

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 24th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Are you serious? Not only is this the last Friday in the month of June, but it's also the final weekend of Interleague play in Major League Baseball. We're also approaching the midway point of the season and we'll reveal our official All-Star team next week.

Eric Gagne:

It was known on Tuesday that Dodgers closer Eric Gagne will have Tommy John surgery, ending his season and causing him to miss a portion of the 2006 regular season. Gagne, who began as a starter for the Dodgers in 1999, went 11-11 in that role before making the switch to the bullpen. From 2002-2004, the Canadian born pitcher saved an ML-best 152 games and was awarded the Cy Young for 2003. That year, Gagne converted all 55 of his save opportunities, en route to becoming the first reliever to win the award in 11 years.

So far this year, Gagne has saved eight games and done his job; nothing great or extraordinary though. LA management made a major mistake in my book: letting this guy come back to soon. As we sit now, the Dodgers are 35-37 and 4.5 games back of San Diego for first in the NL West. It could and really should only get worse. **This for a team that began the year 12-2 and earlier this month got swept by lowly Kansas City.** Make no mistake about it, Gagne isn't the sole person the Dodgers miss due to injury. Milton Bradley has been out for quite some time and his bat would be welcomed, even his temper too if it resulted in a few more victories.

On a team that's 27th in all of baseball in doubles, Jeff Kent and J.D. Drew have really been the two reliable bats from day one. If you look at each guy's recent history, leadership does not fall under either. Following Tuesday's defeat to San Diego the team had dropped eight straight contests. It's now fair to say the off-season moves, which were ridiculed by me and others, ended up backfiring. I'll be very surprised if this team does not tank it the rest of the way and finds a way to compete for the playoffs to the very end.

Minnesota's Mess & Florida's Floundering:

Coming into Sunday, the Twins had more infield hits (81 at the time) than any other team in Major League Baseball. More than division foes Chicago (74) and Detroit (71), and more than any team in the National League, including small ball Florida. Speaking of the Marlins, they are struggling mightily. Thank goodness for Dontrelle Willis, who may be our pick to start in the National League All-Star game (be sure to find out next week). If it weren't for D-Train, this team might very well be in last place and Jack McKeon might be thinking about quitting if he hasn't already.

Both teams have pitching. Both teams are good World Series candidates. Is it just a case of going through a slump? Possibly and hopefully for them. Both possess the

necessary starting pitching to go to the World Series. Both make plays in the field and around the base pads. Bullpen and the bench - non-issues. Is it panic time? **No - remember, baseball is a marathon more than any other sport, I firmly believe that.** Of course, that is more of a marathon than any other sports that don't involve marathon running (i.e. track and field, et.). Part of me says the Twins have a better chance of snapping out of it because of all those infield hits and their arms, unlike the Marlins', haven't been overworked early in the season. Then you think if they are 13th overall in hitting, and lead all of baseball in infield hits, they can't be that high on the totem pole in hits out of the infield. True, and good point. Thing with Florida is they just aren't hitting right now at this particular point. The other part of me say the Marlins have an easier path to the playoffs because of the winnable division they play in and the hitters on the roster.

The talent is there for both and the Marlins have a potentially better offense. They won't have too many more games like they did on Thursday night where the team committed half as many errors (two) as hits (four) in a shut-out loss to Atlanta. Minnesota's outfield has been so deep and talented for so long now. What's the missing ingredient perhaps? A business-like second baseman would do the trick. What both teams are looking for in the trade market is what St. Louis got a year ago in Larry Walker, a move that helped propel them to the Fall Classic. Minnesota's going to give serious thought about trying to bring in Blue Jays second baseman Orlando Hudson, who really could fit anywhere in that order. As strange as it may have sounded two months ago, the fish may want to look at brining in another starter with how poor Al Leiter has been.



Twins Manager Ron Gardenhire can't figure out what's wrong with his ball club. They've gone 13-13 since May 24th and dropped an additional 4.5 games in the standings behind the White Sox. Getting Brad Radke (5-6, 4.20ERA) back on track would be a good start tonight. Photo: AP/Charles Krupa

Best NL Bullpen?

I've already said that I personally believe the Twins have the best bullpen in all of baseball and in the American League. Who's got the best group of relievers in the National League? There are some good candidates, and some not so good one's. Start out in the NL East... okay nobody has been really consistent except the Washington Nationals. There you find four steady relievers in Hector Carrasco, Gary Majewski, Luis Ayala and Chad Cordero. Carrasco and Majewski are flexible in that they can pitch in the sixth, seventh or eighth innings. When Livan Hernandez goes out on the hill, and sometimes John Patterson when he's rolling, they aren't really needed. Ayala's power sinker is almost unhittable at this point. Cordero recorded his 23rd save of the season on Wednesday night and 20th consecutive one.

Then you get to the NL Central. St. Louis' bullpen has its moments and they are led by closer Jason Isringhausen, who really has yet to be tested since 2003 for the simple fact the Cardinals' lineup has been so good they haven't had to play tight ball games. The Cubs are starting to piece together something decent enough to maybe put them in position to make a postseason push. Good closer at the bottom of that division (Mesa, Turnbow and Lidge) with the exception of Cincinnati. No pen has been worked more than Arizona's in the National League West it seems. Odd saying that when you consider the D-backs have three pitches - Brandon Webb, Javier Vazquez and Russ Ortiz - that can go deep into games on any particular night. Being used a lot doesn't make you the best bullpen either. My pick in the National League West would have to be the San Diego Padres. Trevor Hoffman is as good as they come in the ninth inning. Chris Hammond, Rudy Saenez, and Akinori Otsuka are playing well leading up to Hoffman.

