is that any good?

Is Betancourt reliable? No. But that's a pretty serious save right there, although the trouble was caused by Betancourt himself.

4) I dunno, I think all the ducks on your pond lend it a certain *joie de schmuck*

As implied above, Betancourt stranded three Tampa Bay baserunners, two in scoring position. This actually extended the theme of the game, as Byrd stranded 6, 4 of whom were in scoring position, and Miller stranded 1 in scoring position. In all, Tampa finished with seven guys standing on second or third base saying to themselves, "Damn, we are such Devil Rays."

5) It still counts as development even if the pitcher is a Devil Ray that was cast off by the Royals

We here in Austin have a soft spot for J.P. Howell since he was a Longhorn, and he's actually made some improvements from his stint in KC. He's striking out 7 guys per 9 IP and has a nice 2.36 K:BB ratio. His ERA is over 5, but he did extend a personal scoreless streak to 11 innings before giving up two runs in the fifth.

Those two runs were courtesy of a home run by Andy Marte: this makes two consecutive games with a homer for Marte and his last three hits have been for extra bases. Although his season OBP is still under .300 (and remember how miserably he started), his SLG now stands at .429. After stumbling to a .239/.311/.373 August, Marte has a .244/.306/.526 (!) September to date. 12 of his 19 hits in September have been for extra bases.

He's got a way to go, but I certainly see enough there to understand why he was considered a potentially great player.

6) Have you met my pet? It's a peeve.

Jason Michaels batted second last night. Although he went 0-for-3, he did draw a walk that allowed Ryan Garko's double to be the game-winning hit.

Now, I knew Michaels would be in the lineup against the lefty Howell. And I knew he'd bat second, because Inertia Man still resides at 75 Rote Lane. I just wanted to point out that Joe Inglett went 2-for-4 out of the seven hole.

I dunno. Starting the lineup with two lefties who don't hit lefties very well up against a lefty would have been a pretty weird thing to try. I'm just tired of Michaels, okay?

7) Give me back my F!

Ryan F Garko drove in the winning run last night by hitting a 2-out double off Ruddy Lugo, which I assume is a typo. Ruddy? Come on. Really? Ruddy?

Now look: Garko's sample sizes are pitiful. They're nothing. Not significant. Can't be extrapolated. But Garko is hitting .293/.360/.483, which is a very credible offensive threat.

In "close and late" (whose definition I don't actually know), Garko is hitting .296/.345/.519.

With runners on base, Garko is hitting .305/.367/.474.

With runners in scoring position, Garko is hittting .344/.394/.525.

With men on base and two outs, Garko is hitting .367/.436/.612.

With runners in scoring position and two outs, Garko is hitting .414/.485/.690, for an OPS of 1.175.

I would feel okay with this man batting behind Travis Hafner next season.

8) She turned me into a newt!

Kevin Kouzmanoff has gone hitless in his past five games to drop to .214/.279/.411. It's 56 AB: take what I said about Garko and cube it. Still, if this is a sneak preview of the game show, "Whom Do We Keep?" with Andy Marte as the other contestant, I'm pretty sure I know the ending.

9) Credit Where Credit Is Due Dept.

Jhonny Peralta had a pair of singles. Since the three batters ahead of him in the lineup went a combined 1-for-12 with 0 BB, it did not have much effect, but hits are good.

Matt Miller threw a scoreless inning with a strikeout and pair of grounders. I'd still like a better strike-to-ball ratio than 9:7. Grady Sizemore had two other hits before the home run. He's good.