

Masterson struggles as Tribe shut down Right-hander allows six earned runs in 3 1/3 innings

By Thor Nystrom / Special to MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- The last time Justin Masterson was on the Metrodome mound, he was a part of baseball history that he would probably rather not associate with.

Things went worse this time around.

On May 27, as a reliever for the Red Sox, Masterson threw a wild pitch on a day in which Boston pitchers threw six total, tying a modern baseball record. On Friday night, he allowed seven runs -- six earned -- in 3 1/3 innings as the Indians fell hard to the Twins, 11-0.

"I got myself in a lot of trouble by throwing a lot of balls," Masterson said. "I definitely did not help myself at all by getting in a lot of bad counts, putting guys on base with walks that didn't need to be on base."

Masterson walked five and allowed six hits, abruptly halting a recent stretch in which he had been stellar, with only one run allowed in his previous 14 innings.

"It's always frustrating in general when you do bad, but you are working off some momentum," Masterson said. "It's like taking a few steps forward and taking one back. I think the key is to learn something from this outing, continue on and get better the next time I go out."

"Masterson was misfiring a little bit all over the place, but he's got filthy stuff," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "His ball's moving all over the place with cutters and velocity and movement. You wonder if it's going to be one of those games where we have opportunities and don't get it done. But the guys kept getting after it and stayed in the dugout and were into it. Finally, we broke through and scored some runs and beat the ball around after that pretty good."

In his second start with the Indians -- he allowed one earned run over four innings against the White Sox last Saturday -- Masterson's pitch count increased from the low 60s to the low 80s. Unfortunately, he needed 83 pitches to record 10 outs against the Twins.

"I think he's still learning what he needs to do as a starter," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "He's still building himself up. I think once we get beyond this pitch count, it's going to help us, too. He was pushing 83 today, so he's looking at 95 or 100 next time. You're always thinking about that when you're out there. He's a horse. He has good stuff. There's every reason to believe he is going to be fine. So we need to stand behind him and keep giving him the baseball. He'll keep getting better."

"I think there is something that kind of looms over when you know there is a pitch count out there," Masterson said. "But you have to put that behind you. Whether you have that or not, you have to throw strikes. That's really what it comes down to."

Twins starter Scott Baker tossed a shutout, allowing only two hits and no walks. Baker struck out five.

"He pitched a great ballgame," Wedge said. "Sometimes those games can be tough. When you get a lead like that, you can lose your focus or change the way you pitch, and he didn't."

Baker improved to 3-0 against the Indians. He has held the Tribe to two earned runs in 23 innings, an ERA of 0.78.

"In the past, we've gotten him a few times, but I think he's a better pitcher now," Wedge said. "I think he's a young pitcher that is getting better."

It was a short night for Wedge, who was ejected in the sixth inning. Home-plate umpire Bob Davidson called out Justin Morneau on a check swing, prompting Gardenhire to request an inspection of the ball. After the umpires huddled, they ruled that Morneau had made contact.

Davidson called Morneau back to finish the at-bat, which sent Wedge shooting out of the dugout. Davidson turned from Wedge on two occasions, evidently trying to spare the skipper an ejection. When Wedge continued, Davidson tossed him and then went chest-to-chest for a shouting match.

"I honestly had thought [Davidson] called a check swing," Gardenhire said. "Then I saw him signal that the ball hit the dirt. [Third-base coach] Scotty Ullger was saying, 'Foul tip.' I just went and basically said, 'Bob, if you called that a foul tip, then that ball hit the dirt.' He had the ball in his hand, and it had a big dirt spot on it. I walked off the field. You just want to get the call right. It doesn't matter what the score is or anything like that. You've still got to play, and the player deserves to be up there. They got the call right. The ball was a foul tip in the dirt."

Wedge waved off questions regarding the incident after the game.

"It was such a bad call, I'm not even going to comment on it," Wedge said. "Because I'm afraid if I do comment on it, I'm going to say something I regret and I'm just not going to go there."

Baker has two-hitter, leads Twins over Indians

MINNEAPOLIS (AP)—The Minnesota Twins' chances of winning the AL Central get slimmer each day. But on Friday night, Scott Baker and Jason Kubel provided a little bit of hope.

Baker pitched a two-hitter, Kubel homered and had five RBIs and the Minnesota Twins beat the Cleveland Indians 11-0.

Could this be the spark the Twins need to finally make a move in the division?

"I sure hope so," Kubel said. "I think we're all still thinking positive. We all know we're still in this. Until we're done, it's not going to feel like we're out of it."

Baker, who faced three batters above the minimum, received plenty of support from Kubel and Joe Mauer as the Twins pounded out 12 hits and chased Justin Masterson (3-4) after just 3 1-3 innings. Kubel and Mauer each had three hits.

"Great pitching performance. Baker had all his pitches working for him," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "You could see it real early in the ballgame. Just a great performance by him."

The Twins were unable to gain ground on the Tigers, however, as Detroit beat the Kansas City Royals and remain five games in front of Minnesota.

The Twins did most of their damage in the fourth inning, taking advantage of an error and two walks to score six runs.

Joe Crede reached on an error to start the inning and scored on Alexi Casilla's blooper down the right-field line. Mauer, Kubel and Michael Cuddyer drove in the other runs.

Mauer extended his hitting streak to 11 games and raised his league-leading batting average to .375.

Kubel hit a two-run homer in the sixth and drove in five runs for the third time this season.

Masterson, making his second start since being acquired from Boston in the Victor Martinez deal, allowed seven runs and walked five. The right-hander with the side-winding delivery displayed plenty of movement on his pitches, but lacked command.

"I definitely did not help myself at all by getting a lot of bad counts, 2-0 counts, and things like that, putting guys on base with walks and they didn't need to be on base," he said. "I felt strong. It isn't like anything physically felt wrong, I just couldn't put the ball where it was supposed to be and that's unfortunate."

Baker (10-7) allowed six runs in 4 1-3 innings against the Tigers on Aug. 9 in his last start, squandering an early three-run lead and an opportunity to close the gap on the division leaders.

But on Friday he struck out five and needed just 94 pitches in the gem.

Baker said his poor outing against Detroit provided no extra motivation against Cleveland.

"That was the farthest thing from my mind," he said. "To carry my last start into this start would be detrimental. I've learned that over the years through experience."

Cleveland has lost three straight, scoring just one run in the three games. A bad night got worse for the Tribe when manager Eric Wedge was ejected after an animated argument with home-plate umpire Bob Davidson in the sixth inning.

Davidson originally ruled that Justin Morneau foul-tipped strike three into the glove of catcher Kelly Shoppach.

Twins manager Ron Gardenhire argued that the ball hit the dirt first and showed Davidson the ball as evidence. Davidson agreed with Gardenhire, bringing an angry Wedge out to argue.

Wedge and Davidson yelled at each other nose-to-nose at home plate for about 30 seconds after the manger was tossed.

"It was such a bad call, I'm not even gonna comment on it because I'm afraid if I do comment on it I'm gonna say something I regret and I'm just not gonna go there," Wedge said.

Asdrubl Cabrera and Jhonny Peralta had the only two hits for Cleveland.

Baker pitched his first shutout since flirting with a perfect game and tossing a one-hitter on Aug. 31, 2007, against Kansas City. The right-hander induced several lazy flyball outs and is 8-1 since June 1.

NOTES: Delmon Young made all three Twins' outs in the fourth, striking out for the first out and grounding into a double play for the final two. ... Expect the Indians to begin determining which minor leaguers to promote to the majors sometime next week. Wedge said there are a number of players the club would like to observe at the major league level, but there is no rush to get them here. ... Twins SS Orlando Cabrera had his league-leading 22-game hitting streak snapped.

**Wedge likes how infield has taken shape
Cleveland (49-66) at Minnesota (56-59), 4:10 p.m. ET**

Thor Nystrom / Special to MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Indians have experienced plenty of transition this season. One of the few constants over the past three months has been the stalwarts to the left side of first base in the infield.

Since the middle of May, when the club moved Jhonny Peralta to third base, Asdrubal Cabrera to shortstop and began playing Luis Valbuena semi-regularly at second, Cleveland has been able to count on three constants amid a fluctuating lineup.

The trio of steady hands will take center stage in Saturday's game on FOX against the Twins. First pitch is 4:10 p.m. ET. Dick Stockton and Bert Blyleven will call the action.

Indians manager Eric Wedge has been pleased with the club's infield defense, saying that Cabrera has become more comfortable at short and citing a recent double play started by Peralta as evidence of the veteran's acclimation to the hot corner.

Valbuena, acquired from Seattle in December in the Franklin Gutierrez trade, was a key to the infield shuffling. He was promoted on May 2 and became a regular less than two weeks later.

"We felt like Valbuena was going to be able to stick up here and we felt like he was going to handle himself to where he could continue to get better and learn," Wedge said. "We just felt like we could be stronger up the middle with Cabrera and Valbuena. With Jhonny, if we could just commit to him playing third base and not move him around, I thought he would be a pretty good third baseman and maybe even help him offensively, rid him of that uncertainty, rid our ballclub of that uncertainty and just commit to it."

Peralta has hit much better while playing third base, entering Friday's game batting .277 with a .769 OPS (on-base plus slugging) in 63 games at the hot corner and .242 with a .643 OPS in 40 games at shortstop. He committed his 13th error of the season on Friday, however, and has committed five since the All-Star break.

Cabrera has turned into a legitimate offensive weapon, batting .310 with a .809 OPS. Valbuena has been passable offensively as a 23-year-old in his first full season in the Major Leagues, batting .241 with a .713 OPS.

While the on-the-fly defensive transitions have gone as well as could have been hoped, Wedge said the club didn't consider breaking Spring Training with Cabrera at short and Peralta at third.

"Jhonny had been there for a long time and Asdrubal is such an outstanding second baseman as well," Wedge said. "We needed to let that play out a little bit more. Valbuena, we felt, needed a little bit more time before we got him up here. We feel like the timing is right. I think it's worked out well."

