

Masterson struggles in loss to A's Indians endure fourth straight road defeat in Oakland

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Both the Indians and A's entered Thursday's contest more than 15 games out of their respective division races. Both have endured losing streaks as long as five games this season. Both are showering its rookies with countless opportunities. Essentially, both have transformed the field into a classroom.

However, while the A's have recently watched their youth play a part in the spoiler role, the Indians have watched their work-in-progress group flounder toward the finish line.

And, on Thursday, it showed.

The Tribe managed just six hits off five Oakland pitchers while Cleveland starter Justin Masterson lasted just four frames en route to a 5-2 loss in the first of a four-game set against the A's, who are winners of nine of their past 11.

Meanwhile, the Indians watched their current road trip record move to 0-4. Furthermore, they have lost 15 of their past 19 games -- basically erasing what was once a second-half rally.

Aside from a two-run fifth inning, the offense failed to produce any type of rally on Thursday night. Trevor Crowe hit a run-scoring triple in that frame, which was capped off with an RBI ground out off the bat of Michael Brantley against A's starter Clayton Mortensen.

The Oakland right-hander exited the game after that frame, but the A's relief corps kept the Indians lineup in check, scattering just two hits through four frames while closer Andrew Bailey picked up his 25th save of the season -- an ongoing record for Oakland rookies.

"He had a good sinker, threw some good sliders," manager Eric Wedge said of Mortensen. "We were chasing them a little bit, but he had good stuff out there."

The Indians' skipper unfortunately couldn't say the same about his own starter's sinker, which played a key role in the surrendering of five runs on six hits -- among them a costly three-run blast by Kurt Suzuki in the third inning.

"I kind of hung that sinker to Suzuki that he hit out," Masterson said. "On 0-2 he got one that stands out in the middle of the plate and says, 'Hit me over the fence.' So he did what he was supposed to do."

Said Suzuki: "The first at-bat he threw me a couple sliders that were the same speed as his heater. I was just trying to sit hard and look for something up out over the plate, try to get the ball elevated a little bit. When you're not trying to do too much the ball goes farther than when you do try to hit it far. I just tried to put a quick swing on it."

The result was a four-run third frame for the A's, who would stay quiet the remainder of the night against relievers Jensen Lewis, Mike Gosling and Jose Veras. The Tribe trio combined for four innings of shutout ball, providing a rare bright spot in the rather forgettable loss.

"It was nice to see the bullpen come in and do a good job," Masterson said. "The sinker was pretty much the one that did me in. Instead of having late action, it looked somewhat like a cookie when I left it up a little bit, and their guys were hitting it."

The A's offense wasn't alone in noticing the mistakes offered by the 24-year-old Masterson, who was acquired by the Indians on July 31 in the trade that sent Victor Martinez to Boston.

"He was a little off sync tonight and never really put it together," Wedge said. "He wasn't quite as smooth as we've seen him. Obviously, he gave up the big three-run homer to Suzuki, but he threw a lot of pitches and had to work pretty hard there."

Working hard is what Wedge and Co. are all about these days. The results, however, are coming slower than liked.

"We're going through a tough stretch right now, but we still have to battle," Wedge said. "The few veterans we have are going through some tough times and, for the young players, every day is a learning experience."

"You got to keep the energy there, the positive attitude, especially when you're going through a stretch like we are right now. You have to keep mentally tough, can't give into the fight, can't look toward the end of the season, can't look toward the end of the day. You have to make everything about today."

Easier said than done for a team that boasts a Major League-tying 12 rookies on its 30-man roster. The losing makes for a disappointed and frustrated environment, but more than anything, says Masterson, "it's just not fun."

"It's not fun losing, ever," he said. "We need to get the victory so that we can have that fire. Even though there's no playoffs it's to make strides for the next year so that hopefully we can make the playoffs for years to come."

For now, though, it's all about smaller steps for a team whose youth and inexperience is catching up with them.

"Of course you'd like to win a little bit more because that encourages that working environment even better when you're learning," Masterson said. "It's just hard to come out and know that you're trying to learn and work on stuff and sometimes you are and it bites you."

"But we're all in it together. We're going to fight until the end of this year and then, next year, turn it on even more

Cabrera better after injury scare
Indians shortstop fouled pitch off knee on Wednesday

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Manager Eric Wedge admitted before Thursday's game against the A's that "it's been such an odd year" for the Tribe.

Hard to argue there, especially with a Major League-tying 12 rookies in tow.

The roller-coaster ride continued Wednesday when Asdrubal Cabrera left the game against the Twins after fouling a pitch off his right knee.

The ride slowed Thursday, though, with news that the shortstop is "OK."

"He'll probably need a day, obviously, but he came in here feeling better," Wedge said before the start of the Indians' four-game set in Oakland. "He's still sore. We'll probably keep him off his feet as long as we can and hopefully he'll be ready to go tomorrow. He might even be available later tonight."

That's good news for the struggling Indians, who can't afford to lose a .306 hitter, having entered Thursday's contest 4-14 since Aug. 28.

