

Indians bounce back to topple Twins Choo, Sizemore homer; Tribe pulls away in four-run fifth

By Thor Nystrom / Special to MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- On Friday night, the combination of a young starter that couldn't rescue himself from adversity and a punchless top of the order led to a disheartening 11-run Indians loss to the Twins.

On Saturday afternoon, rookie starter David Huff didn't implode despite a steady stream of Minnesota baserunners and the top four Cleveland batters combined to go 8-for-18 with a walk and a pair of homers.

The combination was enough to push the Indians to a 7-3 revenge victory over the Twins.

Cleveland led, 7-0, by the fifth inning, taking any suspense out of the game in front of 33,931 at the Metrodome.

Huff wasn't sharp -- he allowed nine hits and two walks in five innings -- but he limited the Twins to two runs and hung on long enough to earn his seventh win.

"They have a bunch of great hitters over there, guys that are going to put the ball in play, and you just have to do damage control and keep your team in it," Huff said.

"He didn't make it easy for himself," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "But part of his maturity is making pitches and controlling damage and getting through innings and getting out of situations. That's what he did today."

Despite the Twins tormenting Indians pitching on Friday, Huff wasn't more concerned with his prospects than usual.

"The funny thing about that is usually when a team puts up that many runs one day, they'll come out cold the next day," Huff said. "Luckily today they weren't putting up too many runs. They had their chances, and I just tried to make some good pitches in situations and it worked out."

Huff, a lefty, had the most difficulty with left-handed hitters Joe Mauer, Justin Morneau and Denard Span, who combined to go 3-for-7 against him. Huff has allowed a .386 (51-for-132) batting average to left-handers this year.

"Mauer is unbelievable," Huff said. "I tried to throw everything at him today. The only time I got him out was a changeup that I accidentally left up around the letters and he hit it straight up in the air. I guess that's what I need to do -- I just need to start making mistakes to him."

The win helped Huff allay his struggles against the Twins this season. The young left-hander entered action on Saturday 0-2 against Minnesota with a 10.24 ERA in two starts.

The Indians pounded away at rookie Twins starter Anthony Swarzak to build their early lead. Shin-Soo Choo's 14th home run of the season led off the second inning. Grady Sizemore added another solo homer in the third inning to give Cleveland a 2-0 lead.

It was in the fifth inning, however, when the Indians really created separation. The first four batters reached -- Swarzak was replaced by reliever Brian Duensing after Sizemore walked and Jamey Carroll singled to lead off the inning -- and the Indians managed to score four runs without aid of an extra-base hit.

Swarzak was tagged for five runs on eight hits and a walk in four-plus innings.

Travis Hafner and Carroll each had three hits. Asdrubal Cabrera and Choo added two hits apiece. Perhaps the top of the lineup got the message when Wedge lamented its lack of production on Friday night.

"Better," Wedge said of Saturday's performance. "Hafner had as good a day as we've seen him have in a while. It was nice to see Grady and Choo hit a few out of the park. It had been a while since we've seen that, so that's what you'd love to see. Asdrubal had a good day. I thought we had good at-bats, a pretty good approach overall. We needed that."

"Guys that have been around, we need to contribute, especially when you have a bunch of young guys that are still trying to get adjusted and understand the game at this level," Carroll said. "There is no excuse for us not to do be able to do it. That's what it's going to take for us to win now."

Cleveland's bullpen was solid, allowing no runs and only one baserunner from the time it relieved Huff to begin the sixth inning until Mauer hit a solo homer off Tony Sipp with one out in the ninth inning.

Rafael Perez (1 1/3 innings) and Joe Smith (1 2/3) combined to get the team worry-free to the ninth.

"Today, [Perez] was as good as we've seen him in a long time," Wedge said. "His fastball was good, his slider was more consistent, his command was better, his mound presence was better. He really did a great job for us. Sipp did as well. Joe handled a couple left-handers, which was good to see.

"When your starter goes five innings and you're able to win the ballgame without going to your closer, there is obviously two or three guys that are doing a great job and that's what you saw today with those three

Laffey making impression on Wedge Cleveland (50-66) at Minnesota (56-60), 2:10 p.m. ET

Thor Nystrom / Special to MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Indians will attempt to keep the prosperity going on Sunday against the Twins with the aid of one of baseball's hottest starting pitchers.

Aaron Laffey is 3-1 with a 1.40 ERA in his past four starts. In three of those outings, he didn't allow an earned run.

"He's been more aggressive around the plate," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "He's been trusting his sinker. Because of that, his secondary stuff has really played out well. It's the old adage -- get ahead, stay ahead and keep pounding. That's what he's been doing."

The Indians have won 14 of their past 23 games. If they beat the Twins on Sunday, they will have won six of their past eight series.

Laffey is 5-2 with a 3.17 ERA in 59 2/3 innings over 10 starts. His ERA would rank eighth in the American League if he had the required amount of innings -- he's currently 40 short.

With the way Laffey has been pitching, he is making a strong case for a spot in the 2010 rotation. Wedge, however, is not willing to hand out those spots just yet.

"I think we have to wait and see how the rest of this season plays out," Wedge said. "Obviously, we have a lot of different people that we've been working through and we'll probably at least throw one more if not two more at some point. I think it's too early to talk about next year's rotation just because of where we are at with everything."

Even so, Wedge acknowledges that Laffey is a part of the club's long-term plans.

"It's hard not to see him in the mix with the way he has been pitching and with the way hopefully he will keep pitching," Wedge said. "But I just don't think we can commit to anything right now until we look at the whole picture. What I mean by that is our starters and our bullpen."

On Sunday, Laffey will look to continue the prosperity against a team that he has recently dominated. Laffey tossed eight innings of one-run ball against Minnesota on Aug. 5.

Replicating the performance would likely propel the Indians to their fourth consecutive series win against the AL Central's top three teams.

Pitching matchup

CLE: LHP Aaron Laffey (6-3, 3.25 ERA)

In his past two starts, Laffey has turned in a pair of gems that give reason to believe he can secure a spot in the 2010 rotation. After tossing eight innings against the Twins in which he allowed just one unearned run on Aug. 5, Laffey went 6 2/3 strong innings against the Rangers on Tuesday. He allowed just six hits with three walks and two strikeouts. He induced a key double play to get out of a bases-loaded jam in the first. When Laffey has his sinking stuff working, he can get those ground balls to get out of such predicaments.

MIN: RHP Nick Blackburn (8-7, 3.99 ERA)

Blackburn had his shortest outing of the season Tuesday against the Royals, as he was pulled after just 1 2/3 innings. The righty gave up six runs -- four of which were earned -- as he was unable to pick up his first win since July 10. Kansas City chipped away at Blackburn, as he faced eight batters in the first inning, with four Royals coming around to score in the opening frame. Blackburn, who faced Cleveland two starts ago, gave up just two runs to the Indians in that game, but picked up the loss.

Tidbits

Trevor Crowe missed Saturday's game with what Indians Wedge called "a little right side oblique soreness." Jamey Carroll started in right field. Wedge spoke to Crowe prior to Saturday's game. "He said it felt a lot better," Wedge said. "We'll see how he feels tomorrow. Obviously, we have the off-day Monday, so that would make sense to me, push him through that." Crowe hasn't played since Thursday. ... Wedge on his ejection from Friday's game: "I'm sure my phone will be ringing on that one." ... Wedge on closer Kerry Wood: "I feel like he's really been at his best here the last four or five times out. He's been more under control. He's been throwing the ball where he wants to. The breaking ball has been more of a weapon for him. I like what we've been seeing the last four or five times out

Carroll makes outfield debut

By Sheldon Ocker

For the first time this season, Jamey Carroll played the outfield, starting the game in right Saturday.

Making one's outfield debut in the Metrodome is not the easiest thing to do. However, Carroll played right flawlessly and also made a relay to the plate after catching a fly ball to hold a runner at third.

"It was definitely a challenge," Carroll said. "It's a little tougher in the daytime, because the roof is lighter. And it doesn't need to be any tougher than it already is."

Why did Carroll play the outfield?

"Trevor [Crowe] has a little right side oblique soreness," manager Eric Wedge said. "I talked to him this morning, and he said it felt a lot better."

Nevertheless, Crowe is not assured of starting today.

"With the off day Monday, it makes more sense for him [to sit] today," Wedge said. "But we'll see tomorrow."

Before Saturday, Carroll had started 47 games, 37 at second base and 10 at third.

What to do

For the season against the Tribe, Joe Mauer is batting .581 with 11 RBI, and Justin Morneau is hitting .318 with 11 RBI.

"I would say both those guys are freaks of nature," David Huff said. "Mauer is a little more disciplined. He has a better sense of the strike zone. But you have to try to get him to swing at something out of the zone.