Pitching matchup

CLE: LHP David Huff (6-6, 6.72 ERA)

In his last start -- against the White Sox on Sunday -- Huff ran into some early trouble, allowing three runs in the second inning, but he recovered from there to keep his team in the ballgame and earn a victory. Huff lasted 6 1/3 innings, allowing four runs on eight hits. He tossed at least six innings for just the sixth time in 16 starts this season, his rookie campaign. Huff has faced the Twins twice this year, and he has not fared particularly well against them, having gone 0-2 with a 10.24 ERA. He pitched against the Twins just two starts ago and surrendered seven runs on 11 hits in 4 2/3 innings.

MIN: RHP Anthony Swarzak (3-5, 5.44 ERA)

Swarzak lasted just one inning in his last start, a forgettable appearance against the Tigers in which the rookie gave up seven runs on eight hits. He was pulled in the second inning after giving up a pair of base hits to the first two runners. Swarzak gave up a pair of home runs in the first inning, as he picked up the fifth loss of his young career. The righty is 0-1 against Cleveland this season, as the Indians got the best of him in his third career start, scoring six runs off Swarzak in four innings.

Tidbits

Wedge was ejected on Friday for the fifth time this season and 28th time of his career. ... Wedge said the organization began talking earlier this week about who could be promoted when rosters expand on Sept. 1. ... Wedge on ballyhooed prospect Matt LaPorta: "I think some people need to understand that this guy hasn't had a great deal of Minor League time. This is a tough game. It's hard. This is the highest level that there is. It's just not that easy. Matt is making use of his time down there. It's valuable time. It's everyday at-bats. It's experience at first base, experience in the outfield, experience with different situations. The more you do that down there, the more you are going to be prepared up here and hopefully less of a fight when you get up here. Matt is going to be up here sooner rather than later, but I think what you have to do is look at the big picture, do what you feel is best for him and his future and development." ... Guest edition of "Excruciating Minutia of the Day": Wedge was sporting a new haircut. He braved rival boundaries and got a trim in the Twin Cities prior to Friday's game.

Marte trying to transfer success to Majors

Cleveland (49-65) at Minnesota (55-59), 8:10 p.m. ET

By Matt O'Donnell / MLB.com

CLEVELAND -- Andy Marte is one of the first to take the field and one of the last to leave.

Whether it's taking ground balls at first base or taking extra swings during batting practice, Marte is one of the hardest-working members of the Indians. But his work ethic has never been in question; it's been his struggle to hit Major League pitching that has drawn criticism.

When the Tribe begins a three-game road trip Friday against the Twins, Marte will try to show his critics he belongs in the Majors.

"His work ethic has never, ever, at any time he's been here, been a question," hitting coach Derek Shelton said. "I think for anyone, it's an adjustment coming up to the big league level, and he's still working through some things."

The 25-year-old Marte was hitting .327 with 18 home runs and 66 RBIs in 82 games for Triple-A Columbus before being called up July 28 to replace Ryan Garko, who was traded to the Giants the day before.

The plan was for Marte to get an extended look in the Majors to see if he could perform better than he had during four previous stints. But the results thus far have been underwhelming.

Entering Thursday, Marte was hitting .200 with no homers and three RBIs in nine games.

"I'm going to be OK," Marte said. "The pitching here is different. I just need to get back to my approach here in the big leagues."

In 183 games at the Major League level, Marte is hitting .210. But he said he's a different player than he was during the other stints in the Majors.

"I feel a lot better," Marte said. "I'm not swinging at bad pitches and I'm being patient."

And to be fair, Marte's playing time has been a bit spotty. He has been playing about two out of every three games, while also trying to learn a new position.

One thing is for sure, as long as Marte continues to work, he's going to continue to play.

"He's going to continue to get consistent at-bats," Shelton said. "We need to make sure he knows what his approach is and things that made him successful down [in the Minors]."

Pitching matchup

CLE: RHP Justin Masterson (3-3, 4.22 ERA)

Masterson went as far as he was allowed to go when he made his first start since May 17 on Saturday against the White Sox. He was on a set pitch count between 60 and 65 pitches, and he threw 61 pitches in four innings before being pulled to start the fifth. Masterson allowed one run on four hits while striking out four and walking one, and he looked the part of a future starter in the Indians' rotation. Before Saturday's start, Masterson had made 22 consecutive appearances out of the bullpen, with 21 coming as a member of the Red Sox and one with the Indians. The 6-foot-6, 250-pound righty has faced the Twins only once, throwing 2 1/3 innings of relief and allowing no runs on two hits. Indians manager Eric Wedge expects Masterson to be stretched out to between 75-80 pitches this start.

MIN: RHP Scott Baker (9-7, 4.85 ERA)

While Baker had been the most consistent starter for the Twins in the second half, he suffered a hiccup in his past start against the Tigers. Having allowed just one hit over his first three innings, Baker gave up six runs on eight hits over the final 1 1/3 innings he threw on Sunday. The 4 1/3 innings marked Baker's shortest start since July 7, when he pitched just three frames against the Yankees. Baker said it was a lack of adjustments on his part that caused the trouble, and Minnesota will see if he can get back on track against Cleveland. Baker is 2-0 with a 1.29 ERA in two starts against the Tribe this season.

Tidbits

Infielder Andy Cannizaro, who was on the disabled list in Columbus, was traded to the White Sox on Thursday for cash considerations. ... Scott Barnes, the pitcher acquired in the Garko trade, won his debut for Double-A Akron on Wednesday. He pitched five innings, allowing two runs on four hits with six strikeouts and no walks. He is 1-0 with a 2.55 ERA in five starts in the Minors since the July 27 trade. ... With a hit Thursday, Asdrubal Cabrera has now hit safely in 19 of his past 21 games.

Indians notebook

Sheldon Ocker

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"There was nothing predetermined," he said. "We just knew it was a possibility."

What finally triggered the change?

"We felt that Valbuena was going to stick up here," Wedge said. "And we felt the moves would make us stronger up the middle with Cabrera and Valbuena. We thought if we could commit to Jhonny at third and get rid of the uncertainty, he'd be able to help us there."

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But does watching others play help him learn?

"If you're getting something out of each day, and you should, you have a chance to stay here," Wedge said. "If you're not, you should be somewhere else."

FARM FACTS — Hector Rondon (4-2, 2.38 ERA) gave up one earned run (four total) and seven hits in 62/3 innings, as Columbus defeated Indianapolis 7-6 in Class AAA. Jason Donald had three hits. . . . Tim Fedroff had a triple, single and two RBI, and Doug Pickens hit a three-run homer in Kinston's 10-8 win over Lynchburg in Class A. . . . T.J. McFarland (7-4, 3.75 ERA) threw six scoreless innings, giving up three hits, as Lake County blanked Augusta 3-0 in Class A. . . . Brett Brach pitched 51/3 shutout innings, but Mahoning Valley lost 2-1 to Brooklyn in Class A.

Indians snooze, lose to Twins

By Sheldon Ocker

MINNEAPOLIS: It was only the sideshow. But it gave Indians fans who hadn't already dozed off in front of their high-definition screens a reason to stay awake a few minutes longer.

It certainly didn't alter the result, an 11-0 beating administered by the Minnesota Twins on Friday night at the Metrodome, but a few moments of melodrama can't hurt.

Justin Morneau was batting for the Twins in the sixth inning, runner on first, nobody out, Tribe trailing 9-0. Tomo Ohka delivered a two-strike pitch. Morneau swung, getting a small piece of the pitch but fouling it into Kelly Shoppach's glove for strike three.

That's the way plate umpire Bob Davidson saw it and called it. Morneau walked back to the dugout. Twins manager Ron Gardenhire walked out of the dugout to speak with Davidson. Gardenhire thought the foul tip bounced in the dirt. Davidson appealed to first-base umpire Wally Bell, who agreed with the skipper.

Morneau, who hadn't argued, trotted out of the dugout and back to the plate. Indians manager Eric Wedge took the matter up with Davidson and after a minute or so was ejected.

That's when the manager and the umpire went nose to nose. You could almost see the words flying from their mouths, as they yelled at one another simultaneously.

"It was such a bad call, I'm not going to comment," Wedge said. "If I do, I might say something I regret. I might go somewhere I want to go but shouldn't go."

And that was it. Ultimately, these were the stats: Wedge's fifth ejection of the year and 28th of his career. And you can believe that Wedge's irritation wasn't triggered merely by an umpire's call that went against him in a game his team had no chance to win.

It's the team, itself, that sparked Wedge's anger. At least the team that was a no-show Friday night, as in no pitching, no hitting, no chance.

Justin Masterson began the evening badly by giving up three runs in the third inning, two on Morneau's RBI single, one on Jason Kubel's run-scoring hit. Kubel went on to have a career night, driving in two more runs with another single and launching a two-run homer off Ohka in the Wedgeless sixth.

"He's still learning what to do as a starter," Wedge said of Masterson. "He was at about 82 pitches tonight, so he's looking at 95-100 next time. You think about that [a rigid pitch count] when you're out there."

Masterson was limited to no more than 65 pitches in his last start (first as a member of the Indians) after mostly pitching in relief for the Boston Red Sox.

Was he worrying about wasting too many pitches?

"That doesn't really creep into your head," Masterson said. "But something kind of looms over you when you're on a pitch count. Whether you are or not, you still have to throw strikes."

The problems that Masterson suffered in the third inning were only the opening act. He failed to survive the fourth, which began ominously with Jhonny Peralta letting Joe Crede reach on an error at third. But Masterson can't blame Peralta for much of his trouble.

After striking out Delmon Young, Masterson threw a wild pitch, gave up an RBI single to Alexi Casilla then walked two batters, which triggered his exit.

"It wasn't too hard to see that command was the problem," Masterson said. "I really got in a lot of trouble by throwing so many balls. I felt strong. There was nothing physically wrong. And I had a good game plan, but you have to execute the game plan."

Enter Jess Todd, who allowed a two-run single to Joe Mauer, two more hits, including Kubel's two-run single, and a hit by Michael Cuddyer that scored another run.