"He's been a very consistent player for us," Wedge said of Cabrera, whose batting average ranks 12th in the American League. "We've utilized him in the one-, two- and three-hole, and he's been very flexible in that regard."

"He's done a real good job for us."

Tribe waiting for seeds to bloom
Cleveland (61-85) at Oakland (68-78), 10:05 p.m. ET

By Jane Lee / Special to MLB.com

OAKLAND -- Some days are good. Others are bad.

Some days will call for a pat on the butt. Others will require a kick in the butt.

But, according to manager Eric Wedge, "that's all a part of being a big leaguer and being a young big leaguer."

And with 12 rookies on a 30-man roster, the Tribe is having to spend more time than usual grooming the aforementioned youngsters. With the team well out of playoff contention, though, the amount of learning time has proved to be extensive.

"We want to help these young kids learn every day," Wedge said. "It's been such an unusual and trying year, you should be able to learn more from that than you do on a good year."

"You manage toward your players, you coach toward your players. Obviously there's a lot more of that going on with younger players."

Thus, the bigger picture in Cleveland these days involves "more structure" and "more conversations."

"It's more of a learning process, especially during the game," Wedge said. "They're going to make mistakes, whether they be mental or fundamental. Whatever you have to do to help them understand and get better, that's why we're here."

One suck rookie involved in the Tribe's adjustment process is Friday starter David Huff, who will make his 22nd big league start against the A's. He is 3-0 with a 2.84 ERA in his past three starts, but -- like most rookies -- has witnessed an up-and-down season.

"You have good days and bad days," Wedge said, "but consistency is key. There's nothing more important than being consistent."

"It's the big leagues. There's a certain level of play that's expected. You gotta really work hard to keep your head up, make plays, make good decisions and stay ahead of the game. For young players, that's hard for them to do because it does speed up here and things happen fast. That's why you have to work that much harder mentally."

Pitching matchup

CLE: LHP David Huff (10-7, 6.14 ERA)

Huff, who joined the Indians' rotation in mid-May, became the club's first 10-game winner this season when he turned in six innings against the Royals on Sept. 12, allowing three runs on seven hits with a walk and six strikeouts. He's shown improved command and aggressiveness of late, as his rookie season winds to a close.

OAK: LHP Brett Anderson (9-10, 4.37 ERA)

In his past two starts, Anderson has picked up back-to-back wins for the third time this season. The lefty pitched seven strong innings in a winning effort against Minnesota last Saturday, allowing just two runs on five hits while collecting four strikeouts. It was the fewest hits Anderson had allowed since July 29, when he gave up just four to Boston. Anderson also did not surrender a walk on Saturday -- the first time in 10 starts he did not allow a free pass. He'll be facing Cleveland for the first time in his career.

Tidbits

This is the first time the Tribe has visited Oakland since April 4-6, 2008. "You've got a different cast of characters and new faces, so you have to prepare and do a little homework," Wedge said. "They're playing well right now, we're having our struggles right now." ... Wedge and A's skipper Bob Geren, both catchers, played together with the Boston Red Sox in 1992. "Bob's a good guy," Wedge said. "We got along well." ... Lou Marson set a career high with three hits in Thursday's game, the third multi-hit game of his career. ...With a triple in the fifth inning of Thursday's contest, Trevor Crowe extended his hitting streak to six games. He is batting .318 (7-for-22) during that span.

Masterson stumbles, Tribe falls 5-2

By Sheldon Ocker

Beacon Journal sports writer

OAKLAND, CALIF.: The Athletics are a team in pain.

They play in a ballpark etched with yard markers, owing to the presence of the Oakland Raiders. Their roster is filled with players who might be future stars or future stiff, and nobody comes to watch.

Check that: Attendance Thursday night was 10,873, but that figure represents tickets sold not bodies in the seats. Say one thing for the estimated 3,000 who showed up, they had a good time watching their team hand the Indians their 14th loss in the past 17 games.

The score was 5-2, and Justin Masterson suffered through one of his poorer starts.

Masterson was in trouble from the outset, giving up a double to Adam Kennedy, who led off in the first inning. Two ground balls later, Kennedy scored, but Masterson allowed no further damage in that inning.

But he limped through the third inning, which began with a walk to Cliff Pennington. Kennedy followed with his second double, scoring Pennington.

Two more runs would follow before Masterson retired the side.

Masterson achieved temporary relief by striking out Rajai Davis, but he walked Ryan Sweeney to put runners on first and second, and Kurt Suzuki hammered a drive over the center field wall for a three-run homer that gave Oakland a 5-0 lead.

One out later, Jack Cust and Mark Ellis singled, but Masterson induced Daric Barton to bounce to second to finally retire the side. Two more batters reached in the fourth, but Masterson held the line.

Manager Eric Wedge elected to go to his bullpen after the fourth inning, because Masterson had already thrown 93 pitches. Moreover, he did not have anything close to satisfactory command (he walked four), though he did have good enough stuff to strike out six.

Among the Athletics roster of largely anonymous pitchers, Clayton Mortensen has the distinction of coming to Oakland in the deal that sent Matt Holliday to the Cardinals. That means he should be a serious prospect.

