

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 27th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Each game the rest of the way in the Major League Baseball season becomes bigger and bigger. Those games are magnified even more so for the teams under .500, which means 12 of you out there: Tampa Bay, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Oakland, Philadelphia, Chicago Cubs, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Houston, and Colorado.

Boys in Pinstripes are Back:

Can we call the New York Yankees officially back? They have now won 15 of their last 17 games. Yes, they haven't exactly played the upper echelon teams as of late. Oakland, Seattle, the Mets and Detroit aren't exactly gang busters. Still, going 15-2 in a stretch is mighty impressive. What stands out to me is how they responded from last Saturday. That was when lefty ace Randy Johnson was pulled after allowing the second most hits in one game during his career. Willie Randolph's Mets pounded them that day for 15 hits in a 7-1 win, none bigger than Dae-Sung Koo's single to center off Johnson. He wasn't done.

The Mets pitcher said Koo-Koo-Cachoo-to-you when he rounded third for off a Jose Reyes bunt. Koo was safe and showed maybe the best base running all season for the Yankees' cross town rival. As the Yankees always do, though, they responded on Sunday. Bernie Williams (.235) and Hideki Matsui (.273) were the key contributors in an error filled game on Sunday that ended in a Yankees 2-1 series wrap.

A-Rod is playing extremely well, but everybody is waiting for him to go yard to win it opposite a Mets or Red Sox hurler. Rodriguez has 17 home runs and 49 RBI's - both ML bests. Tino Martinez has exhibited a surprising amount of power early on in this season, and Derek Jeter, well is playing like Derek Jeter. His .303 batting average is only bettered by Gary Sheffield and A-Rod, plus it goes without saying the amazing defensive play he made on Wednesday night. Now looms a big series with the Red Sox where Tom Gordon, Mariano Rivera, and Big Unit must show up. Same goes for A-Rod, too.



Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez currently leads the Majors in homers and runs batted in. Photo courtesy of:

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Boston's Struggles:

Boston's struggles have reached a new low. They are coming off being swept by the Toronto Blue Jays and must go into Yankee Stadium Friday night and face the most dominant southpaw of this generation. Fact is right now they have very little starting pitching to speak of heading into tonight's crucial matchup. **Starters Bronson Arroyo (who was pitching well), David Wells, and Wade Miller had a combined 8.80ERA in the Toronto road series.** Okay, so the Jays do have an excellent group of fielders behind their pitching staff - led by Roy Halladay and Josh Towers, who are a combined 12-4. Terry Francona's Red Sox simply aren't playing well right now.

It all started to go bad for Boston last Saturday in an inter-league home game with Atlanta. The game was delayed due to inclement weather and Boston went on to lose as Edgar Renteria continued to have trouble fielding tough hops/choppers. Renteria committed his eighth error on the season in that particular game, pointing to more trouble. What's really been bad for the Red Sox is the combined mark of Johnny Damon and Manny Ramirez in the Toronto series: 1-for-23. Damon was hitting very solid prior to the series and I'd expect Manny and David Ortiz (i.e. Big Papi) to catch fire in the mid-summer months. They need good swings from former AL batting Champ Bill Mueller, too.

Now the news isn't getting any better with ace pitcher Curt Schilling to be out for possibly the next three months. Given the choice, I bet Schilling wouldn't trade the team's Championship last year for anything, not even being on the field this season. Tonight knuckleballer Tim Wakefield, who once finished 3rd in the AL Cy Young voting with a 16-8 record, takes the mound. Certainly a big series for the Sox this weekend.



Jason Varitek (shown left of the struggling Keith Foulke), a three-time All-American at Georgia Tech, hit his fifth consecutive homer on May 20th last Friday. His bat and defense will be important for the Red Sox over the next several weeks.

Giants without Bonds & More Notes:

San Francisco keeps trucking along without Barry Bonds and are actually doing a decent job. The team saw its four-game win streak come to an end Thursday night with a home loss to the Dodgers, but they are only 4.5 games out of first through 46 games. GM Brian Sabean is known to make some moves before the deadline and I'd expect this year to be no exception. Jason Schmidt is on the DL right now and has yet to pitch at the level he is capable of throwing. One more young arm, another semi-powerful bat (maybe a Mike Cameron perhaps) and a quick guy on the base pads could put them over the top and in position to make some kind of run.

It's very conceivable the Giants play themselves into second place in this division by season's end. Yes, it's an old team, especially in the batting order. What it comes down to as I said before the year started is how good they are with the glove and trying to get extra bases. Another factor will be how Jerome Williams, Noah Lowry, and Brad Hennessey (tonight's starter) pitch from June-September. Keep your head above water until Bonds comes back around maybe August is what Giants fans are hoping.

***** Home Sweet Home is what the Rays, Rockies, and Astros are thinking when they return from a road trip.** Tampa's an abysmal 3-18 away from home, but 15-12 in front of their fans. Houston's 13-9 at the juice (that's Minute Maid), though sit in last place in the NL Central because of a 3-21 road mark. There also lies the problem for Colorado, whose 10-11 home record is not a whole lot better than the 4-20 they've posted on the road. How would you like to be the Cubs? **Chicago, an even (and not so good) 12-12 at Wrigley Field, dropped back-to-back games at home to the Astros and Rockies - two woeful road squads.** Pittsburgh and Cleveland are two additional teams that could easily be over .500 if it weren't for sub-.500 home marks.

