

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 3rd, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

We've got a triple crown leader: Cubs first baseman Derrek Lee, a former 14th overall pick by the San Diego Padres in 1994, is tops in the National League in homers (17), RBI (50), and batting average (.389). A couple of divisions are supremely tight, such as the National League East where all five teams are separated by just 2.5 games. Finally, the All-Star voting is out and the entire AL infield does not consist of New York Yankees (as it did a couple years ago), especially after the team got swept by the worst team in all of baseball - now Buddy Bell's Kansas City Royals.

All-Star Voting:

It's mind boggling to me that Nomar Garciaparra is one of the top vote getters in the National League. I know, it's early. Still, it's not like this guy was doing that well before the groin injury. Nomar has 0 home runs this season. Nomar's batting average: .157. His RBI total: 4. One Cub definitely deserves to be in the All-Star game as a starter or reserve and that's Derrek Lee. His numbers through two months of the season are astonishing to say the least. Although, I have no problem with Albert Pujols of St. Louis being ahead of him at this point. Pujols has played well. What bothers me is these players getting in solely based on their past reputation. Want another prime example? Reds center fielder Ken Griffey Jr.

Griffey, 35, is way past his prime as much as I struggle to say that being a fan of his for quite some time. On the season he's batting .267 has banded out eight and driven in 36. He may be a Hall-of-Famer whose compiled incredible career numbers during an injury plagued career, but he's nothing more than an all-star reserve at this point. Some solid candidates that to make the team: Philadelphia's Bobby Abreu, Florida's Miguel Cabrera, and Luis Gonzalez of the Diamondbacks. All three of them are prime threats in their respective lineup.

DEBACLE: It's a true debacle that Ramon Hernandez isn't even in the top five for catchers in the National League. The Padres' guy behind the plate has been great all year long and no disrespect to Mike Piazza, but should be the starter there if he keeps up the pace.

So who would I put in Nomar's place at shortstop? There aren't a lot of lock-solid candidates thus far. However, David Eckstein has done a nice job, especially without Scott Rolen at third recently. Rafael Furcal of the Braves also is in the mix and the same goes for Jose Reyes, who leads the Majors in triples thanks to slowly improving plate discipline (still not disciplined enough at the plate).

As far as the American League goes, nothing really gets under my skin there. Tino Martinez has been a terrific surprise, yet Mark Teixeira is my pick with 13 homers, 38RBI, and **zero errors**. At second base Brian Roberts (Baltimore) may be the only real lock. Can't go wrong with either Jason Varitek (Boston) or Detroit's Pudge Rodriguez at catcher. In the outfield, Ichiro is close to becoming a lock if he doesn't go on a bad slide,

which he shouldn't. Manny Ramirez has to improve the batting average and the defensive play. Still, he'll get in because of the great RBI numbers. Gary Sheffield needs to get in as a reserve or starter. Vlad Guerrero is the major question mark only because we don't know if he will be back and whether he will want to play in the game or not.

Pitching wise I think there are a lot of superb choices in both leagues: Jon Garland (White Sox), Roy Halladay (Toronto), Pedro Martinez (Mets), Dontrelle Willis (Florida), San Diego's Jake Peavy, Roger Clemens, etc.

***** Be sure to look for our official All-Star picks here in the coming weeks prior to the mid-summer classic next month. *****

Octavio Dotel: Out for the year with elbow surgery

This is a monumental blow for the A's for a few reasons. First off, Houston Street now becomes the closer sooner than they would've liked. It also means there's now one less arm in the pen. Now Dotel may not have been lights out this year, last season, or long before that. As a setup man to Billy Wagner in Houston, Dotel, an ex-Met, was pretty darn good. His velocity was there, location, too. Dotel was hammered by the Red Sox on May 10th and 11th. Kevin Millar nailed him for a walk-off homer then Jason Varitek did it the very next day. Another thing this does to Oakland, currently reeling at 21-32 (second worst mark in the AL), is it takes Dotel off the open trade market.

Even though he has not been greatly productive, Dotel can help any team needing an extra arm in the bullpen. A move back to the NL could've done wonders for him believe it or not. Minnesota, the White Sox, or even one of those AL East teams may have made a play for him as well. Funny thing is Billy Beane is finding out first hand what it is like to be so good for so many seasons and then fall to the very bottom. And what if those young starting pitchers don't pan out like Zito, Mulder, and Hudson?

Who Would've Thunk It?

Me using bad English? No, not that. Who would've thought that D-rays outfielder Alex Sanchez, a former Detroit Tiger that was suspended last month for failing a drug test (i.e. 'roids), would lead the American League in batting during the month of May? He came into last Saturday's home contest with Seattle leading the league at .389.