"Morneau is a little more aggressive. But you just have to battle and hope they don't hit a home run or that they don't come up with guys on base. You just can't let those guys beat you."

Dome days diminish

The sign in left field reads: "Countdown to outdoor baseball."

Once this season is over, in 22 more home games, the Twins will end their tenure at the Metrodome and move into Target Field, which will not be covered by a roof.

Asked his feelings about the dome, Wedge said: "This is a tough place to play. It's been a great home-field advantage for a lot of years. I won't be disappointed to leave."

Remembering

Today is the 89th anniversary of Tribe shortstop Ray Chapman being hit in the head with a pitch thrown by the Yankees' Carl Mays, leading to the only on-field death in the history of the majors. Chapman suffered a fractured skull and died the next day, Aug. 17, 1920.

The Indians went on to win their first World Series against the Dodgers.

Farm facts

Matt LaPorta homered twice and singled twice, driving in two runs, but Columbus lost to Indianapolis 14-5. LaPorta lifted his average to .306. . . . Cord Phelps homered and singled, driving in three runs, as Kinston beat Salem 6-4. Adam Davis had three hits and Tim Fedroff doubled twice and had one RBI. Bryan Price gave up one run in six innings. . . . Bo Greenwell, Delvi Cid and Roberto Perez each had two hits.

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Getting a whiff of evils of whiffing

By Sheldon Ocker

MINNEAPOLIS: Aside from generating the greatest number of angry fans in the shortest amount of time, the Indians haven't done much to alter the franchise record book this season.

But they do have a shot at erasing the team record for strikeouts, set last year when Tribe batsmen went down on strikes 1,213 times.

Putting up enormous strikeout totals is a relatively recent big-league phenomenon. The Indians, for example, have rung up strikeout totals of 1,000 or more in 11 consecutive years, beginning in 1998.

Before that, they struck out 1,000 or more times only twice in the 108-year history of the franchise, 1963 and 1964.

Of course, we all know the game has changed. Owners pay more for home runs, and batters tend to swing harder to produce as many longballs as possible, inevitably increasing the number of strikeouts.

This season, the Tribe is averaging 7.6 strikeouts per game (through Monday). Two American League teams have struck out more: the Texas Rangers at 8.0 per game and the Tampa Bay Rays at 7.9.

If the Indians can maintain their current pace, they will amass 1,231 strikeouts, exceeding last year's club record by 18.

They certainly will not threaten the major-league and National League record of 1,399, set by the Milwaukee Brewers in 2001. Nor is it likely they can muster enough late-season thrust to equal the American League record of 1,268, established by the Detroit Tigers in 1999.

Many professional observers of the game — particularly those who value the current crop of sophisticated statistics — do not believe it is a bad thing to strike out. When a reporter expressed the thought that strikeouts are valueless, a member of the Tribe front office responded, "Would you rather that Victor Martinez strike out or hit into a double play?"

Presumably, that answer was given only because the respondent was irritated by the question, because there are many more options than striking out or bouncing into a double play.

There is an argument that strikeouts are a relatively beneficial thing. This view is becoming more pervasive, reaching into many front offices.

To quote from a 2004 article in *Baseball Prospectus*: "From a quantitative perspective, however, there is little evidence to suggest that a strikeout is 'worse' than a groundout, popout, or any other means of making an out, with respect to generating runs.

" . . . Granted, putting the ball in play, whether in the air or on the ground, can sometimes enable a hitter to advance a runner, but it also increases the chance of hitting into a double play — a far greater rally-killer than a strikeout."

" . . . When it comes to offense, an out is an out is an out. . . . While it might not be overwhelming, there is a distinct, positive correlation between an individual's strikeout rate and a number of useful attributes: hitting for power . . . and slugging percentage — as well as drawing walks . . . Of course, causation is a sticky subject, so try not to misinterpret the above data as 'proof' that increased strikeouts cause an improvement in a player's secondary skills."

What is really being measured here are the results of playing the modern game. That is, swing hard in case you hit it, and that the benefit of the home run ball outweighs the negatives of the increase in strikeouts.

The reason that graphs and statistical formulas can't find a positive cause-and-effect relationship between strikeouts and offense is because there is none.

"It depends on the situation," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "I think there are times when a strikeout is just another out. But with a runner on third and less than two outs, then it's not just another out."

To Wedge, there are bad strikeouts and neutral strikeouts, but can players adjust their swings and their thinking to a variety of situations?

"I think they do," he said. "But they don't always have the discipline to shorten their swing and make contact."

No manager or hitting coach wants to watch players fail to make contact with runners in scoring position.

"We are by no means content with it [striking out]," hitting coach Derek Shelton said. "I don't know that it's just another out. A strikeout can be more harmful in some situations than others. It's one of the things we continue to work on and talk about."

Baseball Prospectus maintains that striking out has no effect on scoring runs. Granted, teams that rely on home runs have to live with strikeouts. But should clubs that don't depend on the longball be satisfied to watch their players wrack up high strikeout totals?

The Indians rank fourth in the American League in runs and have the third most strikeouts. But as long as the team continues to score at the current rate, Wedge and Shelton won't make too much of an issue of strikeouts.

Maybe that's a mistake. The Indians have struck out 10 or more times in 30 games, averaging 4.6 runs. But that figure is skewed by one game against the New York Yankees in which they scored 22 runs. If that game is thrown out, offensive production drops to 4.0 runs in those 30 games.

In the 51 games the Indians have struck out between six and nine times, they have averaged 5.6 runs, and when the Tribe strikes out five or fewer times (30 games), it's scoring average is 5.0.

Of the top 39 power hitters (20 or more homers) this year, only 12 are among the 39 most prolific strikeout artists. But among the 39 players who have struck out the most, 24 are not on the list of 39 foremost home run hitters.

For example, Emilio Bonifacio of the Florida Marlins is 38th in strikeouts (88) and has hit only one home run. Is he hurting his team by striking out so often? Apparently not. Modern statistics back him all the way.

Around baseball: At least Tribe's defense deserves notice as season winds down.

By Josh WeirCantonRep.com staff writerPosted Aug 15, 2009 @ 10:25 PM

AKRON — .Random thoughts on the Tribe as we pass the halfway point of August ...

- Fausto Carmona's velocity has been an encouraging sign. During his last start, he routinely hit the mid 90s, and the Rangers had difficulty — to use an Eric Wedge-ism — squaring him up. If Carmona continues to progress mentally and fundamentally, it might not be too far fetched to expect him to contribute significantly next season.
- The Indians have been impressive in the field recently. Shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera and second baseman Luis Valbuena cover a lot of ground up the middle, while the outfield of Trevor Crowe in left, Grady Sizemore in center and Shin-Soo Choo in right run down plenty of balls. I hate to pick on Choo, who's had a great season, but his only major weakness seems to be reading fly balls. He makes up for it with his athleticism.
- Cabrera is fun to watch, whether he's throwing to first across his body while on a dead run toward center field or shortening up with two strikes and slashing a base hit the other way. Cabrera has an incredible feel for the game.
- He may not be Brooks Robinson, but Jhonny Peralta is settling in nicely at third base. The Indians waited probably a year too long to move him from shortstop. At least they finally did it.
- I wonder how long the Indians will wait before they end the Andy Marte experiment and get Matt LaPorta to the big leagues. LaPorta might have to wait until September when rosters expand.
- Who's the Indians catcher next year if Carlos Santana isn't ready, which I'm guessing he won't be? Kelly Shoppach, he of the 43 hits and 74 strikeouts in 195 at-bats through Thursday? Or one of the youngsters: Wyatt Toregas, Chris Gimenez or Lou Marson? These options don't inspire feelings of confidence.
- It's difficult to imagine the Indians' 2010 rotation not including Aaron Laffey.
- I am cautiously optimistic that the Indians will put together a solid bullpen for next season. Again, I say cautiously. Chris Perez looks great now. I've been impressed with Tony Sipp. Joe Smith finally looks like the guy the Indians expected when they traded for him over the winter. Jess Todd is an interesting talent. I still think Rafael Perez and/or Jensen Lewis will rediscover whatever made them effective, with Perez being the more likely candidate. Hopefully Kerry Wood will get a chance to justify the \$10.5 million he is due next season.
- Whether it's as a starter or reliever, I think Jeremy Sowers will have some value for the Indians next year.
- For all the Wedge haters out there, please don't hang me in effigy, but I'd like to see him get another year. I just have a hard time laying at his feet what's happened with this team the past two seasons.
- Jake Westbrook's most recent setback made me think back to the offseason, when Indians officials seemed to assume he would be ready for the rotation by midseason. Now his 2009 is all but gone. The Indians paid him \$10 million this season, and are on the hook for another \$11 million next year.
- I really like Justin Masterson's arm, and I'm excited to see Carlos Carrasco in Cleveland probably by September. But it's still painful to see Cliff Lee and Victor Martinez in their new uniforms. It's especially painful when Lee is dominating to the tune of a 3-0 record with a 1.13 ERA with the Phillies.