Relievers Transforming into Closers:

What's amazing to me is the transformation of these relievers into interim closers. Arizona beat San Diego 12-11 on Wednesday night before dropping a 10-0 loss on Thursday. In that game on Wednesday, Brian Bruney gave up two runs in the ninth, further indicating the fact that they miss Brandon Lyon (an NL best 13 saves before an elbow injury forced him out of the pen). Manager Bob Melvin will do the 'prudent thing,' as he said after Wednesday night's win. That may mean thrusting Jose Valverde into the closer's role temporarily.

A number of guys out there in Major League Baseball have become their team's closer due to injuries, inconsistency, or just plain lack of productivity. Minnesota has arguably the **best bullpen in baseball.** Jesse Crain can field well and has a very powerful sinker that could make him a closer in the future. Right now Joe Nathan and the rest of the guys are doing a yeoman's job. Florida has turned to the old, but tasty Todd Jones, who through Monday had a 1.37ERA and seven saves replacing Guillermo Mota as top save guy. Washington's got a gutsy and wily reliever in Gary Majewski - a stopper for games and years to come. Baltimore's already made the move to B.J. Ryan, who's better

in the set-up role but more reliable than Jorge Julio and others. In Anaheim they have turned to Scott Shields, who has not done a bad job with an ERA of 1.09 coming into Tuesday and a 3-1 record to go with five smooth saves. Those Angels ended Johan Santana's 17-game win streak and did the same to Jon Garland, who threw 71 strikes and 33 balls in seven innings as he suffered his first loss of the season. Darin Erstad (on his bobblehead night) and Orlando Cabrera each had three hits. Adam Kennedy drove in two runs and Ervin Santana was spectacular to give the pen a night off. Shields got save #7 when the Angels defeated the Chi. Sox, 3-2 Thursday evening.

Then we look at teams like the Pirates and Phillies. Both of those organizations could be grooming guys for trade bait or future closers. Mike Gonzalez of Pittsburgh has quality stuff late in ball games and has a future somewhere for sure. Ryan Madson may be a guy Philly looks to make a spot starter or a closer late on in his career. It had to be very disappointing for Charlie Manuel to watch Billy Wagner blow another save the other day. Cincinnati's closer role has been a mess for much of the season and did not get any better really when Danny Graves was designated for assignment. David Weathers got his first save since 2003 on Monday night as the Reds got a helpful victory. One more name to keep an eye on is San Francisco's Tyler Walker, who has been converted from a starter to a closer and has done well, going 2-0 while converting six of seven save tries coming into the week. He appears to be guy while Armando Benitez is on the shelf.

HOT:

Texas Rangers: Buck Showalter and company drilled Houston last Saturday for 18 runs and eight homers in a big-time beat down. Texas has won six straight and is tied with the LA Angels of Anaheim for first in the American League West division.

Padres players Ramon Hernandez and Jake Peavy: Terrific! That's what Peavy was last night against the Arizona D-Backs as he threw a complete game two-hit gem, while walking none. Hernandez has a 13-game hit streak going and has 29 base knocks in his last 24 contests.

Brewers power man Carlos Lee: Has definitely ignited the Brewers lineup, getting them back to .500 on Wednesday with a 11-1 triumph over Washington. Lee is second to A-Rod in all of baseball in RBI's with 43. Also, Lee is 8-for-21 with three dingers and ten runs batten in since last week.

Rangers pitcher Kenny Rogers: Is this guy amazing or what? Rogers (6-2) won his sixth consecutive decision for the Rangers last night and lowered that ERA even further to 1.69 - tops in the American League. Not bad for a 40-year-old.

NOT:

Detroit Tigers & Boston Red Sox: One just played the Yankees and essentially got pummeled, the other one is about to face them. Only difference with Boston is they are the defending Champions and could (operative word) be in the Yanks' heads.

Cubs third baseman Aramis Ramirez: We told you last week that this guy needs to step his game up. Right now he's hitting a mere .226 and is 2 for his last 22 at the plate. Defensively... he and Neifi Perez are anything but gold glove material.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

On Monday, Reds lefty Eric Milton, who was inked to a three-year deal in the off-season, had two base hits and drove in a run. He also allowed just one run in eight beautiful pitched innings, becoming the first Reds lefty to get to the eighth inning since 2001. Prior to him, who was the last Cincy pitcher to do it?

Last Week's Answer: Kenny Lofton of Philadelphia with 94 triples.

Our Top Ten Hitters/Players of All-Time:

Willie Mays - Led the New York Giants to a World Championship in 1954 and later helped the New York Mets win a pennant in the early 1970's. Considered by some, including myself, to be the best overall player to play the game, Mays has 12 Gold Gloves and 3,283 hits to go along with his staggering 660 career home runs.

Already on the list: Babe Ruth & Ted Williams