

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Tuesday, April 12th, 2005

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

The 2005 Major League Baseball season is off the grounds and I present to you our first MLB Weekly... here are some things that have caught my eye:

Opening Day Highlight: The highlight to me on opening day had to have been Dmitri Young. Upset about Marcus Thames not being on the roster for the April 4th game vs. KC (note: Thames recently hit a homer and now is on the big league roster), Young cranked out three home runs in the Tigers' win over the Royals. Also, the versatile Brandon Inge took Jose Lima's braking pitch deep in the top inning to get things started.

Closers not closing: What's up with all the blown saves by premier [and not premier] closers in baseball early on? That's just it... early on... so things can be fixed. On opening day it was two National League closers - San Diego's Trevor Hoffman and the Mets' Brandon Loper - failing to shut the door on the road. After trailing 4-0 after one inning, the Padres responded with five homers at Coors, two of which came via the bat of Xavier Nady. Nady is getting off to a nice start, but it did not result in a victory for San Diego as the Rockies battered Hoffman for four runs in the ninth to win, 12-10. In Loper's case - the Mets got off to a nice start with a Kaz Matsui blast in the top of the first. But Joe Randa and Adam Dunn together hit three jacks (two in the ninth off Loper) to spoil Willie Randolph's managerial debut.



Oh, and that Eric Gagne guy is hurt too. Without them, though they've been able to win four of six on the road. Question is how long will it hold up with a suspect defense at best that does not make the routine play?

Getting away from the individuals for a minute, two bullpens that are having a difficult time holding onto leads would be Arizona and Toronto. Doesn't look to be a problem in week one as the Jays have reeled off three straight to capture a 5-2 mark (best in the AL East entering Tuesday's play), and Arizona has a healthy 4-3 record. Another pen that might have some trouble is Texas. Their relievers were terrific last season, but really screwed things up recently in a loss to the Angels. We'll see what takes place with them as everything progresses...

Seattle's Eddie Guardado, whose nickname was everyday steady Eddie, was not steady over the weekend. The M's fought back to gain a lead against the Rangers only to see Guardado give up a pair of two-run shots to lose narrowly. Shingo Takatsu, the stopper for the 5-2 White Sox, had his problems vs. the Indians. Both closers in a Yankees-Red Sox game last week - Mariano Rivera and Keith Foulke - gave it up in the ninth. Who prevailed? New York shortstop Derek Jeter, whose game-winning blast sent the folks at Yankee Stadium home happy.

Yanks/Sox: What's wrong? The Yankees and Red Sox are a combined 6-8, each at 3-4. Don't panic people, there's still a good 150+ games to go. I've come to the conclusion that Hideki Matsui is to the Yankees what Jason Varitek is to the Red Sox --- leader. Okay, so Matsui does not speak the English language fluently, big deal. He's a leader by example, and when Randy Johnson has a bad outing or the rest of the lineup is off, look for him to pick them up more times than not. By the way, how's that David Wells (0-2 8.44ERA) move going for the Sox?

J.D. Drew: Not off to the fast start in LA he probably hoped for. The Dodger outfielder, formerly a member of the Cardinals then Braves, began 0-for-23 to start the campaign. According to some of the experts out there he is being too patient. And also, Drew has to attack the fastball better instead of watching it go by.

Pat Burrell: Unlike Drew, this guy is steaming hot [in the playing performance sense that is]. Burrell, tied for the Major League's home run lead with Arizona's Troy Glaus, hit a majestic shot to left field on Monday night as the Phillies won their third straight, beating the Marlins at Pro Player Stadium. Just think: two years ago people we're talking about Burrell maybe being shipped down to the minors. If he, and everyone else [primarily Jim Thome], can keep those strikeouts down then they can contend for the division crown.

Three More Names that have impressed Me: Freddy Garcia, Ichiro, and Mike Hampton: Garcia is now 10-0 in day games since 2004. So what the heck does that mean? Do they [the White Sox] now strictly pitch him in day games instead of night games in order to achieve excellence rather than failure? Who knows! What I do know is that Ichiro is on a 20-game hitting streak dating back to last year, and has a .438BA over the past 28 games. No one man is a better pure hitter than him. Not Barry Bonds, not Albert Pujols, not A-Rod, and not my AL MVP pick from last year - Vladimir Guerrero [who I still think is a wonderful hitter that would be even better if he was more patient]. Finally, we come to Mr. Hampton. In his last 13 decisions he is 12-1. We're seeing the Mike Hampton that was in Houston, with the Mets during their 2000 postseason run, and not the one that fell apart in Colorado. Maybe it'll be Hampton instead of John Smoltz, struggling a tad thus far, and Tim Hudson that becomes the ace. Then again, he's a guy that can follow a good outing with a horrendous one.

Meet the Mets: No thank you, I already have. And after becoming the last team to earn a victory this year in Major League Baseball, they have rebounded to pick up two wins. Pedro Martinez looks all right so far, but that bullpen [as mentioned earlier] is very shaky. They're going to need some quick power production from the likes of Carlos

Beltran, Mike Piazza, and David Wright before the New York fans get cranky. Because the last thing they need in New York is a power outage!

Surprise Player: Phillies pitcher Gavin Floyd. This young kid really looks good and if Philadelphia can get 15 wins out of him I see them making the playoffs. Of course, my pick was for them to finish fourth in the division so naturally I've got to stick with that right? The three teams I believe have to take advantage of their nice starts the most are the Blue Jays, White Sox, and Phillies. Brewers? Well, they were above .500 entering the break last year and where did that get them?