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

The Indians have the makings of a nice double-play combo for years to come with Cabrera and Valbuena, a pair of 23-year-olds who were born 17 days apart in Venezuela.

"They fit well out there together," Wedge said. "They're two of the more vocal guys we have. They have leadership personalities. They have some toughness to them. They're not afraid to speak up. I like that. Teams need that. We need more of that. They come to play hard. There's a lot going on with those two guys. Obviously, Cabrera is ahead of Valbuena because of his time and experience, but Valbuena's not afraid. That's for sure."

THEY GOT SKILLS

The Indians were well represented in Baseball America's mid-season minor league awards. Cleveland had players named for Best Strike Zone Judgment in three respective leagues: Triple-A Columbus OF Michael Brantley (International), Double-A Akron C Carlos Santana (Eastern) and Single-A Kinston INF Cord Phelps (Carolina).

Other awards included Best Reliever in the Pacific Coast League (Jess Todd for his work with the Cardinals' Triple-A affiliate before being traded to Cleveland) and Eastern League (Vinnie Pestano), the EL's Fastest Baserunner (Akron OF Jose Costanza), the Carolina League's Best Batting Prospect (2008 first-round pick Lonnie Chisenhall, who was promoted to Akron this week), the Carolina League's Best Defensive Second Baseman (Phelps) and the South Atlantic League's Best Fastball (RHP Jason Knapp, who had 111 strikeouts in 85 innings with Lakewood before coming over from the Phillies in the Cliff Lee trade).

In addition, Columbus' Torey Lovullo (IL) and Akron's Mike Sarbaugh (EL) were named Best Manager Prospects.

HASN'T WORKED

Josh Barfield cleared waivers this week and remained with Triple-A Columbus after being taken off the Indians' 40-man roster — another sad footnote in what's become one of the more disappointing Tribe moves of recent years.

The Indians traded third baseman Kevin Kouzmanoff and pitcher Andrew Brown to the Padres for Barfield in November 2006.

Barfield had just batted .280 with 13 home runs, 58 RBIs and 21 stolen bases as a 23-year-old rookie. He batted .243 with the Tribe in 2007 and eventually lost his job that season to Cabrera. Over the last two seasons, he's played in just 25 big-league games because of injury and ineffectiveness.

His three-year major-league totals with the Tribe: A .245 batting average (116-473), three home runs, 54 RBIs and 14 stolen bases.

"He's still young," Wedge said. "Hopefully he figures it out and good things happen for him in the future."

That future is likely somewhere else.

LOOK OUT!

It's an absolute miracle that fans and players aren't seriously injured on a regular basis by broken bats and sizzling foul balls. The barrel of Shin-Soo Choo's bat went flying on his sacrifice fly in the first inning of Thursday's game. Like a giant whirling splinter, the bat bounced off the top of the dugout suites and landed five rows back. Despite almost 20 people being in the line of fire, no one appeared hurt.☐

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Indians hit 2 homers, top sputtering Twins 7-3

By DAVE CAMPBELL, AP Sports Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP)—The Minnesota Twins are leaving too many men on base. Their pesky slap-and-run game is rarely getting off the ground despite a sharp increase in power this season.

That's what happens when the starting pitching stops working.

Shin-Soo Choo(notes) and Grady Sizemore(notes) hit early homers Saturday to lead the Cleveland Indians to a 7-3 victory over the Twins, another failure by Minnesota to create some late-season momentum.

"When you're behind so much, it really makes it difficult," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "You have to have some people go out there and stop 'em."

About 17 hours after Scott Baker(notes) pitched a two-hitter in an 11-0 win, the Twins watched rookie Anthony Swarzak(notes) (3-6) get roughed up for the third straight start. Following two strong performances out of the All-Star break, here are Swarzak's August totals: eight innings, 25 hits, 16 earned runs, four homers.

Gardenhire wasn't ready to say whether he'll stay in the rotation. Injuries prompted the Twins to start Swarzak before they planned to, though he's not the only starting pitcher who has let them down this summer. All those early deficits have forced the hitters to be more conservative, taking first-pitch strikes and reducing their opportunities to steal bases.

The third-place Twins have tried to stay optimistic during this most disappointing month, pointing to a deficit in the AL Central race that was at only five games when the day began. Division-leading Detroit was hosting Kansas City later.

The Twins, though, dropped to 4-10 in their last 14 games. Half of those losses have come to the Indians and Royals, teams already looking ahead to next season.

Though their last four wins, amazingly, have been by a combined 39-2 score, the Twins have been unable to generate the kind of good vibes and comeback-at-any-time mentality they used to rally for the 2006 division title and tie for the 162-game lead in 2008.

"It has been a little frustrating to not get over the hump," outfielder Denard Span(notes) said. "It kind of gets old saying that. I'm getting tired of saying that."

Swarzak sounded tired, too.

"Mechanical, and mental," he said, assessing his problems. "I don't know. I need to figure it out soon."

Choo started the second with a drive that ended Cleveland's homerless streak at 38 innings. Sizemore did the same in the third, his shot to center barely eluding the outstretched glove of Carlos Gomez(notes).

Choo was dealing with a power outage of his own. He last homered on July 7, but hitting coach Derek Shelton had been encouraging him that the stroke would come.

"I'm never trying to hit home runs. But the last 40 days, not hitting home runs, it's a little bit of pressure," Choo said.

The Indians just kept on hitting, usually with solid contact. Swarzak gave up a walk and a single to start the fifth, before being relieved by Brian Duensing(notes). Cleveland batted around and took a 7-0 lead.

Having traded CC Sabathia(notes) and Cliff Lee(notes) in successive summers, the Indians are holding unofficial auditions for next year's rotation. Rookie David Huff(notes) (7-6) was so-so, needing 102 pitches to finish the fifth inning and failing to put much of a dent in his ERA that still stands at 6.55.

He toughened up when the Twins threatened, though, leaving the bases loaded in the first and stranding nine runners in all.

"They've got a bunch of great hitters over there, guys that are going to put the ball in play," Huff said. "You've just got to try to do some damage control and just try to keep your team in it."

Joe Mauer(notes) had three more hits for the Twins, extending his hitting streak to 12 games and raising his league-leading average to .378 with a ninth-inning homer, his 22nd. Justin Morneau(notes) hit an RBI double during a two-run rally in the fifth that was too little too late.

Jamey Carroll(notes), getting his first start in the outfield this season, had three hits and Choo drove in two runs for Cleveland, which won at the Metrodome for only the third time in its last 13 tries.

NOTES: Twins 2B Alexi Casilla(notes) left after the sixth inning because of a bruised left foot. His status will be determined Sunday. ... Carroll was playing RF for Trevor Crowe(notes), who has a strained right oblique muscle but entered as a pinch runner. ... Twins LHP Glen Perkins(notes) will go to Florida on Sunday to start a rehab assignment for his inflamed shoulder. ... Jeff Manship(notes) pitched a scoreless ninth for Minnesota in his major league debut.

Indians 7 | Clippers 0: Another loss, another futile night at plate

Sunday, August 16, 2009 3:43 AM

By Jim Massie THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The Indianapolis Indians reached a high-water mark last night in Huntington Park with a 7-0 victory over the Clippers.

By winning in its 120th game, Indianapolis hit the .500 mark in the International League West Division standings for the first time this season. The last-place Clippers won't near such lofty heights again in 2009.

The Clippers sank under .500 at 31-32 with a loss to Louisville on June 14 and are a Mariana Trench-deep 19-37 since then. The surface seemed miles away to the crowd of 10,100.

Indianapolis peppered Clippers starter Mike Gosling (7-4) and reliever Frank Herrmann with base hits all evening and took advantage of nearly every extra opportunity provided by the Clippers defense.

The already struggling Clippers offense, minus the injured Michael Brantley and Jason Donald for the past two games, produced seven hits and was 0 for 7 with runners in scoring position. The cavalry isn't coming.

"If you look at it, we've got some key players that are hurt," Clippers manager Torey Lovullo said. "We're asking guys to step in and give us some production. It's just a situation where they're feeling their way around. We need them to step up and get the job done while there is an absence of some of our better players."

The breakdowns weren't confined to the offense. Defensively, the Clippers didn't make several plays. Indianapolis had scored once in the third inning and had runners on first and third when Tagg Bozied broke from first on a steal attempt.

The Clippers thought they were ready for Jose Tabata to try to score from third as soon as catcher Damaso Espino threw to second. The ball, however, sailed over the head of second baseman Niuman Romero and Tabata scored easily.