He began the season at Memphis, St. Louis' Triple-A affiliate and spent time at Sacramento, the A's Triple-A farm team. He was summoned to Oakland in August and made three starts before Thursday night (He also started a game for the Cardinals in June).

Though his earned-run average coming in was a disappointing 6.88, Mortensen began to show promise in his last start, against the Twins, whom he held to one run in six innings for his first major-league win.

Mortensen found the going easy against the Tribe. In five innings, he allowed just one run and four hits, walking three.

He got in trouble in the second but only because he walked two and gave up an infield single to load the bases with two outs.

The Tribe did not threaten again until the fifth, when Lou Marson led off with a single and scored on Trevor Crowe's triple. Michael Brantley's groundout brought Crowe to the plate, but Mortensen stopped the bleeding right there, although he allowed a single to Shin-Soo Choo before retiring the side.

Was it Mortensen's excellence or the Tribe's incompetence? Four A's relievers followed Mortensen to the mound, and all of them put a chill into the Indians' attack, giving up two hits and a walk in four innings.

A succession of relievers — Jensen Lewis, Mike Gosling, Jose Veras — kept a lid on the Oakland attack, which produced only one hit off the Tribe bullpen.

Tribe novices need time, attention

By Sheldon Ocker

OAKLAND: Rookies wear big-league uniforms, but they aren't fully formed major leaguers.

Nobody is more aware of that than manager Eric Wedge, whose young Indians tested his patience during the three-game series (all losses) against the Minnesota Twins that concluded Wednesday at the Metrodome.

Before Tuesday night's game, Wedge presided over a team meeting, explaining afterward: "There were a few things I wasn't crazy about. We have a lot of young people here. I want to make sure they know how we go about things."

After a loss the next night, Wedge blamed bad decisions for costing the club two or three runs.

Unfortunately, it takes time for novices to become veterans. And it's difficult to rush the process.

"Sometimes you give them a pat on the butt," the manager said, "and sometimes you give them a kick in the butt, whatever you have to do to help them get better."

"Consistency is the key. Nothing is more important. The game is much faster up here than in the minors. You have to make decisions quickly. To do that, you have to prepare. You can't be thinking about it in real time and then saying go."

Even a couple of months can make a noticeable difference in a novice player's performance. Matt LaPorta doesn't look like the same player now as he did in his first 3 1/2-week stint with the Tribe in May.

Improvement is based primarily on repetition and receiving advice from the manager and coaching staff. But Wedge feels the most effective guidance can come from teammates.

"We don't have a large number of veterans," Wedge said. "But Jamey [Carroll] will pull somebody aside, so will Kerry Wood and Travis Hafner. That is very appreciated. I'm a very big believer in one player doing something for another player."

Carroll said he has not always felt comfortable correcting another player.

"But more so this year than any other," he said. "I always looked at myself as the 25th guy on the roster, someone who was just happy to be here."

But in his two years with Cleveland, Carroll has become a valuable piece of the puzzle, more so than most utility players.

"If I'm around certain situations, I might offer up something," he said. "Most of the time, some coach will beat me to it. Even then, I might come up afterward and say something. I always did things by observing, so this was kind of new to me."

There have been veteran players who have taken it upon themselves to mentor a particular rookie. Former Tribe designated hitter Ellis Burks once bought CC Sabathia a suit. Later, Sabathia did the same for a newcomer.

"Bartolo Colon bought me a couple of suits," Carroll said. "So did Michael Barrett. I think with Bartolo it was more a thing that me and Endy Chavez got called up when he won 20 games, 10 in one league and 10 in the other."

That was in 2002, when Colon was traded by the Tribe to the Montreal Expos.

Players don't have to criticize one another to make a point. When two young players become buddies, the interaction can serve to make both more adept on the field.

Asdrubal Cabrera and Luis Valbuena have that kind of rapport, and they play next to each other, Cabrera at shortstop, Valbuena at second.

"If two guys are hanging out together, the conversation is going to be about baseball, either at the ballpark or somewhere else," Wedge said. "When guys like that have a great relationship, you can see it on the field."

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Indians notebook: LaPorta smacking them to center for change of pace

By Sheldon Ocker

OAKLAND: Since being called up from Columbus Aug. 19, Matt LaPorta has hit five home runs, the first three to left, the last two to center.

What difference does it make which direction the ball goes as long as it leaves the ballpark? Throughout LaPorta's minor-league career, his power was as a pull hitter to left. That might be changing.

"I think in all my time in the minors, I hit about three balls to right," he said. "So one thing I've worked on is going the other way. For a while, I really scuffled trying to do it. I used to be more of a guider. But something clicked, and now I can drive the ball to all fields."

OPTIMISTIC ABOUT ASDRUBAL — Asdrubal Cabrera did not need an X-ray after he fouled a ball off his knee Wednesday.

He has a bruise that kept him out of the lineup tonight, but Manager Eric Wedge felt he might play Friday.

"He probably needs a day," Wedge said. "He's OK, though. We'll keep him off his feet as much as we can today and hope he plays tomorrow."

TIME MACHINE NEEDED? — It's been 17 months since the Indians played a series in Oakland, dating to April 4-6, 2008.