If you're keeping score at home, 11 Twins batters came to the plate in the fourth, and six scored. Masterson was charged with six earned runs (seven total) in 31/3 innings. In addition to allowing six hits, he walked five.

Todd limped through the rest of the inning. He was charged with two runs, four hits and a walk, retiring two batters on a double play.

Neither Masterson nor Todd gave the kind of performances likely to turn around an angry fan base that has serious issues with the recent trades that have brought 11 new faces to the Indians, among them Masterson and Todd.

The only thing Tribe batsmen accomplished was to deny Scott Baker a no-hitter. That's because Asdrubal Cabrera doubled leading off the fourth, and Peralta singled with one out in the seventh.

"My hat's off to Baker," Wedge said. "He pitched a great game. In [blowout] games like that you sometimes lose focus, but he didn't."

So Baker had to settle for a two hitter, but he'll get over it.

Wedge says infield changes for best

By Sheldon Ocker

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A few left to move up to Tribe

By Sheldon Ocker

MINNEAPOLIS: What does a big-league team do when it comes time to call up featured minor leaguers, and they've already arrived?

To some extent, that's the position the Indians are in. September is when rosters can be expanded to 40, and traditionally an organization's best Triple-A players (and maybe one or two in Double-A) are promoted for the last month of the season.

But in the case of the Tribe, many of Columbus' finest — Trevor Crowe, Chris Gimenez, Andy Marte, Wyatt Toregas and Jess Todd — already hold roster spots with the parent club.

Even so, there are other Triple-A players likely to be called up on Sept. 1. The most obvious candidate is left-fielder/first baseman Matt LaPorta, who played 13 games with the Indians earlier in the season.

The fans have been calling for his return and wonder why the team is taking so long to bring him to the big leagues.

"People need to understand that this guy hasn't had a lot of minor-league time yet," manager Eric Wedge said Friday. "This is valuable time for a player. It means more at-bats, it means more time at first base and in the outfield. The more time down there, the better prepared he will be when he does get up here."

Wedge won't say whether LaPorta will be called up in September, but it's almost certain that he will be.

"Matt will be here sooner than later," Wedge said. "But we have to do what's best for him."

After Ben Francisco was traded to the Philadelphia Phillies as part of the Cliff Lee deal, there was a roster opening that went to Crowe instead of LaPorta. The reason: With Francisco gone, Crowe was the only viable backup for Grady Sizemore in center.

Moreover, because Marte had an excellent season at Columbus, Tribe officials felt they had to give him one more look before he ran out of options at the end of the season. The only place to play Marte was first base, where LaPorta seems to be headed.

Asked if LaPorta was ready to stick on a big-league roster the first time he was summoned from Triple-A, Wedge said: "At some point in time I think he would have had to go back down. Almost everybody does."

Where does LaPorta need the most work?

"It's not really one area over another," Wedge said. "Experience is important. He needs more at-bats. He handled himself well in the outfield in spring training, but it's the offensive side that's the toughest to master."

Wedge and General Manager Mark Shapiro have only begun talking about September callups.

"We don't want to call someone up just to call him up," Wedge said. "We're scheduled to talk about it more seriously next week."

Commentary: Tribe's Cabrera gaffe contributed to slow start

By Jim Ingraham JIngraham@News-Herald.com

This just in: Asdrubal Cabrera is a sensational shortstop.

You know it. I know it. Any scout you talk to knows it.

Why, then, were Cabrera's bosses the last ones to figure it out?

In a season filled with bizarre decisions by Indians management, perhaps none was so indefensibly wrong-headed than the decision to play Cabrera — the best shortstop on the major-league roster by yards, not feet — at second base for the first half of the season.

Even opposing teams were scratching their heads over that one.

"I see they've got Cabrera at short now," said Texas manager Ron Washington earlier this week, with just a hint of "what took 'em so long?" in his voice.

"I knew he was a shortstop, so I thought it was kind of weird they were playing him at second," said Rangers shortstop emeritus Omar Vizquel.

"Wait until you see him play short," a scout told me in spring training two years ago. "He could be as good as Vizquel."

Everyone, it seemed, knew how good Cabrera was at shortstop and couldn't wait to see him play there.

Everyone, that is, except for Indians management.

In one of the great bafflements of 2009, Tribe officials played the first half of the season with the best shortstop on their roster playing second base. Instead of playing their best shortstop at shortstop, they went with Jhonny Peralta, whose feathers they apparently didn't want to ruffle.

This was curious decision-making on a number of fronts.

Shortstop is the premier defensive position on the field. It's the position that has the most potential for impacting the game.

Superior defensive shortstops have more opportunities than any other defenders to turn potential hits into outs, which shortens innings and helps keep pitchers' pitch counts down, which helps give the pitchers the chance to pitch deeper into games and, by definition, gives their teams a better chance to win those games.

Why would you not want to play your best shortstop at shortstop?

When building your defense, that's the first piece that goes into place. It's beyond a no-brainer.

Especially for a team such as the Indians, when considering the makeup of their pitching staff. As the Indians launched into the 2009 season, they had a pitching staff filled with sinkerball pitchers.

Sinkerball pitchers tend to throw a lot of sinkers. Sinking fastballs tend to produce a lot of ground balls.

To infielders.

To shortstops.

Nevertheless, the Indians chose to start the season with a shortstop that has the range of the Bob Feller statue, playing behind a pitching staff filled with sinkerballers.

The company line on going with Peralta at shortstop instead of the far superior Cabrera was the astonishing "He (Peralta) makes all the routine plays."

That may be the lamest defense of a poor defender in major-league history.

Especially when talking about shortstop, a position that by its very nature presents so many opportunities to impact games.

The Indians had this one thought out all wrong right from the start.

They had it thought out all wrong, ironically, at a time when following the offseason trade with the Cubs to acquire Mark DeRosa, it couldn't have been set up more perfectly for them to get it right.

DeRosa was a second baseman for the Cubs. The obvious move for the Indians was to play DeRosa at second, move Cabrera to short and move Peralta to third.

Instead, the Indians got it all wrong, and as a result, when the season started none of the three players were playing their best positions.

Peralta, whose best position is third, was playing short. DeRosa, whose best position is second, was playing third. And Cabrera, whose best position is short, was playing second.

And you wonder why the Indians got off to such a lousy start?

It wasn't until the Indians traded DeRosa, the guy who should have been playing second but was playing third, that the Indians finally moved Peralta, the guy who should have been playing third but was playing short, to third base. And they then moved Cabrera, who should have been playing short but was playing second, from second to short.

It was then the Indians started to play better.

And it's no coincidence the Indians started to play better when they moved their best shortstop to — eureka! — shortstop!

The end result of this infield merry-go-round is one giant chunk of irony.

While Indians officials proudly, and rightfully, trumpet the virtues, ability and wizardry of their new shortstop, they also, inadvertently, call attention to their own inexplicable foot-dragging in finally moving him there.

Yes, Cabrera really is an elite defensive shortstop.

He is now, and he would have been in April and May as well.

How come we had to wait until June and July, when the season was down the drain, for it to happen?

New Batting Helmet to Get Test in High School All-Star Game

By DAVID WALDSTEIN

Major league players who are curious to see Rawlings's new S100 helmet in action can tune in Sunday to see high school stars model the new protective lid in a game. The helmet will be worn by players participating in the Aflac All-American High School Baseball Classic at Petco Park in San Diego. It will be broadcast on FOX Sports Net Sunday at 2 p.m. Eastern.

Although the new helmet has been shown to be safer than previous models, some major league players have expressed concerns over its bulkiness and fear it could be uncomfortable or look awkward.

The new helmet, recently developed by Rawlings, has been tested by the independent National Operating Committee on Standards for Sports Equipment (NOCSAE), and proved to withstand pitches at 100 miles per hour, well surpassing the 60-m.p.h. standard set by NOCSAE.

It has the hard polypropylene padding of a bicycle helmet and a special mesh insert that makes the shell more rigid. But it is larger than current helmets because it has to accommodate the extra padding.

Rawlings spent four years developing the helmet (at least two years more than it usually spends working on a new model), trying to combine the added safety feature with style and comfort, a not-too-easy task, they say.

"To get all three of those right is the key," said Art Chou, the vice president for hard goods for Jarden, the parent company of Rawlings. "To get it where it performs the way you want it to, looks the way you want it to, and feels the way you want it to. This one was more challenging."

Many major leaguers are wary of the size of the helmet, but Rawlings is hoping that, over time, it will become more accepted. In the meantime, the company plans to introduce it to the lower levels of the game - high schools, colleges and the minor leagues - with the hope that those players will grow accustomed to it and then bring it to the majors with them when they get there.

"I think potentially, at the minor league level, we could have greater participation," said Mike Thompson, Rawlings's senior vice president for marketing and business development. "But it will be up to the clubs and how baseball wants to handle it."

Rawlings plans to make the model available to major leaguers in September. After the season, a safety advisory committee made up of union and M.L.B. officials will make its recommendations.

Rawlings supplies all helmets to the major leagues, but players can choose any model they prefer.

New York Times LOADED: 08.15.2009

Scott Baker pitches complete-game 2-hitter in Twins' 11-0 win over Cleveland

By John Shipley

Joe Mauer has entered the torrid zone, and he's bringing the rest of the Twins lineup with him.

The major leagues' best, and hottest, hitter raised his batting average to .375 and spearheaded a 12-hit attack as the Twins drilled the Cleveland Indians 11-0 Friday at the Metrodome.

Mauer entered the game batting .370, ahead of Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki (.358) and Florida's Hanley Ramirez (.353). He finished 3 for 3 with three singles, two walks and two runs batted in, extending his hitting streak to 11 games.

"A couple fell for me," he said.

Everything fell right for the Twins.

Starter Scott Baker (10-7) rebounded from a four-inning start last week in Detroit with a two-hit complete game, and Jason Kubel went 3 for 4 with a walk and five runs batted in as Minnesota won the opener of a three-game series.