Overall: Washington is #1, while the Padres are 2nd as far as NL bullpens go.

Firing Miley Was Just The Beginning:

On the same day John Garland became the Majors' first 12-game winner and one day prior to Garland's White Sox teammate Mark Buehrle improved to 9-1, the Cincinnati Reds - many people's surprise pick instead of CWS before the season started - said adios to Manager Dave Miley. After being promoted as interim Manager from AAA Louisville, Miley went 125-164 in his time in Cincinnati. More sickening was the 27-43 record, which isn't going to cut it, especially when you put into perspective the moves they made in the off-season. The Reds went out and got more pitching to make them more balanced and ready for a run. A lot was riding on this season coming in and nobody has really delivered besides Willy Mo Peña - the only guy I would consider **an untouchable** heading towards the trade deadline. Believe me, the firing of Miley was not the first and last move. Adam Dunn's name will be tossed around, Austin Kearns' too, and the face of the franchise - Kenny Griffey Jr.

***** We'll delve more into the Reds and every team out there as we do our mid-season review two weeks from now. You don't want to miss a second of it! *****

HOT:

Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols - Despite the fact his team is 5-5 over the last ten games and have dropped three in a row, Pujols has been swinging a very hot

bat. If it weren't for Derrek Lee, Pujols would be getting all the attention as he is 9-24 with three homers and 9RBI since last Friday.

Devil Rays third baseman Jorge Cantu - Last night the guy went 3-5 with a couple of homers. He's hit the Yankees well, but more importantly has put up nice season numbers. Cantu is batting .306 with 11HR and 41RBI's this season.

Chicago White Sox - They are winners of eight of their last ten and ten in a row. They do have the best road record in baseball. And yes, if they can take care of the Cubs this weekend they can pretty much cement themselves for the postseason.

NOT:

Florida Marlins offense - Until last night, this team had been absolutely cold offensively. Florida has scored three runs or fewer 12 times this month. The fish need some warm water and fast most definitely.

Dodgers Jason Repko and Hee Seop Choi - Neither has gotten a hit in their last 27 combined at-bats. Choi was hot there for awhile, though cooled off pretty quickly. Say the name Repko and people will mistake it for Revco for times than not.

Colorado Rockies: Lets make it clear the Cardinals are an honorable mention choice, but have actually done something this year. Never a good thing when you've got throw Byung-Hyun Kim out on the mound every five days. Also, not a good sign when your best hitter - Todd Helton - has a .252BA and just six home runs.



Devil Rays young left-hander Scott Kazmir threw seven strong innings Wednesday, allowing only four hits and three earned runs in a victory over the Yankees. Kazmir certainly figures into Tampa Bay's long-term plans as he's improved with each start in 2005.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Twins pitcher Carlos Silva is on the verge of becoming only the fifth pitcher in the last 20 years to go into the All-Star break with more wins than walks. Jon Lieber, Curt Schilling and David Wells have all done it in the new millennium, but can you name the only man to do it in the 1990's?

Last Week's Answer: Hack Wilson and Joe DiMaggio

Our Top Ten Hitters/Players of All-Time:

Hank Aaron - The Hammer, Hammerin Hank, was the game's most under appreciated great hitter in my opinion. He's still the all-time home run leader with 755 in his career and won his only World Series in 1957. Aaron, who appeared in a record 24 All-Star games, also won three gold gloves.

Already on the List: Babe Ruth, Stan Musial, Joe DiMaggio, Barry Bonds, Willie Mays & Ted Williams

Interleague Stuff to Watch:

Here are my predictions on three rather intriguing Interleague series'.

Cubs @ White Sox - Sergio Mitre has been a pleasant plus for the Cubs over the last several weeks. Who hasn't? Corey Patterson. He's got to get it going and join Derrek Lee and Aramis Ramirez as dependable every day players. Don't see it happening. What I do see happening is Mark Prior making his first start come Sunday, but the end result will be... **Pick: White Sox win two of three.**

Mets @ Yankees - Despite the fact Tom Glavine goes up against a left with an ERA of 10.29 tomorrow, the Mets' best chance of getting one here is tonight when Pedro Martinez goes out on the mound vs. Mike Mussina. Pedro's had his troubles at Yankee Stadium in the past and tonight may not be any different. If they don't win tonight, NYY could sweep... **Pick: Key player for this series is Mike Piazza. NYY goes 2-1.**

Reds @ Indians - Eric Milton has been nothing short of dreadful. He comes into tonight's deal with a 3-9 record an ERA approaching 8.00. On the other side of the spectrum, the Indians are trying to rebound from a not so easy series with the Red Sox. Jake Westbrook goes on Saturday and he's not be that great, but has received very little run support. Good news for Cleveland is they are playing a team with no pitching and a new Manager. Also, C.C. Sabathia goes on Sunday which helps. **Pick: Indians sweep.**