"That's something we're becoming accustomed to," Wedge said. "With the unbalanced schedule and interleague play, it doesn't surprise anybody when you haven't been to a particular ballpark or play a team in a long time.

"Our team has turned over, their team has turned over. That's what happens when you're not playing particularly well. That's why you have to do extra preparation."

PLAYOFF UPDATE — Clayton Cook allowed only one run and four hits in five innings, but Mahoning Valley lost the final game of the best-of-three New York-Penn League finals 5-2 to Staten Island. Rafael Vera tripled and drove in a run.

Suzuki leads Athletics to win

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP)—Kurt Suzuki thinks defense first. When the catcher makes a rare appearance as Oakland's cleanup hitter, though, he slides into the role of run producer.

Suzuki hit a three-run homer to help the Athletics beat the Cleveland Indians 5-2 on Thursday night.

"When you're not trying to do too much it seems the ball goes farther," Suzuki said. "We're having fun and it's showing on the field."

Suzuki batted fourth for the fifth time this season, and improved his slugging percentage in the spot to .667. He's hitting .286 there with a pair of home runs and eight RBIs.

"He doesn't strike out much and puts the ball in play," A's manager Bob Geren said. "That's how you pick up runs when you have a man at third."

Suzuki has driven in 21 runs over his last 17 games despite hitting .219 over that span. He leads the A's with 78 RBIs and is trying to become the first catcher to lead the team in the category since 1944.

"I just want to be productive," he said. "Last year I hit .279 and had half as many RBIs (42). I want to put the ball in play and make the defense work."

Adam Kennedy doubled twice and drove in a run for the A's, who have won four straight and nine of 11. Clayton Mortensen (2-2) pitched five innings to win his second consecutive start.

"He did his job; he kept the ball down and we got him some runs early," Geren said. "I'm happy to get what I got out of him. His first inning was about as good as you can pitch."

Trevor Crowe tripled home a run and Michael Brantley added an RBI groundout for the Indians, who have lost five straight and nine of 10. Lou Marson had a career-high three hits.

"We're going through a tough stretch right now," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "We have a lot of young (hitters) and we're chasing a lot of bad pitches. It's something we have to battle through. We probably made four or five mental errors and they add up."

Mortensen gave up two runs and four hits, struck out four and walked three. Andrew Bailey pitched the ninth for his 25th save in 29 chances, and has converted his last 20 opportunities.

Justin Masterson (4-8) lost his fourth straight decision, allowing five runs and six hits over four innings.

The A's scored four times in the third to build a 5-0 lead. Cliff Pennington led off with a walk and scored on Kennedy's second double. After Rajai Davis struck out, Ryan Sweeney walked and Suzuki followed with his 13th homer.

"I just kind of hung that sinker to Suzuki that he hit out," Masterson said. "It's 0-2 and you want one that goes down to the dirt, not one that just hangs out in the middle of the plate and says 'Hit me over the fence.' So he did what he's supposed to."

Kennedy went 2 for 5 and is batting .383 in September, with 10 multihit games. Kennedy leads the A's with 41 multihit games despite joining the team on May 8.

NOTES: In the eighth, Shin-Soo Choo was hit by a pitch for the 15th time this season and Cleveland's major league-high 78th plunking. ... X-rays on Indians SS Asdrubal Cabrera's sore right knee were negative and he's likely to return to the lineup on Saturday. ... A's RHP Vin Mazzaro will not pitch the rest of the season due to right shoulder tendinitis. ... A's LHP Dana Eveland will start Sunday's series finale.

Eastern League Championship Series

Clutch hitter at Head of class

Left fielder who aided winning streak looks like a postseason MVP

By Stephanie Storm Beacon Journal sports writer Published on Friday, Sep 18, 2009

Tyler Minges was the man in 2003.

Nathan Panther came out of nowhere to claim MVP honors in 2005.

If the Aeros are to go on and win their third Eastern League Championship by clinching the title in Game 3 of the Eastern League Championship Series tonight at Canal Park, this year's postseason MVP likely will be left-fielder Jerad Head.

Head's profile won't be in any prospect books, but his clutch hits have helped propel the Aeros to a franchise-best, 13-game winning streak and a 2-0 advantage over the Connecticut Defenders.

"I can't say enough about what Jerad Head has meant to this team this year," Aeros manager Mike Sarbaugh said. "He practically carried the team offensively in April, when so many others got off to slow starts."

Head at 6-foot-1, 205 pounds, leads all players in the postseason in doubles (six), extra-base hits (seven) and RBI (nine).

"I don't know what it is or that I'm doing anything differently," Head said last week. "I guess I'm just seeing the ball really well right now."

Signed by the Tribe as an undrafted free agent in 2005 out of Washburn University in Kansas, Head is the quintessential utility man.

For the Aeros, Head has played left field, right field, center field, first base, second base, third base and designated hitter, and he has committed just eight errors in 98 games.

In the regular season, Head also hit .282 with 23 doubles, four triples, six home runs and 47 RBI — with splits nearly identical whether facing right or left handers.