The win was just the Twins' fourth in 13 games, but they've won two of their past three and gotten at least seven innings from their starters in all three. The question is whether this is a harbinger for the last 48 games of the season or just another bright spot in an otherwise disappointing season.

With Detroit's 1-0 victory over Kansas City, the Twins remained five back in the American League Central.

"We've still got (about) 50 games left in the season. You can make up a lot of ground in that time," Mauer said. "We learned that last year. We were a couple of games back in the last week and we ended up going to the (one-game) playoff game. We

still have a lot of baseball left."

If they get more starting performances like Baker's, the Twins could be dangerous down the stretch because they're the AL's best-hitting team in August, with a .309 team batting average and scoring 6.25 runs a game.

Mauer is the league's hottest hitter during the month - .469 with three homers, three doubles, 10 runs scored and 15 RBIs.

"It's crazy," Kubel said. "I mean, you almost expect him to get a hit every at-bat."

Kubel's two-run blast in the sixth gave Minnesota an 11-0 lead. At that point, only two Indians had reached base, leadoff hitter Grady Sizemore when he was hit by a pitch and Asdrubal Cabrera on a leadoff double in the fourth inning.

Most of the damage came in the fourth, when the Twins sent 11 batters to the plate and scored six runs on five hits and three walks for a 9-0 lead.

"Once the guys came out and scored a bunch of runs, I was just coming right at hitters," Baker said. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it. I was just throwing it over and letting them swing, and whatever happens, happens. It worked out well tonight."

Mauer, Denard Span and Alexi Casilla each scored two runs, and Justin Morneau drove in two runs with a bases-loaded single in the third.

"It was a great night for us offensively," Mauer said. "We've got some guys who can swing it."

But not like Mauer, who got a standing ovation as he approached the plate for his final at-bat in the eighth inning, when he walked. He's taking direct aim at his third AL batting title in four seasons, and nearly everyone in Friday's announced crowd of 34,845 knows they're witnessing some history.

The catcher, however, said he's not paying too much attention to the batting race. Not yet.

"I've been through a couple of them, you know, and I think it starts getting interesting that last week or so," he said. "Hopefully you're still there."

Minnesota Twins' fate in hands of their starting rotation

By John Shipley

The Twins have a lot of young, live arms who have proven they can be effective major league starters. Right now, however, it's pretty clear they're holding the team back.

The Twins are one solid winning streak from being back in the playoff race, but they haven't had one all season. Their best streak is four, and their best stretch was six of seven at the end of May. The reason, manager Ron Gardenhire said, is the starting staff.

"You look over the course of the long season, the inconsistency of the rotation is why you haven't been on a really long streak," Gardenhire said. "The guys out there have been fighting it a little bit."

The Twins started the season with a rotation composed of guys playing their second full seasons: Scott Baker, 28; Nick Blackburn, 27; Francisco Liriano, 25; Glen Perkins 26; and Kevin Slowey, 25. Before Friday's 11-0 victory over Cleveland they had combined for a 28-35 record and 4.99 earned-run average.

"Second-year jinx, or whatever you guys write - I don't buy into that stuff," Gardenhire said. "But you know what? The league does make adjustments as you go along, and you have to ... adjust to the league, too."

Slowey is out for the season after wrist surgery, and Perkins, demoted to the bullpen, is on the disabled list with a shoulder strain. They have been replaced by veteran Carl Pavano, a trade-deadline acquisition, and Anthony Swarzak, 3-5 with a 5.44 ERA this after spending all of last season in the minors.

Swarzak will start against the Indians this afternoon.

Baker was fabulous on Friday, pitching a complete-game two-hitter, but in his last start he lasted just 4 1/3 innings in an 8-6 loss at Detroit. It's that kind of performance that gives Gardenhire hope that Minnesota can make up a five-game deficit and overtake Detroit to win the American League Central.

"If we can get those guys going, we can run off a streak," he said. "We just haven't been able to do that on a consistent basis all year. But I like these guys, I like the way they throw the ball - and over the long haul they're going to be very good."

Nathan antsy: Joe Nathan hasn't had a save opportunity since July 29, and he's getting antsy.

"If we're winning, it's fine," the Twins closer said. "The tough part is we're not winning and not getting any opportunities. That's the frustrating part."

The Twins entered Friday's game with Cleveland having won only three of their past 12 games, and their victories were 10-1, 11-0 and 7-1. Nathan got to mop up in the last one, a win over Kansas City on Wednesday, and ... well, pretend.

"I was able to at least kind of mimic it being a save situation because we were able to win a game and shake some hands afterward," he said. "I tried to treat that one as a save."

Nathan hasn't pitched in a save situation since he closed down a series sweep of the Chicago White Sox more than two weeks ago.

Strange play: Justin Morneau reached base Friday after being called out on a foul-tip strike, but Gardenhire got the call reversed when he proved to home-plate umpire Bob Davidson that the ball had hit the dirt before being caught by catcher Kelly Shoppach.

"He had the ball in his hand and it had a big dirt spot," Gardenhire said.

Morneau reached on a fielder's choice and scored on Jason Kubel's two-run homer. Cleveland manager Eric Wedge was ejected after arguing about the reversal.

"It was such a bad call, I'm not even going to comment on it because I'm afraid if I do comment on it I'm going to say something I regret," Wedge said.

Briefly: Orlando Cabrera's career-high, 22-game hitting streak ended as he went 0 for 4 with a walk and run scored. The streak, which started with 11 games with Oakland, was the longest split between two major league teams since Heinie Manush's 27-game streak in 1930, split between the St. Louis Browns (18) and Washington Senators (nine).

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Foreign Talent Loads the Bases in Minor Leagues

More Visas Spur Deals From Haiti to India; Korean Teen Scores Big.[Article](#)[Video](#)[Slideshow](#)[Comments](#)[more in US »](#).

By JOEL MILLMAN

BOISE, Idaho -- Like many teenagers spending this summer abroad, Hak-Ju Lee is immersing himself in a foreign culture, making friends and tasting exotic food like moose stew. Unlike most teens, however, he's getting paid three-quarters of a million dollars to do it.

Mr. Lee, 18 years old, is a shortstop, and the culture he is experiencing is American minor-league baseball, where major-league teams develop their talent in small towns across the country.

For decades, minor-league rosters seemed the essence of America's heartland. But thanks to growing numbers of foreign players like Mr. Lee, the minors are fast turning into a veritable United Nations.

The Boise Hawks' Imported Talent [View Slideshow](#)

Sean Flanigan for the Wall Street Journal .Hak-Ju Lee is one of 18 international players on the Boise baseball roster.

The gangly infielder is one of three South Koreans playing this summer for the Boise Hawks, an affiliate of the Chicago Cubs. The Hawks' opening-day roster boasted 18 of 25 players from abroad -- mostly Venezuela and the Dominican Republic -- making it one of the most "imported" of all minor-league teams.

Recent changes in U.S. immigration law and growing competition in baseball for raw talent have allowed the minor-league farm system to flourish with imported players. It has been a home run for globalization, but bad news for U.S.-born players, who suddenly have much more competition. Across the minor and major leagues, the total number of foreign-born players is growing fast, to almost 3,500 of the 8,532 players under contract this summer, from 2,964 three years ago.

Boise Hawks' hitting instructor, Ricardo Medina, a native of Panama who translates at team meetings in what has become almost a bilingual program, notes that Mr. Lee and his Korean teammates are getting something else from their summer in Idaho. "I think they may be learning more Spanish than English," he jokes.

The three South Koreans on the Hawks' roster matches the total number playing at the major-league level. Today, 19 Koreans play in the minor leagues, compared with just seven five years ago.

This summer's crop of foreign players in the minors includes baseball's first-ever pros from India, two of them on the Pittsburgh Pirates' Gulf Coast league team. That league's rosters include players from Honduras, Haiti, Russia and the Czech Republic.

Eight teams have minor leaguers from Brazil, including Fábio Murakami, an outfielder for the Philadelphia Phillies' Williamsport, Pa., minor-league team, the Crosscutters. Mr. Murakami is one of several South Americans of Japanese descent in the minors, a list that includes Claudio Fukunaga and Lucas Nakandakare, both from Argentina and under contract to Tampa Bay.

One Red Sox farm team boasts an even more exotic tandem: the brothers Crew Tipene Moanaroa, called "Boss," and Hohua Moanaroa, called "Moko." Born in New South Wales, Australia, the Moanaroas are believed to be the first members of New Zealand's Maori tribe to play baseball professionally in the U.S. "Boss" is a first baseman. "Moko" plays outfield.

New Zealand's representative in the minors is Scott Campbell. He plays third base for the Blue Jays' Eastern League affiliate, the New Hampshire Fisher Cats.

The surge of young foreign players into the U.S. minor leagues began in 2007, a few months after then-president and former major-league team owner George W. Bush signed the Creating Opportunities for Minor League Professionals, Entertainers and Teams Act, known as the Compete Act. It freed the farm systems of major-league teams from having to compete with all U.S. employers seeking H2B work visas for foreign employees, the supply of which usually was exhausted each year by February. Now, teams can import as many prospects as they want.

"There is no longer a limit on work visas," explains Oneri Fleita, the Florida-born director of minor-league development for the Cubs. "So, yeah, you might see more foreign players getting an opportunity."

The Cubs, who signed Korea's Hak-Ju Lee right out of high school, have become one of the most aggressive signers of foreign players. In 2006, 86 players in the Cubs' major and minor-league system were foreign-born. This year, 142 Cubs are imports.

The changes pose a challenge to American teens hoping to make the big leagues. Instead of signing hundreds of U.S. amateurs out of high school -- the traditional business model for stocking minor-league rosters -- teams are drafting fewer U.S. kids and signing more so-called nondraft free agents, the vast majority of them teenagers from Latin America.