"If we could hold it to a 2-0 lead, I thought we'd be in good shape there," Lovullo said. "That third run I just felt like the play we had called would have defended it had we executed it. We just didn't get the job done."

An error by shortstop Jesus Merchan set up another two-run rally for the Indians in the sixth.

The miscue by Merchan occurred after a scary moment. When Erik Kratz flied to center, his bat shattered and the fat part struck Espino in the left ear. He was down for several minutes while trainers from both teams attended to him.

"I didn't know what happened," Espino said. "It was the bat. I didn't know that it broke or anything. The guys saw it on TV and said that it broke and the part that broke hit me in the ear. It cut me in like five places. I never lost consciousness."

Espino continued to play and even doubled to start the seventh. Three quick outs followed. It was a familiar night in the free fall from .500.

"It was an ugly performance," Lovullo said. "Our approach at the plate wasn't exactly sound. We didn't pick up the ball in key situations. That's going to equate to a loss."

August 15, 2009

Brantley, Donald out again tonight

The Clippers will have a short bench again tonight with outfielder Michael Brantley and shortstop Jason Donald sidelined for out for a second straight game by injuries.

"You might see (pitcher Bobby) Livingston in the outfield tonight before you see Michael Brantley," Clippers manager Torey Lovullo said.

Brantley injured his right ankle sliding into third base in Indianapolis.

"His ankle is banged up," Lovullo said. "He slid in hard to third base. When you move that fast and you run as well as he does, you're susceptible to those moments. It's nothing other than a jammed ankle. We'll see where he is (Sunday)."

Donald has a sore lower back.

"We're going to give him Sunday off," Lovullo said. "Then we'll have him play (Monday) at Toledo. That's the plan."

Catcher Lou Marson is the lone healthy position player not in the lineup. Josh Barfield, normally a second baseman, is playing left field tonight because the Cleveland Indians want Matt LaPorta to split time between the outfield and first base. He played past two games in the outfield.

Relief pitcher Jose Veras was not put on the active roster for tonight's game. He was outrighted to Columbus earlier this week by Cleveland and was supposed to be in the bullpen for the game against Indianapolis.

"We're going to hold off," Lovullo said. "Veras wanted to throw another bullpen today. We'll activate him (Sunday)."

Relief pitcher R.J. Swindle, a waiver claim by Cleveland, did arrive on schedule today. He threw a bullpen for pitching coach Scott Radinsky.

"He did that so Rad could see where he is," Lovullo said. "We may be activating two guys (Sunday). It might be a pre-game thing."

Livingston is going home to Springfield, Mo., Sunday to be with his wife, Amber Nicole, for the birth of their first child. She is to be induced early Monday morning. They know they have a daughter on the way.

"We've got a name already, Jady Paige," Livingston said. "It's going to be crazy. But I'm really excited."

Outfielder Mickey Hall broke an 0 for 19 string with a single yesterday in the first inning. He went 0 for 4 after that. ... Designated hitter Tony Graffanino was thrown out of the game by two umpires last night. Third base ump Chris Bakke ejected him for arguing a strike three pitch that Graffanino thought was an uncaught foul tip. First umpire Manny Gonzalez added a second thumb while Graffanino yelled at Bakke from the dugout. The two animated moves had people in the press box thinking somebody else had been thrown out.

The lineups for tonight's game are as follows:

Indianapolis: Chris Barnwell, 2b; Jose Tabata, cf; Brian Myrow, lf; Jeff Clement, dh; Tagg Bozied, rf; Neil Walker, 3b; Erik Kratz, c; Robinzon Diaz, 1b; Argenis Diaz, ss; Daniel McCutchen, p.

Columbus: Mickey Hall, cf; Josh Barfield, lf; Tony Graffanino, dh; Matt LaPorta, 1b; Wes Hodges, 3b; Stephen Head, rf; Jesus Merchan, ss; Damaso Espino, c; Niuman Romero, 2b; Mike Gosling, p.

Tom Walker, the father of Indianapolis third baseman Neil Walker, is at the game tonight. Tom Walker has a nice niche in baseball history. While pitching for Fort Worth in the Texas League, he threw a 15-inning no-hitter against Albuquerque on Aug. 4, 1971. He won the game 1-0.

Ingraham's Starting Rotation

By Jim Ingraham JIngraham@News-Herald.com

The Indians this season have lost nine games they were leading after six innings, and in the eighth inning alone they have been outscored, 81-40. I'm no Bill James, but I don't think that's very good.

Rafael Perez's ERA progression in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively: 1.78, 3.54 and 9.00. And that 9.00 ERA this year is no fluke — it has come in 34 appearances. Could Perez be the one Indians' pitcher who most misses Luis Isaac?

I don't know about you, but when it comes to the Hot Dog Races at Progressive Field, I don't like the cut of Ketchup's jib. There's nothing worse than cocky ketchup.

It would be nice, come September, for the Indians to call up catcher Carlos Santana, the switch-hitting phenom at Akron. And it would be even nicer if Santana was impressive enough that consideration would have to be given to possibly having him on the big-league roster at some point next season as the regular catcher.

In case you haven't been keeping track, Ryan Garko hasn't exactly been abusing National League pitchers since the Indians traded him to the Giants. In his first 14 games with San Francisco, Garko is hitting .205.

Baseball notes: Pride of the Yankees back on display
By Jim IngrahamJIngraham@News-Herald.com

There's not much doubt about who owns New York this summer. The Yankees, incredibly, have hit 109 more home runs than the Mets (178-69).

Indeed, it looks like this could be one of those years for the Yankees, who have won 11 of their last 12 games, and have the best record (73-43) and biggest division lead (6 1/2 games) in the majors.

They are hitting. They are pitching. They are doing it all.

From Friday through last Sunday, Yankees starters each threw at least seven scoreless innings, the first time the team has had three straight starts like that in 36 years.

The new additions have all been great in the clubhouse and on the field, CC Sabathia, A.J. Burnett, Nick Swisher and especially Mark Teixeira, whom Alex Rodriguez says is "like our Lou Gehrig, the way he handles himself on and off the field, a true leader."

The Yankees spent more — way more — than any other team in the offseason, and you get what you pay for. They've also made an effort to be more like the late-1990s Yankees, with some solid role players, too, so essentially they have the best of both worlds — big-money additions and productive role players.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, the Yankees have never blown a lead of more than six games. So if history holds, they will win the East. They are 22-6 since the All-Star break and 35-11 over their last 46.

Pitcher Chad Gaudin, recently acquired from San Diego, could barely contain his awe at pitching for the Yankees.

"You get on the mound, you look around and there are Hall of Famers behind you," Gaudin explained after his first win as a Yankee on Wednesday. "You just know that each guy is going to push past anything they have to push past to get the job done."

Countdown to midnight

To the surprise of no one, No. 1 draft pick Stephen Strasburg has yet to come to terms with the Nationals. The deadline for teams signing draft picks is midnight on Monday. Nobody expects any movement in the Strasburg negotiations with the Nats until about 11:30 p.m. Monday.

The Nats have anticipated this all along. They know this is the M.O. of Scott Boras, Strasburg's agent, and they've said from draft day there would be little development prior to Aug. 17.

Nats owner Ted Lerner, president Stan Kasten and acting GM Mike Rizzo flew to California last week to meet with Strasburg in person for the first time.

The Nationals have believed all along they will sign Strasburg, and that feeling hasn't changed over the last two months. They're going to offer him more than any previous draft pick has ever received — the record is \$10.5 million given by the Cubs to Mark Prior in 2001 — and the ball ultimately will be in Strasburg's court to make a final decision.

What if?

Would Strasburg really walk away from, say, \$15 million and take the chance of getting more next year?

That might be a gamble.

There's no guarantee he would get a better deal in next year's draft.

Washington's top pick last summer (right-hander Aaron Crow) turned down \$3.5 million at the deadline, pitched for the independent league Fort Worth Cats, re-entered the draft this year, was selected 12th by the Royals (three spots lower than last year) and now is being offered \$3 million by Kansas City.

Take our mistake, please

The White Sox, who haven't had a productive center fielder in forever — they've used 14 players at that position since Aaron Rowand was traded to Philadelphia after the 2005 World Series — finally got one last week, and it didn't cost them a single player.

Just \$62 million. That's what's owed to Alex Rios over the next five years, and that's why the Blue Jays, who signed Rios to the contract before the 2008 season, agreed to basically just give Rios to the White Sox. Chicago didn't have to send any players back to Toronto. The Sox only had to assume Rios' monster contract.

Chicago tried hard to sign Torii Hunter as a free agent two years ago but couldn't, so Rios becomes Hunter Lite.