Nats Notes:

******* How about those Washington Nationals? Frank Robinson's ball club is 28-26 and only 1.5 games out of first heading into tonight's game vs. Florida. Taking the mound opposite Josh Beckett (7-3, 2.62ERA) will be 8-2 Livan Hernandez. **What's really amazing to me is that the Nats have scored the third fewest amount of runs in the entire National League through June 2nd.** Really unheard of for a franchise like this that most thought would be struggling going into June. They've been able to do it with timely hitting and pitching. As we mentioned last week, Gary Majewski has been

emerging bright spot in the bullpen. Former AL Cy Young candidate Esteban Loaiza has also been very sound and might be poised for good summer.

Offensively, look no further than the trio of Brad Wilkerson, Nick Johnson, and Jose Guillen. Guillen began the team's most recent road trip 10-for-32 with a pair of homers and five RBI. Successful hitting by Guillen, despite the fact he ended that trip 1-for-hit and driving in no runs. Johnson got on-base in 45 of the team's first 47 ball games. Through last Friday's game he had a .424OBP - 5th in the National League. Moving on following a forearm injury, Wilkerson has hit like an All-Star. The .281 BA isn't bad, but what's really impressive is his 22 doubles, showing why he was Kentucky's Mr. Baseball.

HOT:

Cubs first baseman Derrek Lee: This triple crown leader's numbers are sick right now. Not only is Lee at the top of the three major hitting categories in the National League, but he's also 16-for-25 with three dingers and 8RBI since last Friday.

Red Sox designated hitter David Ortiz: Yankees fans are calling for their pitchers to be aggressive/threatening on the mound when Ortiz steps into the batter's box. Ortiz is 11-22 with three homers and 10RBI since the Yanks-Sox series.

Pitchers Pedro Martinez (Mets) and Glendon Rusch: Both were fabulous last night as Rusch threw a complete game gem, while Pedro fanned a ton of D-backs in eight wonderful innings. Also, both guys are in the top 15 in ERA.

NOT:

San Francisco Giants: Bring back Barry and fast! Last week they were in decent position at 23-22. Since then the Giants have dropped seven in a row, plummeting in the standings with bad losses to San Diego and Philly.

NY Yankees & Tampa Bay Devil Rays: Each has dropped five in a row. Tampa has a 3-21 road record and the Yankees are not a whole lot better (11-13 away from the Stadium). Tino Martinez, a former Devil Ray who was red hot earlier in the season, has failed to get a hit in his last ten at-bats.

A's pitcher Joe Blanton: I really hate to pound this kid, but you cannot give up 27 earned runs over your last 18.1 innings of ball. An 0-5 record doesn't help his cause, nor does a 26th ranked Oakland offense.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Last Saturday, the Padres' Phil Nevin said 'ka-boom,' breaking a 2-2 tie with the Giants with one swing of the bat. Nevin's 155th career home run moved him past Dave Winfield on the team's all-time list as San Diego went on to win, 5-3, as Trevor Hoffman struck out Michael Tucker to end the game. Who is Nevin chasing for first on the Padres' all-time home run list?

Last Week's Answer: Lance Davis (2001)

Our Top Ten Hitters/Players of All-Time:

Stan Musial: The most forgotten great player in baseball history, Stan Musial was the face of the St. Louis Cardinals for years. Three rings, three MVP's, seven batting crowns, 24 All-Star games, over 3600 hits and 475 homers belong to Musial. As one respected baseball person told me, "if he played today he'd be one of the three best hitters in the game, bar none."

Already on the List: Babe Ruth, Willie Mays & Ted Williams



'Stan The Man' Musial was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1969 after 22 years with the Cardinals. (James A. Finley)

Final Thoughts:

For the first time all season I am starting to doubt just a tiny bit my Yankees World Series pick. They have to go on another 16-2 streak to make up for losing two out of three to the Red Sox. A sweep at the hands of the woeful (and I mean woeful) Royals only added to it all. Boston was able to salvage a home split with Baltimore thanks to David Ortiz' 5th career walk-off jack. Ortiz has been playing like a monster as of late, but I still the Sox need a healthy Curt Schilling to get in the postseason. Interesting to find out that all seven of Carlos Beltran's home runs have come in Pedro Martinez starts. Pedro's pitching like a Cy Young nominee, but mark it down: **he will start to tail off in late June/early July.** The Mets are actually playing better ball after they won three out of four in Florida (who finally snapped their Pittsburgh losing streak) and followed it up with two out of three in Arizona. Bottom line is nobody is head and shoulders above the others in the NL East and the Mets have problem with the Braves. The American League is really up for grabs with about six or seven teams sporting a legit chance, while in the NL may come down to San Diego and St. Louis. I'm going to say it all year long: watch out for Bruce Bochy's Padres. Texas is playing wonderful ball in the AL and tearing the cover off of the baseball. However, San Diego has more complete, young pitching from my point of view. Also have to love the balanced hitting and bench for Bruce Bochy.