

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, April 29th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Tonight, we've got two huge pitching matchups as Houston's Roger Clemens goes up against the Cubs' Greg Maddux. It marks only the fifth time since 1900 that two 300-game winners, both of which in this particular case are right-handers, opposed one another. The previous four times it happened in the 1900's it featured Don Sutton, who like Maddux used to pitch for the Braves, every time. And for those of you history buffs out there, four times we (not we because I wasn't alive) saw a pair of 300-game winners face off prior to 1900.

Thus far, Clemens is pitching lights out with a 0.32ERA, 32 strikeouts, only six walks, and a 0.79WHIP. Not to mention the fact Clemens has received minuscule run support. Clemens has driven in more runs in his stars by himself than the rest of the Astros lineup. Houston's .250 batting average is actually better than three of the National League's finest from a year ago - St. Louis, Atlanta, and San Diego. However, it's not translating over into runs as the Pittsburgh Pirates are the only team in the NL with fewer runs than Houston's 75. Chicago ranks seventh in all of baseball runs scored (2nd in the NL), but I like Houston to win tonight's game.



In Mark Mulder's last start he pitched ten innings without giving up a single run. (AP/Gary I. Rothstein)

The other terrific pitching duels faces former A's teammates Mark Mulder (St. Louis) and Tim Hudson (Atlanta) vs. each other. If you're like me and have both Mulder and Hudson on your fantasy team then it really doesn't matter which one prevails. St. Louis already has a 3.5 game lead on everyone else in the division and third baseman Scott Rolen just started heating up. Best team in the National League at this point, and I'm not sure who's going to challenge them.

A-Rod: After a three-home-run performance vs. the Angels on Tuesday, Alex Rodriguez followed it up by producing the Yankees' only run in a 5-1 loss Wednesday, coming via the long ball, his eighth of the season. That homer on Wednesday night made

him the Major League's leader in home runs. And if he keeps it up, could it spell the three letter word M. V. P.? Quite possibly. He's locating the ball better, which is the key to his recent success in my opinion. One would be foolish to question his ability. It's all about the mental aspect of the game, and if that's working for him then he will start tearing any and every pitcher up. I think it is the beginning of something big when you take into consideration the Yankees play Texas and Toronto in their next five games before another series with the Angels. Not exactly the two most outstanding pitching teams when you're talking about the Rangers and the Blue Jays (who basically only have Roy Halladay).

Are the Diamondbacks for Real? I hope so. Luis Gonzalez' numbers have diminished since his monster 56-homer season in 2001, the same year he famously drove in the game-winning run in the World Series off future Hall-of-Fame closer Mariano Rivera. Despite aging and suffering a couple of injuries, Gonzalez still remains one of the best driving hitters in the game. He's not the strongest out there which he means he has to follow through on solid contact. Gonzo is fantastic at pitch recognition. He can hit two dingers by recognizing pitches well then be patient enough at the plate to draw a walk. In fact, he did exactly that, hit two homers and later get walked, in the same game earlier this season. Arizona's closer situation is something I'm going to watch closely. After blowing a save early in the season against the Dodgers, former Blue Jay Brandon Lyon has been shutting the door consistently. Lyon's got ten saves on the year, while Gonzo, Shawn Green, and Troy Glaus (6HR 17RBI) are providing the offense. Brandon Webb (3 wins; 2.63ERA) is another key. If he can become an elite ace then they have a chance at the postseason. Otherwise, I think Arizona is a lock for third as we predicted before the season.

Lou Piniella v. Curt Schilling: Ding! Round one: Curt throws a left at Piniella, oh my Lou responds with a jab to the right part of Schilling's face. Back and forth we go... whoa nelly! Earlier in the week Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling and Devil Rays Manager Lou Piniella had a verbal spat via none other than the media of course. Schilling came on a radio station in Boston saying that the Devil Rays players said this is why we lose 100 games because our idiot manager makes us do things like this (or something like that regarding the scuffle that took place on the field between both teams). Anyway, Piniella responded with his few choice expletives and held a team meeting.