Sox GM Ken Williams said he initially hoped to make a trade when he claimed Rios off waivers, with the Blue Jays paying part of his contract to get prospects from the White Sox. Williams was happy that owner Jerry Reinsdorf didn't object when he was assigned the full contract.

"I expected to make a trade," Williams said. "The Blue Jays deemed my request of money off the contract was not worth as much to them as the savings of cash. At the end of the day, I have to call Jerry Reinsdorf and lay all the cards on the table.

"And (Reinsdorf) said, 'I absolutely love the idea of not having to give up some of these players,' and we're OK with the cash because of the way we structured our payroll over the years.' "

A wrecked Bedard

Erik Bedard has probably pitched his last game for the Seattle Mariners. Dr. Lewis Yocum performed surgery on Bedard's left (throwing) shoulder on Thursday, and the damage was worse than originally thought.

Yocum found an inflamed bursa and a torn labrum. Dr. Yocum debrided the bursa and repaired the labrum, and the Mariners report Bedard will be in a sling for two to three weeks. It will be four to six months before he is able to begin baseball-related activity.

In other words, Bedard is done for this season, and he's a free agent this winter coming off surgery, which means he will probably will be offered only a one-year contract, which means the Indians might have some interest.

Clown Town

When the Angels placed pitcher Joe Saunders on the disabled list with a sore shoulder last week, they called up Trevor Bell from Class AAA.

Bell, 22, was the Angels' first pick in the 2005 draft (37th overall, a sandwich pick), but his biggest claim to fame is his grandfather Bob played the original Bozo the Clown on Chicago TV back in the 1950s.

He's Aussie good

Outfielder Trent Oeltjen is The Next Big Thing for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Purchased from Class AAA Reno on Aug. 6 when Justin Upton went on the disabled list, Oeltjen had 12 hits in his first 24 at-bats — three homers, two doubles, a triple and two stolen bases. He's currently hitting .414.

Oeltjen, 26, became the fifth player since the beginning of the expansion era (1961) to get 12 hits in his first five major-league games when he had a four-hit game in the D-backs' 6-2 victory over the New York Mets on Tuesday.

The others are St. Louis' Ken Reitz (1972), Minnesota's Kirby Puckett (1984), Montreal's Mike Lansing (1993), and St. Louis' Bo Hart (2003).

Oeltjen became the fifth player in the last 60 years to hit a home run and steal a base in his first major-league game when he did it Aug. 6, an 11-6, 12-inning victory at Pittsburgh. The others who have done that are Bert Campaneris (Kansas City, 1964), Kevin McReynolds (San Diego, 1983), Lenny Dykstra (Mets, 1985) and Jose Offerman (Dodgers, 1990).

Milwaukee massacre

The slumping Brewers made three clubhouse-shaking moves last week, firing pitching coach Bill Castro, sending All-Star shortstop J.J. Hardy to the minor leagues and releasing infielder/outfielder Bill Hall, who has recently as 2006 belted 35 home runs.

Those moves seemed to indicate the Brewers were conceding they were out of the race in 2009, but GM Bob Melvin said that's not so.

"We're still focused on winning games," said Melvin. "We're not giving up. If there's anybody in the clubhouse that's giving up, they shouldn't be here."

Hardy was informed of his demotion via telephone by Melvin and admitted to being "a little bit shocked."

"I didn't see that coming at all," said Hardy. "It didn't really make sense to me. I told Doug all I need was a couple of days off. I know I haven't been swinging the bat like I want to, but that has worked for me in the past.

"It's certainly not anything I'm excited about. I'm very frustrated."

Only six players have hit at least 400 home runs while maintaining a .320 or better career average: Babe Ruth, Stan Musial, Ted Williams, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx and Vladimir Guerrero.

n Think Matt Holliday wasn't invigorated by his trade from Oakland to St. Louis? Since joining the Cardinals on July 24, he is hitting .486.

n The Rays have made a deal to become part owners of the Florida Tuskers team in the about-to-launch United Football League. The Tuskers (Tuskers?) will play one of its three home games at Tropicana Field on Oct. 30, which is the day after Game 2 of the World Series. The other two home games will be played in Orlando.

n Outfielder Chris Young signed a \$28 million extension with the D-Backs in April of 2008, after becoming the first rookie in major-league history with 30 homers and 25 stolen bases. Now Young is back at Class AAA Reno, optioned Monday after struggling the first four months of the season, hitting .194 with seven homers and 28 RBI in 103 games. He had two hits in his last 30 at-bats, and his batting average has not been above .205 since April 30. He had only three RBI in his last 24 games.

n You know you're going bad when you get 17 hits and lose one day, and then hold a team to three hits in 12 innings and lose three days later — as the Cubs did last week.

n The Marlins are among the teams interested in John Smoltz, whom the Red Sox must trade or release by midnight tonight. The Marlins are in need of some back-end rotation help and that could prove an attractive situation for Smoltz. He also has a relationship with Manager Fredi Gonzalez from when Gonzalez was a coach for Atlanta, and Smoltz obviously knows the NL East inside and out.

n Attention serial jaywalkers: You might want to avoid Seattle. Last season, Seattle police made news for lecturing Manny Ramirez for attempting to jaywalk outside Safeco Field after a Mariners game against Boston. On Monday, White Sox general manager Kenny Williams didn't get a lecture, he got a ticket (\$56, thank you very much), for jaywalking outside Safeco.

n After not having a triple all season, Magglio Ordonez tripled in back-to-back games in Boston last week.

n The Cardinals' big three of Chris Carpenter, Adam Wainwright and Joel Pineiro are a combined 20-3 since July 1.

n Marco Scutaro of the Blue Jays leads the majors with 29 walks when leading off an inning.

n The Braves last week signed first-round draft pick Mike Minor, a left-handed pitcher from Vanderbilt, for a \$2.42 million bonus last week, the largest in franchise history and the largest signing bonus in draft history for a No. 7 pick.

Minor's signing bonus surpassed the \$2.2 million the Braves gave Jeff Francoeur in 2002 and eclipsed the \$2.4 million bonus that Prince Fielder received from the Brewers that year, the previous record for a No. 7 selection.

Francoeur was the 23rd pick of the first round, but had a football scholarship to Clemson to use as leverage for a bonus much higher than usual for his slot.

n When Colorado shortstop Troy Tulowitzki hit for the cycle Monday, he became just the 19th cleanup hitter since 1952 to hit for the cycle. Three of those 19 have come this season: Tulowitzki, and Minnesota's Jason Kubel and Michael Cuddyer.

n Andre Ethier, Matt Kemp and James Loney could become the first trio of Dodgers since the team moved west in 1958 to each drive in 100 runs in the same season. The last time the Dodgers had three 100-RBI men was in 1955 when Duke Snider, Roy Campanella and Gil Hodges did it.

n The Tigers have lost nine straight road series. Yet they have stayed in first place in the Central Division throughout that stretch because they've played superbly at home and because they play in a weak division. Losing nine straight road series is the Tigers' longest such streak since the 119-loss 2003 Tigers lost 14 straight road series.

n The Twins released second baseman Mark Grudzielanek from his minor-league contract Sunday after eight games for Class AA New Britain. Grudzielanek had been out of baseball all season, but the Twins signed him on July 19, because Twins second basemen this year are hitting a combined .186.

n Eight different Tampa Bay relievers have a save this season. The last team to have eight or more pitchers with a save in a single season was the 2006 Cincinnati Reds.

n Zach Greinke leads the AL with a 2.33 ERA, and the Royals are 11-13 in his starts. On Wednesday at Detroit he allowed three hits and no runs over seven innings, which earned him a no-decision as Brandon Inge hit a walk-off homer off reliever Roman Colon. The Royals have now been shut out four times in Greinke's starts, and scored one or two runs in five others

Bill Madden / Crying poverty, some MLB owners are laughing all the way to the bank

For no good reason, Cliff Lee is wearing a Phillies uniform as Indians trade chance at winning for chance to pocket a few extra bucks.

With the September stretch looming, five of the seven teams with \$100 million or more payrolls - the Yankees (\$201M), Dodgers (\$100M), Phillies (\$113M), Angels (\$114M) and Tigers (\$115M) - are leading their divisions and looking more like odds-on favorites to make the postseason. One other, the Red Sox (\$122M), cannot be discounted for a wild-card berth despite their recent struggles.

Of the two \$100 million-plus teams looking like October "outs," the \$149M Mets can attribute their demise to injuries and a bad farm system while the \$134M Cubs can blame injuries and bad judgment on player signings.

Meanwhile, on the flip side of the equation, we have witnessed the middle-market Cleveland Indians and Pittsburgh Pirates trading away their best players and, in effect, rendering themselves non-competitive for the foreseeable future, all in the name of financial duress.