"Jerad has such a consistent approach to hitting," Sarbaugh said. "It is such a luxury to have someone with a little pop in their bat in the nine hole for us."

Head isn't the only hot-hitting Aeros player right now.

Second baseman Josh Rodriguez has found the groove he was in before injuring a hamstring that forced him to miss 101 games during the regular season.

Upon his return to the Aeros' lineup late in the regular season, Rodriguez went 1-for-23 with 13 strikeouts before finally getting his timing down. In five games in the postseason, Rodriguez is batting .333 (8-for-24) with four doubles and seven RBI.

Rodriguez hit his first home run of the season, a ninth-inning, three-run homer Wednesday night giving the Aeros a 7-6 victory at Connecticut's Dodd Stadium.

No more camo

The Aeros' alternate camouflage jerseys that the players favor have been banned for the Eastern League Championship Series. Traditionally designed to be worn as an occasional third jersey, the Aeros wore them in the Southern Division Series against Reading, and that riled up some officials.

In an e-mail to the Aeros this week, Tim Brunswick, the executive director of baseball operations at Minor League Baseball wrote: "The camo jerseys are a specialty jersey, and are to only be worn for a special promotion one game a year or possible few games a year with prior approval from Minor League Baseball."

Pitching matchup

The Aeros are expected to send left-handed pitcher Eric Berger (1-0, 1.80 ERA) to the mound against Connecticut lefty Craig Clark (0-1, 5.40 ERA) tonight. Games 4 and 5 would also be at Canal Park on Saturday and Sunday, each starting at 7:05 p.m.

Under-the-radar OFs who've emerged

By Jerry Crasnick ESPN.com

Category of the week: Major league outfielders who've blossomed in 2009

In the interests of keeping the Starting 9 from expanding to the Starting 20-something, a few qualifiers were necessary. We left out guys older than 30, so Juan Rivera and Matt Diaz didn't make the cut.

We wanted players who've shown perseverance and plugged away through some career setbacks, so we excluded rookies -- unless they spent at least a decade in anonymity in the minor leagues. Sorry about that, Chris Coghlan, Andrew McCutchen and Nolan Reimold.

We figure Matt Kemp, Andre Ethier and Justin Upton already were considered hot stuff before this season. And because Jayson Werth, Shane Victorino, Nelson Cruz, Ben Zobrist and Adam Jones all made the All-Star team, they've already received their fair share of recognition.

Seven of the players listed below are with their second or third organizations. The other two (Adam Lind and Denard Span) are former hyped prospects who endured a rough patch in the majors or the minors and had to make some adjustments to get over the hump.

Past performance isn't necessarily an indicator of future results, as they say in the mutual funds game. But these players all raised their stock considerably in 2009.

Michael Bourn, Astros (.293 BA, 56 steals and 11 triples)

"He's been our most valuable player," Houston general manager Ed Wade said of Bourn, who is turning out to be everything the Astros hoped for when they acquired him from Philadelphia in the Brad Lidge trade.

Bourn's speed sets him apart, but the big question was whether he'd hit enough to put his wheels to use. He contributed off the bench for the Phillies in 2007, but it didn't help his development to spend the entire season in the majors and log only 119 at-bats.

After hitting .229 for Houston in 2008, Bourn played winter ball in the Dominican Republic at the club's request. Manager Cecil Cooper batted him eighth on Opening Day, and Bourn eventually worked his way up to second in the order, then first. He's done an admirable job learning to hit leadoff on the fly -- and we do mean "fly."

"Last year Michael put himself in a lot of tough situations," Wade said. "Word got around that he was trying to take pitches and be patient, and all of a sudden he was hitting in a lot of 0-2 and 1-2 counts. Now if somebody throws a fastball, he'll square it up and hit it somewhere -- preferably to the left side."

Bourn has gradually found the right balance between patient and overaggressive. He ranks second on the team to Lance Berkman with a .365 on-base percentage, is hitting .379 with runners in scoring position and has 40 extra-base hits. He's also given the Astros a big lift defensively.

"He makes center field look awfully small," Wade said. "Sometimes it seems like he's covering it corner to corner, foul line to foul line."

Adam Lind, Blue Jays (30 HRs, 101 RBIs, .913 OPS)

Lind, a third-round pick out of Juan Pierre's school, South Alabama, sailed through the Blue Jays' minor league system. But once he joined the big club in 2007, his strikeouts spiked, his walk rate declined and the game suddenly seemed too fast for him.

"He showed a pretty good strike zone in the minors, but when he got to the big leagues, it evaporated," an American League scout said. "He's like a lot of kids: They get to the big leagues, and they're almost in panic mode. They feel like they've got to swing at whatever comes in there."

The Jays sent Lind back to Triple-A for a refresher course, and now he's a budding star at age 26. Lind is tied for first in the American League in extra-base hits (76), ranks second in doubles (46) and is fourth in total bases (299).

Manager Cito Gaston and hitting coach Gene Tenace helped Lind develop a more coherent game plan in the batter's box, and it has manifested in his improved plate discipline. Lind is seeing an average of 4.04 pitches per plate appearance this year, compared to 3.74 in 2008. He's tied for first in the majors with Boston's Jacoby Ellsbury with 71 two-strike hits.

