

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 6th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

One month of baseball is in the books, and the story so far has been the New York Yankees. Right now George Steinbrenner's Yanks are tied for dead last in the American League East after losing three out of four in Tampa Bay to the Devil Rays. The Boss may have much of his focus for this weekend set on the Kentucky Derby, where his horse Bellamy Road is projected as the favorite. Still, he's not happy with things, and an even bigger change than bringing up Robinson Cano (who made a poor error a few nights ago) to play second base might be in store. Here are my thoughts on a couple divisions, story lines, and more through one month of play...

NL East: Marlins, Braves, and Mets may all be in the discussion

Florida's key is staying healthy. Atlanta has to swing the bats well to win yet another division crown. And for the Mets, well they need a lot of things to happen, more importantly to get good starting pitching. New York saw Mike Piazza's 1-for-21 streak come to an end on Thursday night as he went 4-5 with a three-run homer to power them over the Phillies, who are struggling at 12-17 overall. Mike Cameron, who did well in a couple games with the Norfolk Tides (the Mets' AAA affiliate), gave them a couple of hits, and third baseman David Wright (.272) sliced a key double in the fifth to put them up for good.



The Mets are hoping to get a boost from this man - Mike Cameron - as he returns to the lineup after left wrist surgery in December. (AP/LM Otero)

Now with Kris Benson returning to the starting rotation and Aaron Heilman making solid improvement, the Mets may think about sending 1-3 Victor Zambrano to the bullpen. They definitely will ponder this if the ex-Devil Ray has a poor outing in Milwaukee against the red hot Brewers. Florida's young arms have been spectacular,

especially my **NL Cy Young for the month of April - Dontrelle Willis**. I firmly expect Florida to be in first or second when we get to September, but I don't see Willis keeping at the pace he is on. With all of those starters, you can get to them and take them out of the game early. Thus far, it hasn't been the case, and it's not going to be easy for teams to pitch for them either. Carlos Delgado adds a whole new dimension to the offense as teams are more tuned in to getting him out than speedsters Luis Castillo and Juan Pierre.

Atlanta's offense is making progress. Chipper Jones is hitting .351 with team best's in RBI's, total bases, walks, and homers. They now sit atop the NL East one night after Adam LaRoche hit a career high four RBI's. One week after the duel of Roger Clemens vs. ex-Brave Greg Maddux, we get Houston's Roy Oswalt opposite John Smoltz. Three things I look for concerning the Braves coming up here:

- A.) - Andy Marte being called up soon since Wilson Betemit is batting .190.
- B.) - Either Raul Mondesi or Brian Jordan (more likely Mondesi) gets dealt.
- C.) - LaRoche will see more playing time and his numbers go up.

Philadelphia has seen Jon Lieber do better than what many thought, including myself, by racing out to a 4-1 start to begin the year. Although, in those first five starts the Phillies gave him good run support in six per game. Losing Kevin Millwood was bigger than they probably thought, even though Millwood has not exactly dazzled the folks in Cleveland. An even bigger departure was that of Eric Milton, now in Cincinnati. Those two guys would be better than what they've got now, which is allowing 5.03 runs per game. Finally, the Nats are slowly going to wilt here in May and June. John Patterson has been terrific for them, ranging that fastball of his between 91-96 miles per hour. Very few guys are going to smack his 12-6 curve (similar to Roy Halladay) near the hips around that often. The tall right-hander formerly of the Diamondbacks held an ERA under one through four starts in '05. Question now becomes who else will be joining him in Detroit for the mid-summer Classic?

AL East: O's on top for now, but can it last?

Baltimore has proven to have the most powerful offense in baseball during the month of April. Whether they are able to sustain that potency is irrelevant in my opinion because scoring runs will usually not be a problem for them. They may have the occasional bad night, but it basically all comes down to the rotation for them. Their bullpen, unlike the Mets' and a few other teams, is not awful. There are a couple guys such as Jorge Julio and new closer B.J. Ryan (throws that tough sweeping pitch) who are reliable. Baltimore's very please with Erik Bedard so far. Bedard throws four basic pitches, none of which are harder to get a handle on than the changeup and cutter. He's throwing that changeup effectively, getting guys to guess fastball when it first comes out. Another starter that's been admirable is Bruce Chen. Now, Chen has been tossed around to different organizations and began with Atlanta. Chen, in his eighth big league season, has a 3-1 record to go along with a 1.26WHIP and 23-9 K/BB ratio. **But what we are forgetting here is that the guy has never made more than 16 starts in a single season.**

We know Brian Roberts is playing out of his mind right now, **looking like an AL MVP candidate**. The guy that's probably going to be one in the very end for Baltimore (no surprise) is Miguel Tejada. He's really considered to be just one of a bunch of very good hitters on the Baltimore Orioles. **Fact of the matter is, he is THE best hitter in their lineup, bar none**. Tejada changes how pitchers approach the other guys in the order, which is opening things up for your Larry Bigbie's and Brian Roberts' of the world.