Foreign Exchange See the statistics of the players mentioned in this story:

Hak-Ju Lee (South Korea), Boise Hawks
Fabio Murakami (Brazil), Williamsport Crosscutters
Claudio Fukunaga (Argentina), Gulf Coast League Rays
Lucas Nakandakare (Argentina), Gulf Coast League Rays
Crew Tipene Moanaroa (Australia), Gulf Coast League Red Sox
Hohua Moanaroa (Australia), Gulf Coast League Red Sox
Scott Campbell (New Zealand), New Hampshire Fisher Cats
Eduardo Figueroa (Venezuela), Boise Hawks
George Matheus (Venezuela), Boise Hawks
Eric Gonzalez (Canary Islands), Lake Elsinore Storm

This summer, major-league teams spent over \$70 million signing nondraft free agents from outside the country. That is up from \$54 million last year, and just under \$30 million in 2006, the last year before the Compete Act.

Economics plays a huge role. U.S.-born players drafted out of high school rarely sign a contract to turn pro without a cash bonus, most in excess of \$100,000. This summer, the Cubs have forked out more than \$6 million in signing bonuses to 26 U.S. prospects, an average of nearly a quarter million apiece.

While some foreign players like Mr. Lee got hefty signing bonuses, the majority do not. Latin players in particular can be had for a lot less -- just \$10,000 in the case of Venezuelan pitcher Eduardo Figueroa, one of Mr. Lee's teammates. Third baseman George Matheus, another Hawk from Venezuela, received \$15,000 for signing.

Lifting visa limits creates an opportunity for players like Eric Gonzalez, a 22-year-old Spaniard in the San Diego Padres' farm system. Mr. Gonzalez was the last player drafted by the Atlanta Braves in 2005, when he was a 17-year-old high-schooler in the Canary Islands. But under the work-visa cap then prevailing in baseball, the Braves would have had to release another foreign prospect to sign him, Mr. Gonzalez explains, "or else send me somewhere overseas to play, probably Australia."

So Mr. Gonzalez didn't get a shot, and instead polished his skills at the University of South Alabama. Signed by the Padres after graduating last year, he has already whipped through one level of minor-league competition, winning a promotion from the Fort Wayne TinCaps to the Lake Elsinore Storm in July. But the cash rewards will have to wait. "I signed for \$1,000, before taxes," laughs Mr. Gonzales, one of two Spaniards in the minors this year. "Basically, I signed in exchange for a plane ticket and a work visa."

In the past, visa restrictions meant many foreign prospects were sent to play for sister teams in places like the Dominican Republic and Australia, where they tried to get enough visibility to fill a coveted visa spot. Nowadays, teams figure they can train foreign talent personally, and give youngsters a chance to learn English and assimilate with U.S.-born teammates.

On both counts, South Korea's Mr. Lee is an enthusiastic student. "Stolen base! Slider! Fastball! Right down the middle!" the teenager recently shouted with a smile, demonstrating the English terms he's mastered since arriving in Idaho.

Much like in an exchange-student program, local families host foreign ballplayers, getting season tickets in return. Mr. Lee lives in a suburban home festooned with heads of antelope and deer and other hunting trophies. He has learned to play Rock Band with his 17-year-old host-family "brother," a ballplayer who is entering his senior year in high school.

His typical teenage observation about life in America: lack of sleep. "Bus ride after game from Vancouver?" he groans, feigning fatigue. "Thirteen hours! Oh, my God. Tired!"

Write to Joel Millman at joel.millman@wsj.com

Boras, Strasburg will push deadline before signing

By Gordon Edes, Yahoo! Sports

A few things to know prior to Monday's signing deadline for players selected in the June draft:

- Bud Selig will become U.S. ambassador to Japan before Stephen Strasburg plays any ball there. Adviser Scott Boras reportedly has floated the idea that Strasburg might consider pitching in Japan if he rejects the final offer from the Washington Nationals, the team that made him the No. 1 overall pick. There's a better chance of Strasburg becoming equipment manager for his old college team, San Diego State. It's risky business playing for an independent league team while waiting to be drafted again (see Harrington, Matt). Going overseas and playing in a totally different environment would be insane.
- The pile of money the Nationals place in front of Strasburg will be higher than that given to any previous player in the draft. The Cubs gave Mark Prior \$10.5 million in 2001. It would shock no one if Strasburg doubles that. It's not impossible he triples it. Fifty million? Sure, and give the kid the Lincoln Bedroom, too. Not going to happen.
- Strasburg's decision will come a few minutes before Monday's midnight deadline, or a few minutes after (wink, wink). Not a moment sooner. As of late Friday night, only 14 of the 32 first-rounders had signed. Sleep will be in very short supply this weekend.
- Boras controls the action. This is not a recent development. It's just more obvious this year, as the agent not only has Strasburg, but No. 2 pick, outfielder Dustin Ackley of LSU (Mariners), No. 3 pick, outfielder Donovan Tate of North Carolina (Padres) and three other first-rounders. Tate has a scholarship to play football at UNC but left camp earlier this week, leading to speculation that he was close to a deal with the Padres. But it could be that he just wanted a break from two-a-days.
- We've said it before: Pitchers picked No. 1 overall don't have an impressive track record in the big leagues. Mike Moore's 161 wins are the most by any No. 1; no No. 1 has had a 20-win season. Strasburg may indeed be a once-in-a-generation talent, but they said the same of Prior, too, and he broke down. Of the 13 pitchers previously taken No. 1 (including recent picks David Price and Luke Hochevar), only two, Tim Lincecum and Andy Benes, have won 100 or more games and won more games than they lost. Does that sound like \$50 million well spent to you?
- A hot-button item in the next round of collective bargaining will be a cap on draft bonuses, as well as some kind of slotting system. Guaranteed. Even the small-market teams like Pittsburgh and Kansas City are making a mockery of MLB's slot "recommended" bonuses this year. Teams feel like they need to find a way to rein in runaway bonuses, and while the union has resisted in the past, there are big leaguers who would you tell you it's ridiculous to pay huge bonuses to unproven talents – especially if that money could have been going in their pockets.
- Trading draft picks happens in basketball, hockey and football, and it will happen in baseball, too. It makes too much sense not to. The argument against it is that the big guys – Red Sox, Yankees, Cubs, Dodgers and Angels – will grab all the talent. But they're doing that already by drafting players that slipped to lower rounds for signability issues and giving them bonuses equivalent to what they would have received in the first two rounds. Expect this to be on the table for the next round of negotiations, too.

Short stocking: Since dealing Nomar Garciaparra at the trading deadline in 2004, the Red Sox have handed out salaries totaling over \$90 million to his successors: Orlando Cabrera (\$2M), Edgar Renteria (four-years, \$40M), Alex Gonzalez (\$3M), Julio Lugo (four-years, \$36M), Alex Cora (\$.8.1M as a backup), Jed Lowrie (\$700,000-plus) and Nick Green (\$550,000).

Cabrera was allowed to become a free agent after playing a pivotal role in Boston's run to a World Series title in 2004; Renteria, thought to be a better hitter than Cabrera, was a flop in his one season in Boston, the Red Sox eating over \$11 million of his contract when trading him to Atlanta after the 2005 season. Gonzalez was a defensive marvel in 2006, but he, too, was deemed expendable, the Red Sox letting him go as free agent while seduced by the notion that Lugo would bring more offense. Lugo went into rapid decline, becoming an intolerable defensive liability, and was traded to the Cardinals last month after being designated for assignment, with Boston eating nearly \$12 million of the contract.

Lowrie, the promising rookie, underwent wrist surgery at the start of the season, came back after three months, but is now sidelined with related complications. Green did a serviceable job for a time as backup, but in 34 games since June 25, Green was batting an abysmal .130 with eight RBIs, and the errors were mounting, with 14 in 76 games (71 starts).

So the Red Sox turn back to Gonzalez, acquiring him in a waiver deal from the Reds. At 32, and after undergoing surgery last season for a fractured knee, Gonzalez is not the same player he was in 2006, when he made just seven errors in 475 chances, and he's not hitting at all, coming back with a .211 average. But the Red Sox, who still had Lowrie and thus passed on Cabrera, who went to the Twins, are just hoping that Gonzalez can steady the defense.

Pirate manifesto: Pirates GM Neal Huntington, following up on our earlier item this week about the Pirates' latest overhaul, offered these thoughts. They came before the Pirates were waxed 17-2 by the Cubs on Friday afternoon, not the ideal backdrop for Pittsburgh fans to derive hope from Huntington's message.

"We will not put a timetable on when we will be competitive because we will not concede a single game, let alone an entire season," Huntington wrote in an email. "We believe we are putting in place the elements that the surprise teams typically have (solid starting pitching and defense, a solid core group that performs at or above expected levels, some young players that exceed expectations). As with all mid- to small-market teams, the variable is health.

"As for offering evidence for future results we ask that they look at the young players currently at the major league level as well as the depth we have added to the system. As a result of the draft and recent trades, we have added 22 pitchers (actually added 27 but we lost 5 in trades) since June 5, 2009. Since June 1, 2008 we have added over 60 prospects (not including senior signs or filler players) and/or players currently on our major league club to our system via the draft, international signings, Rule 5 selections and trades. Our system is much improved from the one that was generally ranked among the bottom in baseball in 2006 and 2007.

"While we acknowledge we have traded away some solid major league players, the reality was eight of those players (Jason Bay, Xavier Nady, Damaso Marte, Adam LaRoche, Jack Wilson, Freddy Sanchez, John Grabow, Eric Hinske) would have been free agents after this season (Marte last season) and were very likely to have signed elsewhere, with the Pirates receiving nothing in return. We chose to make the trades to add players to our system and re-invest the dollars saved to baseball operations.

"Lastly, while we recognize the moves have been unpopular, our belief is the fans would prefer to cheer for a winning team over a team that loses but has a few familiar faces. Our sole focus with each of these moves was to best position the Pirates to consistently play meaningful games in September and October."