This is exactly what former commissioner Bowie Kuhn warned would happen back in December of 1975, when baseball arbitrator Peter Seitz ruled that the reserve clause did not bind players to their teams for life, thus opening the floodgates of free agency. The rich teams will buy up all the good players, Kuhn complained, and the middle- and small-market teams will be hard-pressed to compete.

As it turned out, Kuhn's fears proved unfounded as free agency actually reaped more competitive balance than ever through the '80s and into the '90s, despite the absence of revenue sharing. That's why it's so disingenuous to hear all this poor-mouthing from some owners today amid renewed calls for a salary cap.

Cleveland president Paul Dolan, in attempting to justify the jettisoning of '08 AL Cy Young winner Cliff Lee and the Tribe's top slugger, Victor Martinez, maintained that the team will lose \$16 million this year because the projected 2.2 million attendance will fall far short of that, to about 1.7.

"After we traded Cliff, we made a commitment toward a new direction for the franchise," Dolan doublespoke. "We needed to make moves that put us in the best position to compete as soon as possible."

How dumb does he think Cleveland fans are? How are the Indians putting themselves in the best position to compete as soon as possible by trading two of their best players - who both were signed for next year for a total of less than \$15 million? I guess it all depends on which set of books Dolan is looking at. Here are the facts:

Last year, Major League Baseball transferred approximately \$400 million in revenue sharing and luxury tax - a little more than 25% of that coming from the Yankees alone. The Indians received slightly more than \$20 million and the Pirates - despite their beautiful, eight-year-old, taxpayer-funded stadium - received over \$40 million. This is how MLB rewards incompetent ownership.

In addition to that, all major league teams received stipends of \$35 million from the MLB central fund, which includes revenue from licensing, properties, national TV and advanced media. So going in, the Indians had approximately \$55 million in the bank offset by their \$81 million payroll - a deficit of about \$25 million before they sold one ticket.

The Pirates had about \$75 million in the bank, offset by their \$48 million payroll, which means they had a profit of \$35 million before they sold one ticket. And this doesn't even include what these teams additionally reap from their local TV and radio rights packages and in-house concessions, advertising, signage, parking, etc.

Even in this recession, baseball remains awash in money, and teams that are winning are all drawing as well as or better than their preseason projections. If you win, they will come. It's that simple.

Unfortunately for Pirates fans and now Indians fans, ownership is not willing to spend what it takes to be competitive. Instead, they pocket all that revenue-sharing and central fund dough and claim they're losing money, meaning they must trade away their best players to "secure the future." What future?

Hard as this might be to believe, baseball has managed to turn back the clock 60 years, resurrecting the spirit of the St. Louis Browns and Philadelphia A's, teams that routinely sold off their best players to the Yankees and Red Sox to stay in business. The only difference is that those teams really were broke. The disgraceful Dolans in Cleveland and Bob Nutting and Frank Coonelly in Pittsburgh are crying poverty and cheating their fans all the way to the bank.

Taking Windy City by storm

Last week in Seattle, Chicago White Sox GM Kenny Williams was issued a ticket for, of all things, jaywalking. On first blush, however, that seemed like small potatoes compared to what his boss, board chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, was going to do to him for claiming Blue Jays outfielder Alex Rios, with six years and \$58 million left on his contract, on waivers. No surprise that Blue Jays GM J.P. Ricciardi just handed Rios to Williams without asking for anything return.

With a lifetime .335 on-base percentage, Rios has been viewed as one of baseball's biggest underachievers. And just a week earlier, Williams traded four prospects to the Padres for a pitcher in Jake Peavy who was on the disabled list and is owed \$52 million through 2012.

But while taking on those two huge contracts might contradict what just about all the other teams in baseball are doing, Reinsdorf thinks they will be good investments. Noting how both Rios and Peavy are just 28, Reinsdorf said: "I didn't do these deals for this year. I did them for the next 3-4 years. We haven't been able to come up with a center fielder with Rios' kind of offense and we're looking at a rotation now of Peavy, (Mark) Buerhle (John) Danks, (Gavin) Floyd and whoever."

By contrast, on the north side, the Cubs are looking more and more like a future train wreck, loaded down with injury-prone players on the downside with onerous contracts. Does the Ricketts family, which is still trying to close a \$900 million deal to buy the Cubs from the Tribune Co., have any idea what it is getting into? A \$90 million commitment to Alfonso Soriano, \$26 million to Kosuke Fukudome, \$72 million to Carlos Zambrano, \$27.5 million to Ryan Dempster, \$21 million to Milton Bradley?

These are the so-called core players on a team that is struggling badly in the mediocre NL Central. Add Lou Piniella to the vast manager's graveyard that is Wrigley Field.

It's a Madd, Madd World...

Mariners third baseman Adrian Beltre suffered what we would have to say was both the most embarrassing and unnecessary injury ever last week when a ground ball took a bad hop and struck him in the groin, tearing his testicle. No, he wasn't wearing a cup and that can really hurt.

The Tigers appear bent on getting to the postseason no matter what the cost. Manager Jim Leyland, who at the All-Star break had announced plans to start platooning underperforming right fielder Magglio Ordonez, has been playing him most of the time, even though, as of Friday, Ordonez's \$18 million option for next year will kick in with just 84 more plate appearances. Ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching.

With the deadline for signing draft picks tomorrow, all eyes are on the Washington Nationals who, to the surprise of no one, are nowhere close with Scott (Avenging Agent) Boras to locking up No. 1 overall pick Stephen Strasburg - especially after their young pitching prodigy, Jordan Zimmerman, blew out his elbow after being rushed to the big leagues this year. Latest word around baseball has Boras convincing Strasburg not to sign, go back to San Diego State and wait for next year's draft, when the Padres will have the No. 1 pick. Meanwhile, it was interesting to see where the Kansas City Royals broke ranks with Bud Selig's salary police by signing their fourth-round pick, Clemson lefthander Chris Dwyer for \$1.45 million. The starting pitcher's slotting number for fourth-rounders is about \$150,000.

Say It Ain't So

"That's what we do here. We hurt your feelings. That's easy. Call your agent and your agent will call Kenny (Williams) and then Kenny will do something about it."

White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen on how the acquisition of Alex Rios has made for reduced playing time for some of the other veteran Chicago outfielders.

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Nick Cafardo / BASEBALL NOTES / Clean-up crew hard at work

MLB panel tackles Dominican issues

By Nick Cafardo | August 16, 2009

After scandals involving steroids, the skimming of money from poor Dominican prospects by scouts, questionable practices by bascones (or agents) and other baseball personnel, and age discrepancies, commissioner Bud Selig decided it was time to clean things up.

So he commissioned a group headed by Sandy Alderson, former A's general manager and Padres president/CEO, and including Mets GM Omar Minaya, Twins GM Bill Smith, and Florida GM Larry Beinfest to look into it.

According to Alderson, the committee has pushed forward and after months of investigation, research, and interviews, the hope is that ways to resolve some of these ugly stories will soon come about. Alderson indicated that it's up to Major League Baseball to figure out solutions, but he has also met with government officials in the Dominican Republic, seeking their cooperation in a relationship that should be beneficial to both parties.

The Dominican is important to baseball and vice versa. One of the largest talent pools in baseball is in the Dominican, where just about every major league team now has an academy that not only promotes baseball but teaches poor boys how to speak English and in some cases provides schooling, support, counseling, meals, clothing, equipment, and other essentials.

Alderson and the committee are looking into the bascones, who for years have represented young Dominicans and helped them strike deals with major league teams. The problem has been that the fees these people charge are not always consistent, and in some cases, they take significant money away from the player. Perhaps a more stringent code of ethics is in order, with the possibility that bascones are held to the same scrutiny as American agents, who have to register and take tests to become player representatives.

Many of the issues could likely be solved with an international draft that includes Dominican players. There are teams who have benefitted by being able to outbid smaller-market teams for players, and the feeling is an international draft would eliminate many of the backdoor dealings that may be inappropriate.

Alderson said he has spent much of the last 12 months visiting the Dominican and meeting with government officials as well as players and agents and members of MLB's Santo Domingo office.

The steroid issue is one of the biggest concerns, because they are sold over the counter in the Dominican, though as Alderson points out, "It's not unique to the Dominican," that steroids are readily available in other Latin American countries as well. Many of the players who have been outed either in the Mitchell Report or in the list of 104 who tested positive in 2003 have been of Dominican descent.

According to USA Today, 42 of the 69 positive tests in minor league baseball in 2008 were players from the Dominican Summer League, but according to MLB figures, those numbers have been reduced significantly in 2009 - only 20 of 46 minor leaguers testing positive were from the Dominican Summer League.

Baseball also suffered a black eye when certain members of current teams tried to take advantage of the chaos and skimmed money off the top of the signing bonuses of Dominican prospects. The White Sox fired director of player personnel Dave Wilder, who once interviewed for the Red Sox' general manager's post, after he was detained by Customs for carrying \$40,000 in undeclared cash after returning from a trip to the Dominican.