Boston's getting encouraging starting pitching from Bronson Arroyo of late. Matt Clement has also been decent. When it's all said and done, don't be surprised if the Yankees get it together and have a better overall pitching staff than Boston. It'll certainly be a possibility if Curt Schilling cannot get it together and stay healthy. One of the big misconceptions about the Yankees through 29 games is their lineup has stunk. Not true at all. There's really only been a few guys in the order struggling, mainly Bernie Williams, Jorge Posada, and Hideki Matsui [we don't count Jason Giambi, who's below struggling]. Williams' issues appear to be more serious than the other two guys. All three of them are consummate professionals and should be able to snap out of it, though I'm not sure Bernie can do it offensively as well as defensively.

What's amazing to me is how good the AL East is from a hitting standpoint. For instance, take the worst runs producing team in the division in the Toronto Blue Jays (138). **Put them in the AL Central and they have 13 more runs in one more game than the White Sox, and more total runs than anyone else in that division**. Of course, in the White Sox case it has been all starting pitching as nobody else in the American League even comes close to the league low 88 runs allowed by Chicago. The guy that is hitting the ball very well for the Jays now that he is back in the AL is Shea Hillenbrand. His .374 batting average is 64 points higher than what he hit in Arizona last year. Vernon Wells is someone else to expect to produce in a big way the rest of the way for defensively oriented Toronto.

Brewers on a Roll: Am interested to see whether or not the 6-7-8 hitters for Milwaukee can produce in the summer months, and if a solid #3 guy can evolve in the rotation. Doug Davis and Ben Sheets are pretty close to lights out when they are on and getting run support. Another thing that's been thrown around the water cooler is Brady Clark's play out in center. One person told me he is a lock to make the All-Star team this season. Hard for me to believe, but he's definitely going to have to play like one for them to remain in second place and have any chance, whatsoever of challenging St. Louis in the NL Central. Milwaukee's won seven in a row and are coming off a big-time sweep of the Chicago Cubs. Lyle Overbay and Geoff Jenkins are showing why they are considered as all-stars, being two of quietest, yet toughest outs in baseball.

Twins stud reliever Juan Rincon suspended for ten games: Minnesota needs this guy to win the division, bottom line. From time to time he'll get rattled (and now I guess suspended), but overall he delivers the goods. Last season Rincon went 11-6 with a

2.63ERA while striking out 106 in 82 innings. He and J.C. Romero give the Twins that righty/lefty reliever combo setting up to Joe Nathan in the ninth.

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

Hot: Red Sox pitcher Bronson Arroyo - took a no-hitter into the seventh; now 4-0. Milwaukee Brewers - winners of seven in a row. Padres lineup - led by Brian Giles, San Diego has scored eight the last two times out.

Not: NY Yankees - haven't fielded or pitched; lost seven of their first nine series?. Rockies pitching - Colorado walked 23 in three straight games recently.

More Stats to Chew On:

***** The St. Louis Cardinals are 1-3 this year in games decided by one run.
*** Four of Josh Fogg's first five runs allowed this year were solo HR deliveries.
*** The two best home records in the NL belong to the Mets and D-backs.
*** Seattle has scored more runs and given up fewer than Oakland, but have a worse record.**

***** Tampa Bay, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Colorado have all yet to make the playoffs in the new millennium. A big reason why is their terrible play on the road, as indicated by their collective 6-45 mark away from home so far in 2005.**

PLAY OF THE WEEK:

Triple Play: The St. Louis Cardinals turned baseball's first triple of the season on Thursday night opposite the San Diego Padres. It poses the following question(s): are the Padres 15-14 (three games out of first) because they run the bases incorrectly? Or is St. Louis the best team in the National League because they play as close to flawless defense as you can in the infield? Nonetheless, the Pads got the nod over St. Louis Thurs. night.



Don't look now, but Mark Loretta (2004 All-Star) and the San Diego Padres are suddenly just three games out of first place in the NL West, and two games behind Arizona after taking two of three from the D-backs recently. (Photo Courtesy of USA Today.com)