Some people in the Blue Jays' hierarchy think Lind has a chance to be adequate in the field, but that opinion isn't universally shared. The consensus in the scouting community is that he's destined to be a DH.

"He's a liability," a scout said. "When he looks bad, it's not a 'pretty bad.'"

Franklin Gutierrez, Mariners (.279 BA, 16 homers, 60 RBIs)

One of Jack Zduriencik's first priorities as Seattle's new general manager was to add a center fielder to cover the vast expanse at Safeco Field. In December, the Mariners acquired Gutierrez from Cleveland, where Grady Sizemore already had staked his claim to center.

Gutierrez has made a big impact in Seattle with his glove. In The Fielding Bible's plus-minus rankings -- where a zero rating is considered average defensively -- Gutierrez obliterates the field with a plus-36. San Diego's Tony Gwynn Jr. and Arizona's Chris Young are tied for second at plus-20.

"He's got great instincts," Zduriencik said of Gutierrez. "He reads the ball off the bat very well. There are guys who are faster runners than he is, but his first step and his track to the ball are terrific. He just glides out there."

Gutierrez gave the Mariners a scare in July when he crashed into the Comerica Park scoreboard in pursuit of a Ryan Raburn fly ball, but he got up and walked off the field. Even 10-time Gold Glove Award winner Ken Griffey Jr. has raved about his defensive play.

At the plate, Gutierrez is a work in progress. He has a .938 OPS against lefties, and he's shown the occasional ability to wait on breaking balls and drive them over the fence to the opposite field. In 2004, Baseball America rated Gutierrez the No. 3 prospect in a stacked Dodgers farm system. At age 26, he's starting to tap into that potential.

Shin-Soo Choo, Indians (.393 OBP, 16 homers, 19 steals)

Choo's numbers have actually dipped a bit from 2008, when he posted a 1.038 OPS after the All-Star break. But he deserves credit for sustaining it over the long haul this season, without a lot of help.

Grady Sizemore was hindered by elbow problems, Travis Hafner has missed more than 60 games because of injuries and Victor Martinez left town for Boston at the trade deadline. Choo batted in the sixth spot on Opening Day, but he's spent the bulk of the season hitting third or cleanup. Amid the upheaval and the rampant disappointment in Cleveland, he's been a rock.

Choo's tools might not overwhelm you in a single viewing, but he's proficient in all facets of the game. He's developing into a 20-25 homer guy. He's improved against lefties. He's an instinctive baserunner, with 19 steals in 21 attempts. And he has 11 assists in right field to help offset seven errors.

He also plays with a quiet determination and toughness, and hangs in the box no matter who's pitching. Choo has been hit by a pitch 14 times, the fourth-highest total in the majors.

Four years ago, Choo and Chris Snelling were second and third in Seattle's outfield pecking order behind phenom Adam Jones. Snelling never managed to stay healthy, but Choo has continued to get better since GM Mark Shapiro acquired him for Ben Broussard in July 2006.

"Cleveland did a really good job of evaluating," an AL scout said. "They always felt he was going to be this type of guy. I'm not sure the industry as a whole had him evaluated that high."

Rajai Davis, Athletics (.314 BA, 37 steals)

Most people stopped paying attention when the Athletics were 37-49 at the All-Star break, then traded Matt Holliday and Orlando Cabrera and released Jason Giambi.

But the A's have seen some positive signs while playing .500 ball since the break. The young pitching continues to develop. Cliff Pennington is playing reliable shortstop. Ryan Sweeney and Daric Barton have made progress of late, and Davis is the driving force behind a new-look Oakland lineup. Would you believe the A's lead the majors with 66 stolen bases since the break?

Davis, 28, stole 251 bases in the minor leagues with Pittsburgh. The Pirates traded him to San Francisco in the Matt Morris deal two years ago, and the Athletics claimed him on waivers in April 2008.

Davis overcame some early tentativeness and has become increasingly more assertive on the bases. He's the first Oakland player to steal 20 or more bases in back-to-back seasons since Rickey Henderson and Stan Javier did it in 1994 and '95. He also has played excellent defense in center, and when batting, finds enough gaps to be dangerous.

"If you watch him in batting practice, he can put balls in the seats," said A's assistant GM David Forst. "We don't expect 15-plus home runs from him. But singles will become doubles and doubles will be triples just because of his speed, so you don't worry too much about his power."

Carlos Gonzalez, Rockies (1.015 OPS since All-Star break)

Gonzalez is a legitimate talent, but that didn't prevent him from being traded twice by age 23. Arizona sent him to Oakland in the Dan Haren deal, then the Athletics turned around and shipped him to Colorado in the Matt Holliday trade.

During Gonzalez's first spring in Oakland, Mark Ellis, Bobby Crosby and other Athletics raved about his arm strength, his picturesque swing and the amount of time his bat stays in the hitting zone. The ball goes a long way when he connects: Gonzalez has 10 homers in 148 at-bats since the All-Star break.

The Rockies have a 45-14 record this season in games when Gonzalez starts.