Fungo hitting: Ken Williams' big play for Jake Peavy may pay off even sooner than the White Sox GM had hoped. Peavy, despite spending over a month in a walking boot to protect the torn tendon in his right ankle, struck out five in three scoreless innings Thursday in a rehab appearance for Triple-A Charlotte, and an end-of-the-month promotion to Chicago appears well within reach, barring a setback. ... The wave of lurid publicity that washed over Josh Hamilton after published photos of a drinking escapade appeared on the Internet did not affect his hitting, at least not in a negative way. Hamilton tore up the Indians in Cleveland, going 9 for 12, and after getting two more hits Friday night against the Red Sox, he is batting .500 (20 for 40) in his last 11 games. ... David Ortiz was anything but the lovable Big Papi in a pregame session Friday night with Boston reporters, giving them an earful for what he termed unfair treatment in the aftermath of reports that his name had appeared on a government list of players believed to have tested positive for steroids. "Let me tell you what I know: I know that I've been tested 18 times," Ortiz said. "Nobody talk about that. Have you heard anybody talking about that? Nobody talk about that. But the bottom line is all people care about is selling bad news. Bad news is what makes the money, but sometimes you've got to sit down and think about things before you make that as a truth. I came out and said what I said. If you want to judge me, it's on you. If you believe me, it's on you too. It's confusing [expletive] but that's how it is. So not too much you can do about it." ... Jump on the Neftali Feliz bandwagon while there is still room. It took Feliz just four appearances to join Nolan Ryan in the Texas Rangers' record book, as he struck out seven consecutive batters over a span of two outings, tying the club record. ... Adding his own touch to the notion of aging gracefully, Rangers shortstop Omar Vizquel has handled 155 chances without an error, the most chances by any position player other than a first baseman. ... With Erik Bedard's shoulder surgery raising questions of whether the Mariners will offer him an extension, the M's stand to reap 11 wins, four trips to the DL and two operations as their haul from last year's trade with the Orioles. The Orioles, in turn, got an All-Star outfielder in Adam Jones, an All-Star closer in George Sherrill (since traded to the Dodgers), a top pitching prospect in rookie Chris Tillman and two other minor league pitchers. Yikes.

Tom Verducci > THREE STRIKES

Ejections on the rise, Nats' error in judgment and Damon's power play Story Highlights

Jump in ejections has to do with plays on the bases, not throwing incidents

The Nationals made a costly error with underachieving Austin Kearns

Yankees' Johnny Damon hitting more fly balls -- and more home runs

1. Does it seem to you that ejections and arguments are way up this year? It might seem that way after a wild past week in which umpires Ed Rapuano (long-distance ejection) and Jerry Crawford (blown gasket) called attention to themselves last weekend, Kevin Youkilis overreacted on Tuesday and four guys got thrown out of games Wednesday afternoon alone. Well, the answer is ... yes, just a bit, thanks to a lot of beefs about plays on the bases.

Through Aug. 11, there were 128 ejections, which at this rate would mean a 14 percent increase from last year. But, no, the increase does not come from throwing incidents or fights and bench-clearing incidents. The big jump is from arguments regarding plays on the bases. Such arguments have led to 33 ejections, already more than such ejections in any of the previous five full seasons. Consider the ejection numbers in the table to the right.

2. With the clock ticking on the Washington Nationals' attempt to sign top pick Stephen Strasburg, the Nats appeared to have lost the chance to come up with another \$3.4 million in savings they could have put toward signing him. According to a major league source, when the Nats put ineffective outfielder Austin Kearns through waivers, another club actually put in a claim for him. Kearns is due the remainder of his \$8 million salary this year and a \$1 million buyout of his \$10 million option for 2010. Kearns is hitting .195 this year and .209 over the past two seasons.

The Nationals could simply have "awarded" Kearns to the claiming team to get out from under the contract, Alex Rios style. But just as Kearns was getting claimed, the Nationals placed him on the disabled list on Aug. 5, retroactive to Aug. 4, with a thumb injury. Once on the DL, Kearns could not be claimed, the source said. "I don't think it's the difference between signing Strasburg or not," the source said of the \$3.4 million, "but it couldn't have hurt."

3. Johnny Damon has become a completely different hitter at age 35, and the obvious explanation is that he has made a swift adjustment to Yankee Stadium III. After year after year of hitting more groundballs than flyballs, Damon suddenly has become a big-time flyball hitter. He is lofting (and pulling) just about everything -- not a bad idea with the shorter porch in the Bronx. Once a threat with his legs by beating balls on the ground, Damon has adopted the hitting profile of such sluggers as Prince Fielder and Russell Branyan. The highlights:

- Damon is hitting fewer grounders and fewer line drives, but hitting flyballs like never before in his career -- a tactic that also explains his career-high strikeout rate.
- Damon has hit 22 home runs this year: 15 of them at home and 19 of them to rightfield.
- Damon has hit 15 homers in 57 games at the new Yankee Stadium. That's already more than what he hit in the previous two years combined at the old Yankee Stadium: 12 homers in 137 games.

Jon Heyman > DAILY SCOOP

With deadline looming, Nationals have a ways to go with Strasburg Story Highlights

It remains a distinct possibility that the sides will not agree by Monday night

There seems to be some extra negativity surrounding these talks

Executives say Strasburg might be worth \$50 million as a free agent

Guesses from a multitude of executives around baseball for ballyhooed/deified No. 1 pick Stephen Strasburg's eventual signing bonus have ranged from \$12 million to \$30 million. Every estimate represents a record bonus.

But here is another possibility: zero dollars.

With only a long weekend to go before the signing deadline, there's no evidence of progress in the negotiations between the rebuilding Nationals and Strasburg's agent, Scott Boras. It's possible the sides will not agree by midnight Monday, and that Strasburg will go unsigned and re-enter the draft pool in 2010.

These big-ticket draft deals almost invariably go down to the last few hours (or minutes), but there seems to be some extra negativity surrounding the Strasburg talks.

Nationals president Stan Kasten didn't return a call, and Boras declined to speak specifically about Strasburg. But Boras, cognizant of the accusation he is slow to agree, did speak generally about the tenor of talks involving his top clients, including six first-rounders this year. "Teams choose to negotiate at a very slow pace," he said. "We merely follow the pace being set."

Only a handful of first-rounders have signed so far, and most of them likely at the parameters of a deal done at draft time. That means the majority of signings will occur in the remaining days or hours before Monday's deadline. Boras' top clients this year include picks No. 1, 2, 3, 9, 13 and 30 in the first round, and while pick No. 3, Cartersville, Ga., high school outfielder Donovan Tate, is thought to be closing in on a deal with the Padres, it's uncertain if any of the others are close. On top of Strasburg and Tate, Boras' other four first-rounders are UNC outfielder Dustin Ackley (Seattle, No. 2), St. Louis high school pitcher Jacob Turner (Detroit, No. 9), USC shortstop Grant Green (Oakland, No. 13), and Gainesville, Fla., Outfielder LeVon Washington (Tampa Bay, No. 30).

The Nationals are thought to be willing to bestow on Strasburg the highest contract ever for an amateur draftee, beating the record \$10.5 million of Mark Prior, who, like Strasburg, is a right-hander from San Diego. Boras client Mark Teixeira is one of a few other American amateurs to have signed for about \$10 million. There appears to be something of a draft ceiling at \$10 million -- so far, anyway.

But Boras sees Strasburg as a once-in-a-generation amateur talent and points out that baseball's revenues are up several fold, to about \$6.5 billion, since Teixeira and Prior signed their deals in 2001. While the economy is in the midst of a recession, baseball continues to thrive. Attendance is down only about five percent this year and revenues may actually be flat or slightly up from a year ago.

Boras has heard the arguments that a big bonus for Strasburg will wreck the system. He counters by pointing out that he once got Ben McDonald \$1 million, which was four times the previous record bonus of Andy Benes, and that didn't change a thing. Teixeira and Prior received their eight-figure bonuses eight years ago, and those didn't lead to a spate of similar or higher bonuses. In fact, Jeff Samardzija and David Price are among the few players to approach that \$10 million figure since.

The Nationals' entire entourage of top decision-makers trekked out to Southern California in recent weeks to make a presentation to Strasburg. But while they may have taken bells and whistles with them, there is no evidence they presented an offer anywhere near the ballpark Strasburg is looking for.

The Nationals will cite the history of previous bonuses, and history has its limits. It also has a mixed record with big bonuses. While pitchers who happened to have been picked No. 1 overall have a rather mediocre record (Mike Moore, Tim Lincecum and Ben Zobler are among the better ones), the history for drafted players who received bonuses of \$5 million or more is almost universally positive, including Teixeira, J.D. Drew, Joe Mauer, Josh Beckett, Price and Rick Porcello. While Prior got hurt, the argument can be made that even he was probably worth that \$10.5 million, if only for a good year or two.

Boras can also try to make a case for Strasburg's extraordinary value by citing rare trades of recently drafted prodigies. For instance, if the Nats were to sign Strasburg, then trade him in a year (draftees cannot be traded for one calendar year), Boras could argue they'd get a haul. Well-regarded recent draftees Andrew Miller and Cameron Maybin brought the Tigers a superstar in Miguel Cabrera. So a case could be made that Strasburg, who's considered far more valuable than either Miller or Maybin, is worth well north of \$10 million. The Tigers wouldn't trade Porcello, a Boras client who signed two years ago with the Tigers for a now-bargain \$7 million, even for superstar pitcher Roy Halladay.

Executives say Strasburg might be worth \$50 million as a free agent. But that is Strasburg's problem: he isn't a free agent.

Word is, Boras has used the bonuses of Daisuke Matsuzaka (\$52 million) and Jose Contreras (\$32 million) as comparables to Strasburg. Matsuzaka didn't have the leverage of more than one team, either, but management people will point out that he was more accomplished, as the top pitcher in the Japan League (while not the major leagues, the Japan League is much higher quality than San Diego State's Mountain West Conference).

Boras, though, will note that Strasburg, who just turned 21, is five years younger than Matsuzaka was when he signed with Boston, and that Strasburg has better stuff than Matsuzaka. Strasburg has been timed at 100 mph and scouts say he has a devastating breaking ball as well. Even a Nationals person said, "He throws 98 and has a legit hammer [curve]." Boras doesn't see why Strasburg should get less than Matsuzaka.