Well, first off, the D-Rays haven't lost 100 games in either of the past two seasons. They lost 91 last season and 99 in 2003. Okay, you don't need to get technically, that's close enough. Only thing I really have to say regarding this entire situation is this: Schilling, who went out on the mound in Game 6 of the ALCS with a bloody sock, has more credibility than Piniella. Lou's had his share of moments as both a player (with the Yankees) and manager. He **used** to be a good skipper of a ball club, but now it looks as if a change is needed in Tampa Bay. Nobody is asking them to beat the Yankees or Red Sox. All we ask is that they finish fourth or so and win at least 70 games with some talented young players. If they are still in last in that division when June rolls around, and they are in last by a bad margin, Lou's job could be trouble. Stranger things have happened, believe me. Also, remember congress ordered Schilling in to testify before a grand jury on the steroids hearing back in March. Reason they asked him is

because he's been outspoken about the issue and is the voice of reason at times. He'll tell it like it is whether you like it, want him to, or neither. Can't we all just get along?

Brian Roberts: Could Brian Roberts be the starting second baseman in this year's All-Star game? Why not? All the guy is doing is hitting .368, drive in 23 runs, score an additional 19, steal nine bases, and smack seven homers. It's amazing to think he's hit seven home runs in the month of April when he only hit four all of last year. If you were really smart (that excludes me) you would've saw this coming. He worked extremely hard in the off-season, harder than he is letting on to people. Baltimore went out and added another powerful bat in one Sammy Sosa, who hit 66 out of the park in 1998. Add Sosa to the mix with Javy Lopez, Rafael Palmeiro, Miguel Tejada, and others - somebody is going to get easy pitches to hit. That somebody has been Roberts through 21 games of play, where the Orioles have the best record in a tough American League East division. They won't win that division because the pitching will start to wilt come late June, July, and early August. **Roberts is a guy that set a club record for doubles last year with 50.** He's turning those doubles into home runs right now. If he can be steady through June you're looking at the AL's starting second baseman for the All-Star game.



Only the Twins' Torii Hunter has more stolen bases than Brian Roberts' nine up to this point in the season. (AP/Rick Bowmer)

NL East: It's pretty congested in this division as the first place and fifth place teams are separated by a mere three games. So basically all it takes is Philly sweeping Florida to turn things upside down. Cliff Floyd has really been the catalyst of the Mets attack, hitting over .300 and right near the top of the NL in both home runs as well as RBI's. New York's done pretty well at home in front of the fans at Shea, yet Atlanta keeps stomping on them when they get any kind of momentum. The Braves hit Tom Glavine rather hard the other day. Still, Atlanta is going to have a difficult time getting past Florida unless the batting order can drive in runs with regularity. Don't be a bit surprised to see the Braves try to pull the trigger on some kind of deal before the break. There are plenty of vets on that team and maybe a middle-aged guy with upside left would fit into their plans. Washington's right there at 11-11 thanks to the play of Jose Guillen. Nobody ever gives the guy credit for how good of a player he is and much of it

has to do with how he conducts himself off the diamond. Expect everyone to be right there for much of the season, all winning around 80 games. In the end, I see Atlanta and Florida getting to the postseason, but I'm now wondering which wins the division and which represents the NL as a wild card provided it's the east getting a wild card slot.

Kansas City Royals: The team we projected as the worst in all of baseball before the season's initiation. Just ended an 0-6 home stand now are a Major League worst 5-17, including 2-12 at home. Enough said...

MY RANKINGS:



1. St. Louis Cardinals - Right now you cannot argue against St. Louis as the best team in the NL Central. Only thing that can slow them down is injuries.



2. Chicago White Sox - Their starting pitching has been surprisingly good in my opinion. Though, I think they and the Dodgers will slide seriously in May.



3. Boston Red Sox - Why not the Orioles here? I'm a realist - Baltimore does not have the pitching to hold up. Thing is Boston might not either with Schilling out.



4. Florida Marlins - If you're looking for someone to challenge St. Louis come playoff time this might be the team. Marlins can score, have young arms, and great speed.



5. Arizona Diamondbacks - As a D-backs fan I'm thrilled they are atop the NL West. Question is how long can they hold it? If they do - Bob Melvin is Manager of Yr.

Honorable Mention: Baltimore (good hitting) , Atlanta (sub-par hitting), and the Angels.