"He's beginning to blossom right before our eyes," Colorado GM Dan O'Dowd said. "His confidence is getting greater every day. He still has issues with plate discipline and overswinging, but he's like a freight train coming on right now."

The Rockies have had an impressive year nurturing young outfielders. Dexter Fowler skipped Triple-A ball and stepped right in as Colorado's leadoff man at age 23. At 6-foot-4, 185 pounds, Fowler still needs to add some strength.

Seth Smith, the former backup quarterback to Eli Manning at Mississippi, also has been a revelation. He's hitting .485 (16-for-33) as a pinch hitter, and he hit a late two-run homer to beat Tim Lincecum and the Giants in late August. The scouts absolutely love his swing.

Denard Span, Twins (.306 BA, .389 OBP)

When the Twins selected Span with the 20th overall pick in the 2002 draft, they envisioned him as the long-term successor to Torii Hunter in center field in Minnesota. Span logged more than 1,900 at-bats on the farm before his big league debut, and people began to have their doubts.

"You almost considered him a failed prospect at one point," an American League executive said. "He was a former No. 1 pick, and it didn't seem like he was going anywhere."

Span finally got his chance when Michael Cuddyer went on the disabled list a week into the 2008 season. Span played well enough to finish sixth in the AL Rookie of the Year balloting, and he has continued to refine his skills as a leadoff man.

Span is tied for the American League lead with nine triples, and he has a .389 OBP even though he suffered dizziness for more than a month as the result of an inner ear infection.

Although Span and DH Jason Kubel have made positive strides for the Twins this season, the news isn't so upbeat on other fronts. Carlos Gomez doesn't get on base consistently enough to use his speed, and Delmon Young is starting to look like a lost cause. He has a Miguel Olivo-like 79 strikeouts and 10 walks this season.

Garrett Jones, Pirates (19 HRs, .587 slugging percentage)

The Pirates went 132 years before hitting their 10,000th home run, and Jones did the honors against the aptly named Homer Bailey of Cincinnati.

It was one of several memorable moments in a head-spinning rookie year for Jones. He arrived from Triple-A Indianapolis before the All-Star break and joined Ralph Kiner and Donn Clendenon as the third Pirate to hit 10 homers in July. He also ranks first among big league rookies in home runs.

That's pretty good for a former 14th-round draft pick who accumulated 4,185 minor league plate appearances in 10 seasons with the Atlanta, Minnesota and Pittsburgh organizations.

Jones has played both corner-outfield spots this season, and he's logged more time at first base since the Pirates traded Adam LaRoche. He might look like the immobile slugger type at 6-4, 245 pounds, but he has nine stolen bases in 11 attempts.

Is his homer binge for real? We'll know better next year. But it's been fun to watch.

"He's a good low-ball hitter, and when I saw him, he was laying off the stuff at the top of the strike zone that he can't get to," a scout said. "This guy has big raw power. And when you watch him run, he's more athletic than he comes across."

Morgan

A National League scout referred to Morgan as "Juan Pierre Lite." When you factor in Morgan's superior defensive skills, on-base ability and affordable contract, maybe it's the other way around.

Morgan made a big impression after coming to Washington from Pittsburgh by trade in early July. He hit .351 in 49 games, stole 24 bases and brought some fun to a clubhouse that hadn't experienced much.

Morgan occasionally refers to himself as "Tony Plush," baseball entertainer, and he quickly began doling out nicknames and lightening the mood in Washington. Let's put it this way: He's a better fit in the Nationals' clubhouse than Lastings Milledge ever dreamed of being.

Morgan's season ended prematurely when he broke his left hand on a slide in late August. He's 29 years old and still polishing the rough edges after spending his youth as a hockey player in Canada. The Nationals will give him every opportunity to prove he belongs.

Jerry Crasnick covers baseball for ESPN.com. His book, "License To Deal," was pu

A pitch for Greinke's Cy Young candidacy

By Jeff Passan, Yahoo! Sports

He is going to get shafted.

It has nothing to do with coastal bias or cover jinxes or a last name that breaks the long-held i-before-e-except-after-c rule. Zack Greinke(notes) may well not capture the American League Cy Young award this year because he plays for the Kansas City Royals, a team larded with more dung than a pigpen, and the Royals do not know how to win games when Greinke pitches.

This is not some reverse-psychology trick meant to will the Baseball Writers Association of America into stumping for Greinke. It is resignation taken to bandwidth. And a hope, the tiniest sliver, that past sins of voting stupidity will fade as a more enlightened group takes subjective and objective knowledge and blends them in the fashion of the best teams.

Greinke has 13 victories. Ugly, yes. He also has an earned-run average twice as good as his league's. Really. Fourteen pitchers have done that since baseball started handing out the Cy Young in 1956, and this is supposed to be the part where it says all 14 won the award – only that's not true because of said voters.

Four didn't. Four pitchers posted historically good seasons and somehow wound up second or third. And it's any wonder there's skepticism.

In 1990, Roger Clemens(notes) ended the year with an ERA a full run lower than the winner's. He threw five more complete games, two more shutouts, had 82 more strikeouts, 23 fewer walks and 19 fewer home runs. And because Bob Welch won 27 games, six more than Clemens, the vote wasn't close.