"Major League teams, in the best interest of baseball, must stop penalizing American boys and American families," Boras said. "The fact of being born in the United States should not result in a dramatic diminution of value, even though your talent exceeds that of a talent born elsewhere."

The issue for American players is leverage -- they don't have much of it. Japan seems like a long shot for Strasburg (though technically, Boston's signing of Junichi Tazawa would seem to open that door). While one person close to the San Diego kid (not Boras) said "he likes sushi," that appeared to have been mostly a joke. The more realistic second option to signing would be to sit out the year and try again next year.

Boras has had a few star prospects who took the idle route, such as J.D. Drew and Luke Hochevar, and both earned extra dough by waiting a year. Drew spurned the Phillies' offer of about \$3 million to sign with the Cardinals for \$7 million, and Hochevar spurned the Dodgers' offer of about \$3 million to ink a deal with the Royals that included a \$3.5 million signing bonus and the ability to earn up to \$7 million over four years. Others, like Stephen Drew and Max Scherzer of the Diamondbacks, waited 10 months to sign (that isn't an option this time as the deadline is Monday night).

However, none of the previous highly regarded draftees had an eight-figure offer to consider, as Strasburg surely does. And a case could be made that Strasburg's current leverage diminishes if he returns to the draft in 2010 one year older.

The call, ultimately, will be Strasburg's, Boras said. Some previous clients have insisted on signing, as highly regarded catcher Matt Wieters did when he accepted the Orioles' \$5 million bonus. Boras is not believed to have felt that was the right offer, considering Wieters' all-around ability. That deal now does look like a tremendous bargain for the Orioles. But Wieters wanted to get on with his pro career.

People close to Strasburg say he wants to start his professional career as soon as possible, and Boras doesn't dispute that notion. But Boras is believed to see no great advantage to signing now, as he doesn't mind the idea of limiting Strasburg's innings to preserve his one-in-50-million arm. Strasburg threw 109 innings for the Aztecs last season, going 12-1 with a 1.32 ERA, allowing 65 hits, striking out 195 and walking 19 (that 10-1 strikeout-to-walk ratio isn't bad). Boras has widely praised Aztecs manager Tony Gwynn, the Hall of Famer, for limiting Strasburg's workload.

Boras has told confidants (and surely the Tigers many times) that he worries about the arm of another prodigy, Porcello, who's pitched 112 innings in the majors with the Tigers at age 20 (he's 10-7 with a 4.34 ERA). Boras worries about the possibility Porcello could repeat the career path of yet another Boras client, Steve Avery, who threw a lot of innings early in his career, including playoff innings, and burned out pretty young.

There is pressure on the Nationals, as they are still in line to lose 100 games this year, even after a recent eight-game winning streak. They recently lost promising right-hander Jordan Zimmermann, who needs Tommy John elbow surgery, and suffered through a couple embarrassments, including the hiring and ultimate firing of Jim Bowden as GM. The Nationals also failed to sign their No. 1 pick last year, University of Missouri pitcher Aaron Crow, who went back in the pool and is now negotiating with the Royals, who also took him in the first round.

"They have to sign him," one competing executive said of the Nationals/Strasburg situation. "If they don't sign him, what are they in business for?"

Kasten has cited the history of past top signings, an indication of where they stand. But Boras sees Strasburg as a history-making case.

By midnight Monday, we will see whether history is repeated or overcome.

Around the majors

- The Diamondbacks and Brewers have until this afternoon to work out a trade for Doug Davis, the former Brewer claimed by Milwaukee on Wednesday. Brewers GM Doug Melvin has publicly downplayed the possibility of a trade, but it makes little sense for the free-agent-to-be to stay in Arizona. And Milwaukee has a desperate need for a starter.
- The Brewers certainly showed they are willing to shake things up again. Last year's late firing of manager Ned Yost was initiated by owner Mark Attanasio, but it is believed the decisions to fire longtime pitching coach Bill Castro, demote shortstop J.J. Hardy and designate Bill Hall were Melvin's. Castro could land elsewhere as a bullpen coach or be back with the Brewers in another capacity next year. Hardy probably needed the wakeup call, and his replacement, Alcides Escobar (Milwaukee's best overall prospect), could provide a spark. Chris Bosio is hoping to stay on as the fulltime pitching coach.
- Even the Yankees think Bronson Arroyo and Aaron Harang are overpriced, with \$16.5 million and \$18.5 million to go, respectively. So unless the Reds are willing to pay a significant portion of their contracts, they are probably stuck with them. Both pitchers have cleared waivers, thanks to those contracts. Arroyo also probably didn't help his trade value with comments to USA Today about how many drugs he and other baseball players take.

The purpose of these comments isn't known. But there have been hints Arroyo suspects he may be on the list of 2003 survey failures, and perhaps he is trying to get ahead of the story. Arroyo went a little over the top with his remarks, especially invoking the name of serial killer Ted Bundy, saying, "I can see where guys like Hank Aaron and some of the old-timers have a beef with it. But as far as looking at Manny Ramirez like he's Ted Bundy, you're out of your mind."

- Some around the Nationals believe acting GM Mike Rizzo might get the fulltime job. The other candidates are highly regarded club executives Jed Hoyer of Boston and Jerry DiPoto of Arizona. An announcement may come soon.
- Hard to say who's been the better pickup, Matt Holliday (.486 batting average, .800 slugging with the Cardinals) or Cliff Lee (3-0, 1.13 ERA with the Phillies).

- The Yankees are 21-6 since the break. Boston remains a favorite to make the playoffs, but Texas is definitely a threat. Neftali Feliz (13 K's in 6 2/3 innings) has been brilliant.
- Not enough has been said about the terrific job Rangers pitching coach Mike Maddux is doing.
- CC Sabathia's first 10-strikeout night came at the expense of Ichiro. In Sabathia's supposedly off year, he's 13-7 with a 3.64 ERA. He may be heading toward a finish similar to last year's with Milwaukee.
- Jerry Hairston Jr. (.389) was a nice pickup for the Yankees.
- I am starting to believe in Marlins magic. Though, judging by the crowds, you wonder whether their fans do. They've now won six of seven, yet the crowds are still sparse (announced as 14,047 Thursday night).

Martinez quick to catch on with Red Sox

Acquired nearly two weeks ago from the Indians, V-Mart now taking charge in Boston

By Amy K. Nelson
ESPN.com

Playing first base at Camden Yards nearly two weeks ago, sharing the field with strangers and wearing the same colors but with a different team name on his chest, Victor Martinez envisioned a goal, in what was the first game of his Boston career.

Down the line, he saw Jason Varitek -- the gold standard of catching preparation and fundamentals -- effortlessly blocking balls in the dirt. It wasn't just the way Varitek stopped them; it was the control he had over them. Once the game ended, Martinez -- his first time outside of the Indians' organization since he was 17 years old -- turned to Red Sox bullpen coach Gary Tuck.

"That's what I want to be," Martinez said to Tuck.

It wasn't about being the starting catcher or taking Varitek's job; it was about bettering himself, even on a difficult day when everything was foreign. On July 31, Martinez was traded to Boston from Cleveland, where he spent 13 years -- almost half of his life. He was the Indians' team leader, catcher, first baseman, designated hitter and much more.

"He was the heart and soul of that team," Yankees pitcher CC Sabathia said.

Sabathia and Martinez entered the Indians' organization together, grew up together, and then, just a year apart, were traded. Now, they are rivals in the American League East. But when Sabathia left Cleveland for the Milwaukee Brewers last year, he went through what Martinez is now experiencing.

"I'm sure he's happy from going from last place to [contending for the AL East]," Sabathia said. "But you definitely have a lot of mixed emotions. I know I was happy to go to a team that had a chance to win, but I was still sad to leave those guys behind -- you know -- him, Grady [Sizemore], those guys I grew up with."

For those who know Martinez, it was no surprise how emotional he was when he got traded, even though he had been one of the top names rumored to move at the deadline. When reporters asked him about the trade, Martinez's voice cracked, saying how much he appreciated Cleveland.

After meeting with the media, he slowly started to pack his things. He couldn't believe he had to leave; it was the only big league clubhouse he had known. Martinez said Indians general manager Mark Shapiro told him around 3 p.m. ET that he had been traded; when the Indians' game started that night, Martinez was still there, lingering, finally leaving around 7:30. It was hard for him to say goodbye, grasping reality that the next morning he would be on a plane to Baltimore, as a member of the Red Sox.

"I appreciate everything [the Indians] did for me," Martinez said. "That organization, for me, was something special. They made me a better son, a better father, a better person."

The Indians also helped make him a better all-around player. One of Martinez's gifts is that he can play both first base and catcher. A three-time All-Star, Martinez has caught five times since coming to Boston, including three Clay Buchholz starts. Since being called up, Buchholz had struggled in his first three starts (Varitek was behind the plate for two of the starts and George Kottaras for one). But in his past two starts with Martinez behind the plate, Buchholz has a 2.08 ERA, despite going 0-2.

"He's been awesome so far for me," Buchholz said of Martinez in New York last weekend. "Little things go wrong and he'll come out and talk to you and he'll try and settle you down. As a young guy -- I'm not really near the veteran stage of my career -- that's a good thing for a guy to come out, tell me to settle down, make a pitch.

"It's nice for a catcher to be in the game as much as you are."

Buchholz said when Martinez puts down a sign, he does so with conviction. He'll pump his fist, giving Buchholz the confidence that he can throw it. Sabathia echoed Buchholz's words. He said there were times, in the middle of an at-bat, when he shook off a sign. Martinez would refuse to throw down another sign.

"He'd make me throw this pitch," Sabathia said. "He'd make me believe in it."

Martinez has a knack for that. Already his Boston teammates notice how positive he is: Coming into the dugout, he tries to get his teammates excited, encouraging them.

Sabathia said that how Martinez's emotions went, the Indians went. One game a few years ago, Martinez got hit, and was so upset when he came back to the dugout he threw his helmet. He told his teammates they could win the game. Down three or four runs at the time, the Indians rallied back.

