

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 13th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Are the Chicago White Sox for real? Maybe not like we all are beginning to think. On Wednesday night it was the early season favorite to win the NL Cy Young award - Florida's Dontrelle Willis - improving to 7-0. Last night, Jon Garland, projected as the White Sox' fifth starter, improved to 7-0 with a narrow 3-2 victory over the Orioles. Speaking of Baltimore, they are tied with St. Louis for the second best winning percentage in baseball, only behind Ozzie Guillen's White Sox.

AL CENTRAL: My personal belief, after they barely avoided a road sweep at the hands of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, is that the White Sox are probably going to finish second in the division. Many people, including myself, thought the Indians had the best starting pitching just a notch ahead of Minnesota prior to the start of the season. The Twins bullpen still looks like the best to me in that division. Who has the best offense? Detroit has the best career hitters, but they are not producing like an offensive juggernaut, and won't with Magglio Ordoñez out. Offensively, it's a tough call but we definitely know it is not the Royals.

Tony Peña became the first Manager to re-sign earlier in the week as Kansas City is destined to miss the playoffs once again. The Royals walk total is very low. Strikeout total? Just the opposite - very high. Star power? They have none, though their most recognizable player - Mike Sweeney - could soon be on his way out. **Worst statistic: more times caught stealing than stolen bases.** One word: debacle. Poor Bob Schaeffer - how long is HE going to be there? Not very long, but we do want to blow our own horn for one second. We called it - this IS the worst team in all of Major League Baseball. There are a couple young bright spots, such as pitcher Zach Greinke and Angel Berroa. Other than that, this is a worthless ball club far removed from their World Series Championship in 1985. And one more note: George Brett's not coming back, although the pine tar thing would fit right in with corked bats and steroids.

Now back to the White Sox. Tonight they send lefty Mark Buehrle, 26, out to the hill against 2-1 Rodrigo Lopez and the O's. Right handed hitters have trouble hitting his inside fastball, a pitch that is considered by some to be Buehrle's third best pitch out of four. Former Yankees Orlando Hernandez and Jose Contreras have yet to disappoint anybody (as if the expectations were high to begin with). **Give GM Ken Williams some credit for this: he's been able to construct a very solid pitching staff without Bartolo Colon and Esteban Loaiza, two primed Cy Young guys when with Chicago.** Instead of Contreras and/or Hernandez being the wild card guys like I thought, it may be Freddy Garcia. He's going to have to be consistent and effective for their pitching to remain better than Minnesota's.

Sooner or later, though, the small ball approach is bound to come crashing down in my opinion. Okay, maybe not crashing down, but you get what I mean. Paul Konerko is their top power hitter. His batting average is just that...average. Take that back - it's below average at .197. Another guy not hitting well quite yet is former A's and Royals

outfielder Jermaine Dye (.190). You say, "Those guys are strictly not BA guys, just run producers." I don't buy that at all. If you want to build a team on speed, pitching, and defense then these two don't fit the bill better than Carlos Lee, who they gave up. Scott Podsednik has given them someone to make noise on the base pads. **What's very misleading about this ball club still is the fact they have just one everyday player hitting over .300.** No, it's not Frank Thomas, who's played in zero games thus far. It happens to be Tadahito Iguchi - their second baseball that's surprisingly hitting .328. Believe it or not, the argument can be made that the bottom of the Chicago lineup is stronger than the top/middle. Juan Uribe is the next closest to .300, batting .298 and making play after play. Catcher A.J. Pierzynski has fit in well and not really had problems offensively or defensively. Third baseman Joe Crede has a .286 average, which is 47 points higher than last year. We'll see how long it holds true.

I don't think Minnesota has a dominating lineup by any means. What I will say is they have more gold glove type players in the field. They have more team speed, and as mentioned earlier, the bullpen has been nothing short of spectacular. I question Dustin Hermanson's ability to be an elite closer for a full season in Chicago. Hermanson has been a starter for quite some time and this transition he's under going is not an easy one by any means. Finally, Johan Santana is a proven ace. Does Jon Garland have the ability to go from fifth starter to ace in the hot summer months? Another thing we'll soon find out.

NL CENTRAL: Is this division even worth talking about right now? We know there is really only one legit team, and that would be the St. Louis Cardinals, reigning National League Champs. They wrapped up a 4-4 homestand with a 10-3 win over the Dodgers. But there were definitely some negatives taken out of those eight games. First one is Scott Rolen, who's now going to be on the shelf for awhile. Other negative is how poor St. Louis played vs. San Diego, a team that almost swept them in four games for the first time in franchise history. Worst thing, as mentioned earlier, is that it came at home in front of the Busch Stadium faithful. **Very few teams can split an eight-game homestand and still be up 4.5 games or more on everybody else in the division.** Tony La Russa might have the best managerial position in the world.