International scouts and personnel from the Red Sox, Angels, and Nationals were also fired for similar practices. The Nationals fired Jose Rijo, who was Jim Bowden's assistant, and Bowden himself resigned, though he has maintained his innocence.

MLB devoted a full investigation to the topic, with many weeks of work in the Dominican. Selig followed that up with a commission to get to the bottom of it and make strong recommendations, which Alderson's committee is getting prepared to do.

The age issue is also huge. For years, parents of prospects gave scouts and teams the birth certificates of their youngest sons so the scouts would be more apt to sign them. Prospects can be signed at age 16, but one of the things being looked into is to raise that age to 18.

Alderson sounds optimistic that both short-term solutions can be reached and long-term recommendations can be implemented to get a country with a hotbed of talent to conform to the rules and the code of conduct Major League Baseball expects.

Playing a game of risk

The intestinal fortitude that White Sox general manager Ken Williams showed in making two deals that were perhaps a tad outside the box could either pay huge dividends in the form of a playoff berth or strap the team with two very expensive players in Alex Rios and Jake Peavy.

Williams deserves credit for rolling the dice, but the final judge and jury will be owner Jerry Reinsdorf, who does surprising things now and then, such as making a bid for the NHL's Phoenix Coyotes. He loosened the White Sox purse strings because his GM, who has won one championship, felt strongly about the moves, and Reinsdorf is extremely loyal to his employees.

There are people within the organization who don't like the moves, but they are willing to ride with Williams on this one.

Peavy is making rehab starts as he works his way back from an ankle injury, but an opposing GM said, "Even if Peavy can't come back full strength and help the White Sox now, the feeling is they've invested in a good front-of-the-rotation pitcher for the future.

"Rios is a complete crap shoot. A lot of money [\$60 million] for a guy we all think should be an excellent four- or five-tool player but who never seems to put it all together.

"Does he do it in Chicago? Could very well. Ozzie [Guillen] is either going to be very, very good for him or very, very bad. Don't think there'll be anything in between."

Another AL GM said, "I thought he gave up way too much for Peavy, but Rios should play well in that park and environment. Got to love Kenny."

The White Sox are nipping at the heels of the Tigers for the AL Central lead and are going to have an impact in the playoff race. They play the Red Sox eight times, starting Aug. 24 at Fenway. Peavy is on track to return to the majors Aug. 28, a day after the White Sox leave Fenway, but that's tentative. The Red Sox will play at Chicago Sept. 4-7.

With Peavy, the White Sox will have a pretty tough rotation of him, John Danks, Mark Buehrle, Gavin Floyd, and either Freddie Garcia (who was 40-21 for the White Sox from 2004-06), Bartolo Colon, or Jose Contreras.

Fireballing draft pick still a hot topic

Will he or won't he? That's the question Stephen Strasburg has everyone asking. The deadline for the Nationals to sign the draft's No. 1 overall pick is tomorrow. With agent Scott Boras involved, it's expected to come down to a dramatic conclusion at the 11th hour, with threats of sending the coveted righthander out of San Diego State to Japan or the Independent League or Mars.

While most baseball people feel the Nationals will land Strasburg, the process has fascinated commissioner Bud Selig, who has watched the negotiations very closely.

While many smaller-market teams are shooting for strict slotting of draft picks, the Nationals would have to step way out of that to get Strasburg signed. Most teams who watched Strasburg think he's worth the money.

Said one general manager who watched Strasburg a few times, "If you're giving Jeff Suppan four years at \$40 million, why wouldn't you do it for this kid? We're talking about a kid who can throw 103 miles per hour with movement. He'll be able to step in and be one of the best pitchers in the game."

It's an important signing for the Nationals franchise, which has endured much humiliation this season. Only recently, with an eight-game winning streak, have they been able to establish some dignity. Strasburg's presence could ignite the fan base, especially if he joins the team soon. Given that Jordan Zimmermann will have Tommy John surgery, that's a distinct possibility.

Etc.

Touching the bases

Apropos of nothing: 1. Most popular names on the disabled lists: Gonzalez (9), Johnson (7), Cabrera (6), Martinez (5), Chavez (4); 2. Giants farm teams had a minor league-best .603 winning percentage, with White Sox teams second at .549; 3. Sometimes we forget what a great player Vlad Guerrero (400 homers, .320 career average) has been; 4. We hope Trevor Bell, the Angels' No. 1 pick in 2005 who has replaced the injured Joe Saunders, doesn't have many bad outings. He is the grandson of Bob Bell, the original Bozo the Clown; 5. Still can't get over Justin Verlander throwing 100 miles per hour on his 123d pitch Thursday.

Updates on nine

1. Tony Pena Jr., RHP, Royals - Once a weak-hitting shortstop, he is converting to pitcher, with the blessing of his father, the Yankees bench coach. "He's got a great arm, so why not use it?" said the elder Pena. "He loves the game. Loves to play. He made it to the major leagues as a shortstop, and if he works hard, which I know he will, he could make it as a pitcher." Pena Jr. started in the Arizona Rookie League and was promoted to Single A Burlington after two appearances.
2. John Smoltz, RHP, free agent - He at first agreed to a minor league assignment, but after thinking it over, he elected to pass on Boston's offer. He also balked at the suggestion of going to the bullpen after saying he was willing to do it just before rejoining the Red Sox. The Marlins, Cardinals, and Dodgers remain interested, and the Sox will likely release him when the 10-day period ends.
3. Michael Weiner, executive director, MLB Players Association - The Harvard-educated Weiner has already made a huge impact with the David Ortiz press conference in New York. Weiner raised doubts about the veracity of the 2003 test results, which is good news for all players. Weiner was brilliant in throwing out androstenedione as a product that was not illegal but which many players took. Where Ortiz swung and missed was not specifying what supplements he took; he must know, since he ordered some of them through the mail.
4. Erik Bedard, LHP, Mariners - Looks like his Seattle career is over. The Mariners gave the Orioles All-Star outfielder Adam Jones, closer George Sherrill, young pitching standout Chris Tillman, and reliever Kam Mickolio as well as minor league pitcher Tony Butler for Bedard, who will be a free agent. Bedard, a talented lefty with a sour personality, had surgery Friday and a torn labrum was found. It will be 4-6 months before he can begin baseball activities.
5. Chris Young, CF, Diamondbacks - There are a lot of guys in Young's boat this year - guys who were once good (J.J. Hardy) but are having inexplicably bad seasons. The first rookie in major league history with 32 homers and 27 steals in 2007, Young was optioned to Triple A Reno after hitting .194 with 7 homers and 28 RBIs in 103 games this year. Arizona has him signed through 2013, with an \$11 million option in 2014. Yikes.
6. Tom Gordon, RHP, free agent - He still wants to play after being released by the Diamondbacks last week. The 41-year-old Gordon has 138 wins and 158 saves and has played for eight teams. "I still love pitching and I feel I could help a team," he said.
7. Mike Timlin, RHP, free agent - He signed a minor league deal with the Rockies July 29 and gave it a couple of weeks, but on Friday, he decided to leave the organization. Timlin, 43, had hoped to be up to the majors by this time. His velocity was in the 86-90 range, and in 4 2/3 innings in Triple A, he allowed seven hits and two earned runs, with six strikeouts and two walks.
8. Heath Bell, RHP, Padres - He was put on trade waivers Friday, so we'll see what type of activity there is. Bell could be a huge bullpen piece for a contending team. If he ever got to the Cardinals, that would be one team to watch. The other would be the Phillies, who have concerns about Brad Lidge (seven blown saves).
9. Bill Hall, INF, Brewers - Designated for assignment, the versatile Hall has had a terrible season after hitting 35 homers in 2006, but might be a nice piece for a contending team. He can play multiple positions, steal a base, and add some pop. Hall, owed \$10.5 million by the Brewers, is still only 29 years old. While Milwaukee GM Doug Melvin was talking trade, teams may wait until Hall clears waivers rather than absorb the money.

Short hops

From the Bill Chuck Files: "Among players who have played 280-300 games in their careers, no one has more stolen bases than Jacoby Ellsbury and no one has been hit by more pitches than Kelly Shoppach." Also, "Three's company - The Phillies' Ryan Howard, Raul Ibanez, and Chase Utley lead the majors in RBIs for a threesome. Evan Longoria, Carlos Pena, and Ben Zobrist of the Rays lead the AL, surprisingly followed by Justin Morneau, Joe Mauer, and Jason Kubel of the Twins." . . . Happy 36th birthday, Damian Jackson, and happy 43d to Terry Shumpert.