It happened to Clemens again in 2005, his 13 victories and 1.87 ERA overwhelmed by Chris Carpenter's(notes) 21 wins and Dontrelle Willis'(notes) 22, and in between to Kevin Brown (1996 runner-up to John Smoltz's(notes) 24 wins) and Pedro Martinez(notes) (2003, behind 22-win Roy Halladay(notes) and 21-win Esteban Loaiza(notes)).

There is history. A pattern. Baseball writers value victories. The object of the game, of course, is to win. Thus, a pitcher with many is the ideal sort. Even if his ERA is twice Greinke's. (Hello, Derek Lowe(notes).)

Now, come on. The voters would never vote for someone with an ERA worse than league average like Lowe's. Just 11 percent better (like Jim Lonborg's in 1967) or 14 percent (Pete Vuckovich, '82) or 15 percent (LaMarr Hoyt, '84). In 2005, when Bartolo Colon(notes) beat out Mariano Rivera(notes) and Johan Santana(notes), he did so with an ERA that looked more like the LBS when he steps on a scale: 3.48.

So what good, then, is Greinke's 2.19 ERA entering Thursday's start, his adjusted ERA of 200 (100 is park-factored average), his league-leading three shutouts and an opponents' on-base percentage of .274? Why bother detailing the most spectacular run to begin a season since Fernando Valenzuela and an almost equally impressive – if not publicized – final month? Greinke could invent a new pitch, call it the snarfball – don't put anything past him – strike out everyone he faces and still remain buried amid the irrelevance of his team.

Only the most attentive voters know that Greinke's ERA over the last month is 1.37, the best in baseball among starters. As are his innings pitched and strikeouts. He is a 96-mph-throwing, vicious-slider-unleashing bottle of baseball moonshine, hard to swallow and even worse to stomach.

Toughest of all is that he will lose votes because of his wretched team. There is no way to summarize the Royals' season in any less than 4,601 words, so two numbers will suffice: 101 runs in 29 starts. That is what the Royals have given the 25-year-old Greinke this year. His run support is dead last in baseball. Were he a middle-of-the-pack pitcher, he would have 20 victories.

Greinke is the only pitcher in baseball to twice go seven or more innings, give up one or fewer runs and get saddled with a loss. Four other times he's done the same and been fed a no-decision – the past two starts in particular, either of which would have looked nice as a victory tacked onto a 13-8 record that out of context screams underwhelming.

The BBWAA isn't an organization that historically engages in nuanced decision-making. The group is overwhelmingly white and embarrassingly male. If Greinke has anything going for him, it's that the writers are younger, too, and likelier to have embraced the idea that while victories are an indicator for a starting pitcher, they are not the lone statistic on which Cy Young votes must be placed.

Which leaves Greinke sweating. CC Sabathia(notes) has 17 wins and plays in New York. Justin Verlander(notes) has 16 and leads the AL in strikeouts. Both are going to the playoffs. Neither, incidentally, has an ERA within a full run of Greinke's, and he can only hope they stumble before hitting the magic No. 20 and he drums up enough run support in his final four starts to steal three victories.

Because 16 is the cutoff. Rick Sutcliffe won the NL Cy Young with 16 victories when he was traded to the Cubs at midseason in 1984, and Greg Maddux(notes) and David Cone did so in the strike-shortened 1994 season. A dozen years later, Brandon Webb(notes) won the first full-year, 16-win Cy Young. It came with a caveat, of course: Webb's 16 tied for the National League lead with five others.

Greinke is tied for eighth. His truest competitor is Seattle's Felix Hernandez(notes). Then there's Verlander, Sabathia, Roy Halladay, Scott Feldman(notes), Jon Lester(notes), Mariano Rivera. Because it's so wide open, the vote is something of a crapshoot, and to assume anything – particularly that Greinke should win – is the domain of the fool.

Even if it is obvious.

AL Cy Young predictions

Gordon Edes

- 1 Zack Greinke Royals Overcomes handicap of pitching for KC.
- 2 CC Sabathia Yankees Great second half, 20 wins could mean a trophy.
- 3 Justin Verlander Tigers Strikeouts give him edge over Felix Hernandez.

Jeff Passan

- 1 Zack Greinke Royals Look at the numbers, not the record.
- 2 Felix Hernandez Mariners Quietly dominant – Greinke Lite.
- 3 Mariano Rivera Yankees So, what was that about slowing down?

Tim Brown

- 1 Zack Greinke Royals A pitcher-franchise relationship reminiscent of Seaver-Mets, Carlton-Phils.
- 2 Felix Hernandez Mariners The throwin' of King Felix bears a breakout season.
- 3 Roy Halladay Blue Jays Stumbled by his standards in August. His standards are different.

Steve Henson

- 1 Zack Greinke Royals Tremendous breakout year in key stat categories.
- 2 CC Sabathia Yankees Handled NY pressure well – in regular season, anyway.
- 3 Justin Verlander Tigers Excellent bounceback to legit ace status with playoff team.