Milwaukee is that team only 4.5 back of St. Louis, but if they want any chance of threatening the Cards with Rolen out they must play well vs. Pittsburgh. Lloyd McClendon's Pirates sit two games behind the Brewers and send Kip Wells out there for Friday's home contest. What's interesting to me is how good the Pirates have been lately away from home. They're coming off three roads series' against Houston, San Francisco, and Arizona. Pitt played respectable baseball and now get the reward of having eight home games before traveling to St. Louis. Meanwhile, could Dusty Baker's job be in trouble in the windy city? If it weren't for Steve Bartman, yes. Bartman? That's right - it was Baker that made the critical error (along with shortstop Alex Gonzalez) in Game 6 of the 2003 NLCS, but it was overshadowed by the fan in left field (i.e. Bartman). Baker can now use all the injuries to the pitching staff and others as his drop-back.



No Sammy, Alou, or even Nomar.

The pressure to produce runs falls squarely on the shoulders of first baseman Derek Lee, who's responded like an All-Star to the challenge. Problem is the Cubs are 15-18 heading into Friday. (AP/Ed Andrieski)

This Week's Who's Hot, Who's Not:

Hot:

Cardinals shortstop David Eckstein: Tiny, but good. Coming off an 11-for-16 series vs. the NL West leading Los Angeles Dodgers. He heads into Friday's play against the Mets with a 13-game hitting streak. Must keep it up without Rolen.

Pirates closer Jose Mesa: Mesa has been close to flawless as of late, converting all 12 of his save opportunities this season. If he keeps it up the Pirates may consider dealing for impact guys rather than shipping some away.

Yankees first baseman Tino Martinez: The hottest of the hot this week. Martinez, in wake of all the Jason Giambi discussion, has hit a home run in each of the last five games. Stunningly, Martinez sits right near the top of AL HR standings.

Not:

Cincinnati Reds - After beginning the season with a sweep of the New York Mets, Cincy followed it up getting swept by Houston. Team hasn't recovered since, falling into dead last in the NL Central. Question now is does Miley get the boot before a trade to save their season is made? My guess is Miley is the next Manager to go.

Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim - Are 1-4 in their last five ball games. Of the three division leaders in the American League, this one might have the most reason to be concerned right now. Not to go off on Vlad Guerrero, a fabulous player, but I haven't seen a recent monster splash by him.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Who is the only rookie to ever hit safely in 34 consecutive games? We'll give you a hint: this catcher was released not too long ago.

NEW FEATURE:

This week we begin our brand new feature that we will be doing every week from now until the end of the baseball season. Hatfield Sports unveils its top ten batters/position players and top ten pitchers of all-time. This was a tough list to comprise, and we want your feedback. So without further to do - here's our first player:

Babe Ruth - currently second all-time on the career Home Run list with 714. Ruth, considered the best baseball player ever by some, was also an established pitcher in his day.

More Notes:

Congrats to Bruce Bochy: Congrats to the San Diego Padres Manager on winning his 800th career game on Wednesday night, making him the 65th Manager to win 800 or more games. In addition, only Joe Torre, Tony La Russa, and Bobby Cox are active and have more wins than Bochy.

Ponson, Ryan power O's: Orioles pitcher Sidney Ponson went eight strong innings, allowing just two earned runs Wednesday in the team's 7-4 win over Johan Santana and the Minnesota Twins. B.J. Ryan shut the door for his ninth save in as many chances.

Red Sox getting Hot? Kevin Millar went 122 at-bats without a home run. So what does he do? Hit a dinger on Monday and follows it up on Tuesday by drilling a fastball from Octavio Dotel over the green monster in left to send the Bo-Sox home happy. Ironically, Millar was the goat earlier in the game, committing two costly errors. Johnny Damon went 3-for-3 in the game, extending his season long hit streak to 16. Then the next day catcher Jason Varitek went yard off of Dotel after the A's closer walked David Ortiz for the second straight day. Memo to Baltimore: the Red Sox and Yankees aren't going away peacefully.

Wild Card Take: After watching Arizona beat Colorado with bobs from Tony Clark and Jose Cruz Jr. - I believe the NL West has a better chance at a Wild Card than the AL Central. My thinking behind it is Florida and Atlanta don't have the money and desire to go after big name players before the trade deadline like the Yanks and Red Sox do. They could beat each other up and the rest of the team up all the way through, while San Francisco (whenever you go with Jeff Fassero as a starter you do not look like a prime contender) and/or Colorado falls completely out of it in the NL West. Padres and D-Backs simply continue to heat up with each win. Been wrong before, so don't take it to the bank. We'll expand on that topic and more in next week's edition!