The Way It Was: Deadliest pitch still a stunner

By Dick Heller | Sunday, August 16, 2009

As right-hander Carl Mays of the New York Yankees wound up, he detected a slight shift in the batter's stance, as if he intended to bunt for the third time in the game. Just like that, the pitcher decided to fire the ball high and tight to make a sacrifice more difficult.

At the plate, the batter inexplicably never moved as the fastball sailed toward his head. It struck him in the left temple with a resounding crack heard all over New York's big Polo Grounds. Suddenly the crowd of 23,000 was deathly silent - a sadly appropriate adverb, as it turned out.

The date was Aug. 16, 1920. Roughly 12 hours later, popular Cleveland Indians shortstop Ray Chapman died at nearby St. Lawrence Hospital. Eighty-nine years later, he remains the only player fatally beamed in a major league game.

The Indians, locked in a dramatic struggle for first place with the Yankees and the not yet blackened Chicago White Sox, eventually won the American League pennant and the World Series - triumphs marred forever by the Chapman tragedy.

Chapman was in his ninth season at age 29. A sunny sort liked by both teammates and opponents, he was known as one of the majors' best shortstops and a dangerous clutch hitter. His lifetime batting average was .278, and he had led the American League in walks and runs during a 1918 season shortened by World War I.

Mays, an early Yankees star who would win 26 games that season and 27 the next, had a reputation as a nasty customer who didn't mind firing his underhand deliveries at hitters. Back then, of course, batting helmets did not exist. The batter had no protection except his reflexes when a baseball - often discolored and misshapen - rocketed at him.

And Chapman's reflexes failed him. He stood transfixed as the pitch clobbered him and rebounded to the mound. Mays, thinking the ball had struck the bat handle, grabbed it and fired to first base. Meanwhile, Chapman sank to his knees without uttering a sound as blood poured from his left ear.

With players from both teams gathered around, Chapman tried and failed to speak. A short time later, incredibly, he struggled to his feet and began walking toward the clubhouse in center field. As he neared second base, his knees buckled. Other players carried him the rest of the way.

While Chapman was being placed in the ambulance, his thoughts were with his 26-year-old wife of 10 months back in Cleveland. According to author Mike Sowell in his 1989 book "The Pitch That Killed," Ray turned toward former catcher John Henry, a close friend, and whispered, "John, for God's sake don't call Kate. But if you do, tell her I'm all right." Then he lost consciousness.

Talking with reporters later at the hospital, Indians manager and star center fielder Tris Speaker noted that he had been beamed in 1916 but suffered no permanent damage.

"I am hopeful Chappie will be back as soon as I was," Speaker added. "I was out 10 days."

A short time later, the doctors told Speaker that Chapman's skull was fractured, necessitating surgery that could be not postponed until his wife arrived. Speaker gave permission. A 90-minute operation was completed around 2 a.m., and it appeared very briefly that Chapman was improving. But at 4:40, he was pronounced dead.

When Kathleen Chapman arrived by train at 10, she and a priest went to Speaker's room at the Ansonia Hotel, where Mrs. Chapman asked the manager, "He's dead, isn't he?" When Speaker nodded, she fainted.

About the same time, Mays answered the door at his apartment to find Yankees official Mark Roth standing there.

"Carl, I've got some bad news for you," Roth said. "Ray Chapman died at 4 this morning."

Stunned, Mays shut the door in his face.

Police soon arrived to protect Mays and took his statement. Though he was cleared of any malicious intent, players from the Boston Red Sox and Detroit Tigers later threatened to boycott games with the Yankees unless the pitcher was barred from baseball. Nothing came of it.

Mays subsequently insisted that a rough spot on the fatal ball caused it to sail and said the umpires should have thrown it out.

"My conscience is absolutely clear," he said. "If it was not, I could not think of ever going near a baseball park again."

Mays pitched in the major leagues for another nine seasons, winning 207 lifetime games, and lived for another half-century. Yet in one sense he was as much a victim as Ray Chapman because when he died at age 79 in 1971, that one deadly pitch was all anybody remembered

Gammons

Wild card still working its magic

Injustice remains throughout the system, which is why it is so refreshing to see the Pirates and Royals reinvest their revenue-sharing money into signing players above Bud Selig's hallowed (and irrelevant) slots. But the reality is that for all the revenue sharing, for the seeming world championship parity for the last 31 years, less than a third of the season remains, and (except for the St. Louis Cardinals) the highest payroll in each of the other five divisions sits in first place.

There were rational, well-thought-out arguments against the concept of the wild card, but without cheapening the regular season to the levels of the NBA and NHL, the wild card has -- in a diminished economy that is increasingly affecting revenues and attendance and financial planning for the 2010 season -- allowed hope.

Take what may have been this weekend's two most important series. The first, Boston at Texas, began with the Rangers fighting within a half-game of the Red Sox despite injuries and the crumbling of Tom Hicks' financial empire, which is so bad that the Arlington grounds crew can't afford to water the playing field in equator weather.

The other is NL wild-card leader Colorado going into South Florida to try to hold back the Marlins. In case you hadn't noticed, the Rockies went in with a run differential bettered only by the Yankees and Dodgers, and the Marlins could get the deficit down to two games by opening the series with one of the game's true aces, Josh Johnson, who is 19-3 since he came back from elbow surgery in 2008.

Colorado. Florida. Texas. Boston. With Tampa Bay, San Francisco, Atlanta, the Cubs and Milwaukee on the horizon. Seven of the wild-card contenders need every ounce of hope to keep up their revenues and keep themselves solvent.

Further expanding the wild card to include a play-in series and four tiers of postseason series may be too much, too complex, too reliant on the roll of the dice in a sport that is built around the long run.

But 15 years after the implementation of the wild card, it is evident that it has done what Bud Selig intended. Can Colorado build a team on its payroll that can beat the Dodgers over 162 games? No. Nor can the Marlins when faced with the Phillies' payroll. Tampa's run may someday be seen as an anomaly, although they showed that anything can happen in October, like the Angels in 2002, the Marlins in 2003, the Red Sox in 2004 and the Rockies in 2007. Ubaldo Jimenez or Johnson could be this year's Josh Beckett. Hey, the Red Sox don't have to worry about the Yankees; they just have to think about getting into the playoffs and having Beckett, Jon Lester, Jonathan Papelbon and the rest of the bullpen lined up.

The Giants know that their pitching can beat anyone in October (and, this year, November), especially after adding to their offense with Freddy Sanchez and Ryan Garko and knowing Madison Bumgarner is lurking out on the horizon. Even if the Cubs cannot catch Albert Pujols, Chris Carpenter and Adam Wainwright, if they can somehow patch together their lineup (memo to Alfonso Soriano and Geovany Soto) and cobble their rotation into order, they can go far in the postseason. Remember, their regular rotation of Ted Lilly, Ryan Dempster, Rich Harden and Carlos Zambrano has been together for only two stretches all season: April 6 to May 7 and June 9 to July 3. Lilly and Zambrano could be back in the rotation Monday in San Francisco and next weekend, respectively, with Aramis Ramirez back in the lineup.

The season is more than two-thirds over this weekend, and half the teams have a chance. That we're watching every moment of a Rockies-Marlins series on the Ides of August and that the 33rd pitch Victor Martinez saw Friday night would be one of those moments that could last into snow is something we'd never have fathomed five months ago, so the idea worked. And works.

Boston has to improve its defense. Jon Lester's in-play average is .345, the GIDPs behind him down from 27 to 9, and the team defense that ranks 29th (ahead of only the Royals) has to improve for Lester, Junichi Tazawa and Clay Buchholz. The Red Sox, by the way, did not go after Khalil Greene when he cleared waivers.

It may pain the Rangers to face Tazawa on Sunday -- Texas' international scouting director, Jim Colborn, tried to sign him for \$7 million. "That they got Tazawa at their number [\$3.3 million] is testament to the relationship they built up [particularly with Craig Shipley]," says Rangers GM Jon Daniels. "It also is part of the side value of the \$100 million they invested in Daisuke Matsuzaka."

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- San Diego put Heath Bell on waivers Friday, and the Angels reportedly are interested, but several GMs expressed doubt that the Padres would be able to trade him. "They should take Francisco Cordero," one GM says. "The Reds will move him."
 - As of Saturday, most baseball people think the Nats will sign Stephen Strasburg if negotiations with Scott Boras do not get contentious. Guesstimates? Perhaps \$22 million for three years, then Boras can go to arbitration for three years and make a deal for \$60 million to \$70 million for six years.
 - Fans and media love firings, and they sure have been coming after Trey Hillman, J.P. Ricciardi, Eric Wedge and Cecil Cooper.
 - The Mets' thinking on Billy Wagner right now is that they'll offer him arbitration and get draft choices, since Wagner isn't going to want to come back and set up for Francisco Rodriguez.