"We were probably going to lose that game up until that point," Sabathia said. "Then he came in and was fired up, and I know we wound up winning that game. ... Every time we'd be down or be losing or having a tough game, he'd always be the one who came in and said, 'Come on, guys, we can do this.'"

When Martinez was traded, there was the tricky situation of cohabiting with Varitek. The move was widely characterized as Martinez's being the club's possible catcher of the future (he has a team option for the 2010 season; Varitek has both a team and player option for 2010). It could have been a bit awkward, but both men have been professional about it. Players say it took about a day in the clubhouse for Martinez -- who's hitting .280 with two home runs, eight RBIs and a .773 OPS in 11 games -- to feel comfortable being himself.

"I'm happy now," Martinez said. "It was tough to leave but I'm happy that I'm here; these guys are making it a lot easier for me. They've been treating me first-class."

When Boston pitching coach John Farrell was running the Indians' farm system, he oversaw Martinez and knew how special he was. When told his current team was acquiring the 30-year-old catcher, Farrell had no doubt that Martinez would fit in. And Farrell has watched how active Martinez has been in pitchers' meetings, asking important questions, eager to learn from Varitek.

"He's got a tremendous energy about him and an approach to the game that's infectious," Farrell said. "As much as he's injected life into us, I think [the trade] injected some life into him -- coming to a team that's fighting for a division title and spot in the playoffs."

It was just two years ago that the Red Sox sent home Martinez's Indians in a brutal Game 7 loss at Boston in the American League Championship Series. Cleveland led the series 3-1 before losing the final three games. The players were crushed. On the plane home, Martinez and Sabathia -- teammates since low-A ball -- sat next to each other. They were emotional, teary-eyed, as they reminisced about their time together.

Martinez, always emotionally attuned to the moment, confessed to Sabathia his thoughts about the future.

"That might be the last time we're all together, in this position," he said to his friend.

Less than a year later, Sabathia was traded, and not very long after that, Martinez followed him out of Cleveland.

Jayson Stark

Sandwich Awards: Back from a little hiatus

Friday, August 14, 2009 | [Print Entry](#)

I don't know about you, but I could use a sandwich. Except I'm not referring to a Corned Beef Special here. I'm referring to something much more appetizing -- the return of the ever-popular Generic Sandwich Awards.

They were on hiatus for a few weeks, because of trade-deadline and vacation factors beyond my control. But they're back. So grab a loaf of bread and check out the most sandwich-worthy feats of the week.

But first, it's time for the ...

Munchies Of The Week

- [A.J. Burnett](#) may not be unhittable, but he's definitely uncatchable. He threw three wild pitches in a game Wednesday, for the *fourth* time this year. Not only is he the first pitcher in the last 55 seasons to have four games of three or more wild pitches in one season. He has now *doubled* the previous high for any pitcher in that time. In fact, there have only been two other pitchers who had four 3-WP games over any *two-year* span -- J.R. Richard in 1978-79 and Jim Maloney in 1964-65. Talk about the call of the wild ...

- The Tigers' [Zach Miner](#) did something this week you sure don't see every year: He lost Game 1 of the Tigers' series in Boston as a reliever, then started Game 3 (because [Armando Galarraga](#) got sick) and lost that game, too. According to ESPN's trusty research department, Miner is the first pitcher to lose two games in the same series -- the first in relief, the second as a starter -- since Dennis Lamp did it for the Cubs against the Phillies on Sept. 29 and Oct. 1, 1980.

- How long did Bruce Chen go without a win before he finally got off the schneid Aug. 6? In between Chen's previous win (Oct. 2, 2005) and this one, 801 different pitchers won at least one game in the big leagues. And 14 different pitchers (topped by Roy Halladay, with 63) won more than 50 games in the time when Chen was winning *no* games.

- Loyal reader Jason Braun had a fun question about Tuesday's Cubs-Phillies game. The Phillies got just three hits in that game, played 12 innings, had their closer (Brad Lidge) blow a save and still won. So how unusual a formula for winning is that? According to baseball-reference.com's fabulous Play Index, the Phillies became only the third team in the last 55 years to win a road game in which they played 12 innings or more and got no more than three hits. But neither of the other two teams -- the 1989 Reds (who beat the Cardinals, 2-0, in 13 innings, on Aug. 30) and the 1975 Rangers (who won a 13-inning 1-0 game against the Angels on June 23) -- blew a save. So the answer is: That's an all-time first!

- Finally, Mike Lowell did something Tuesday that's almost impossible: He hit two home runs in a game he entered as a pinch-runner (after Kevin Youkilis got ejected). Lowell became only the third player in the last 55 years -- and the first in three decades -- to pull off that goofy feat. The others: the Twins' Craig Kusick on May 8, 1979 (after running for Ron Jackson), and the Indians' Chuck Essegian on June 11, 1962 (after running for Jimmy Piersall).

And now, on with the Sandwich Awards. The envelopes, please:

The On A Roll Award

The best bullpen show on earth is going on in Texas these days -- every time that smokeballing Neftali Feliz makes it to the mound.

This guy has been in the big leagues for only a week and a half. But what a week and a half it's been. Check out these numbers:

- In the first four outings of his career (totaling 6 2/3 innings), Feliz has piled up 13 strikeouts and allowed precisely one baserunner. As the Elias Sports Bureau reported Friday in "Elias Says," he's the first pitcher in history to allow just one baserunner over his first four appearances while even accumulating as many as *seven* strikeouts.

- Feliz has faced only 22 hitters, but he already has more strikeouts (13) than eight different pitchers who have faced at least 100 hitters this year. Topping that list: Carlos Silva, who fanned only 10 of 132 before heading for the disabled list.

- And maybe the most amazing Neftali Feliz stat of all is this: This man has struck out *more than half* of the hitters he's faced. And if he can somehow keep this up, he would be the first pitcher in history to do that, among guys who pitched six innings or more in a season. Billy Wagner never did it. Rob Dibble never did it. Eric Gagne never did it. But nothing Neftali Feliz -- a fellow averaging nearly 99 miles an hour on every fastball he launches -- does would surprise anybody.

"I'll never forget the first time I ever saw him," one scout said. "It was during the Instructional League, when he was still with Atlanta. And one of our instructors called me over and said, 'You've got to see this guy. He's the best I've ever seen.' To be able to throw a baseball like that -- it's a gift."

So in the spirit of giving, we'll give Feliz the first Sandwich Award of his career. Anybody have a feeling it won't be his last?

The Cold Cuts Award

For years now, the baseball world has looked at B.J. Upton and thought: "star." But nowadays, the baseball world looks at this guy and thinks something else: "What a disappointment."

Over the last week, the Rays' slumping center fielder is 1-for-19 with seven strikeouts. He's gone over two weeks since his last extra-base hit -- and has hit .136 (6-for-44), with 15 strikeouts and two walks, during that little funk.

And since Joe Maddon finally ran out of patience and zapped Upton out of the leadoff hole, he's a scary 3-for-27, with 12 strikeouts and one RBI. Which isn't exactly ideal strategy for convincing any manager to put you back in the leadoff hole.

OK, let's go big-picture and talk about his season. Upton is now hitting .235, with a .310 on-base percentage and a .357 slugging percentage, for the year. You know how many players who qualify for the batting title have numbers lower than his in all three of those categories? Exactly one -- Tigers catcher Gerald Laird.

And one more thing: Upton has hit as many homers all season (seven) -- in 480 trips to the plate -- as he hit last year just in the *postseason*. In 72 trips to the plate.

Now I'm not sure exactly what to make of this. But one scout who has seen a lot of Upton says we should make this of it: This guy is never going to be the player his talents ought to allow him to be.

"You look at his ability, and you say: 'Wow. There's no reason he shouldn't be a perennial All-Star,'" the scout said. "But what he really is, is a perennial underachiever. He just doesn't make any adjustments. This is his second or third time around the league, and the league has figured him out. But he just doesn't do anything to adjust back. It's a shame, really, because he's got so much talent. He just doesn't know how to utilize it."

Well, the good news is, this act has earned him a Sandwich Award. The bad news is, it's one nobody wants to win.

The Super Sub Award

Finally, we turn our attention to a man whose last name looks like a word you'd expect to see only in a game of Boggle.

That man is (who else?) recent Diamondbacks call-up Trent Oeltjen. And in case you hadn't noticed what the pride of Sydney, Australia, has done since the D-backs brought him to the big leagues last week, it's about time you started.

- In the first five games he played in his big league life, after nine minor league seasons waiting for this chance, Oeltjen had a four-hit game, a three-hit game, two two-hit games and a one-hit game.
- He homered in his first game, hit another in his third game and bopped yet another in his fourth game. According to Elias, he's only the second active player to make at least three trots in the first four games of his career. The other: (surprise) Mike Jacobs, after his 2005 call-up by the Mets.
- Then, in game 5 of his career, Oeltjen went 4-for-4 -- which gave him 12 hits (in 24 at-bats) in his first five games in the big leagues. So how many active players have ever gotten that many hits that fast? How 'bout none. And only four other players have done it in the entire 49-year expansion era. The others: Ken Reitz in 1972, Kirby Puckett in 1984, Mike Lansing in 1993 and Bo Hart in 2003.

Here at Sandwich Awards World Headquarters, we're a sucker for a great story. And it doesn't get much better than Trent Oeltjen's story:

Son of an American-born dad who moved his family to Australia in search of work. Stints in eight different minor league towns -- from Elizabethton to Reno. Cast adrift by the Twins after a .238 season in Triple-A in 2007. Only got his chance after the Diamondbacks sent Chris Young to the minors and had to put Justin Upton on the disabled list.

And then, after all that, there was Trent Oeltjen on Tuesday night, standing at home plate in the eighth inning, needing a homer to hit for the cycle -- and "only" singling, for his fourth hit of the game.

"I was worried they were going to boo me when I didn't get the homer," Oeltjen joked later, to MLB.com's Steve Gilbert.

Oh, all right, he wasn't really worried. And for good reason. It's been nothing but long-awaited cheers for this bloke so far -- well, cheers and Sandwich Awards, that is.