

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 1st, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

All-Star selection weekend is here! The games to us become kind of irrelevant this week as we focus on who will be picked on Sunday to play in the mid-summer classic. There's two ways to do this. Number one, pick who you think will be there. Number two, pick who you want there. Me, I'm going with who I want in the game based on my unbiased opinion of the MLB games played thus far. Next week we'll have our mid-season MLB review - a can't miss if you're a baseball fan!

Note: Plenty of good guys that will make it as reserves. Am only filling out the pitching side of the roster, not the offensive reserves.

AMERICAN LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Jason Varitek (Boston Red Sox): Not a great position this year. Pudge Rodriguez of Detroit is not having his usual season, though you'd think he'll be there as the lone Detroit representative if all they have is one. My reason for Varitek is simple. The guy may have trouble from time to time throwing out base runners, but he's as good any switch hitter out there. He's got an OBP over .500. Name me another AL catcher that does? You can't because he is the lone one. Leadership skills are good too.

First Baseman - Mark Teixeira (Texas Rangers): How Tino Martinez of the Yankees was leading this guy by nearly 178,000 votes at the start of the month is beyond me. Tino had a nice little stretch early in the season, I understand that. Teixeira, a Georgia Tech product born in Annapolis, Maryland, hit two big blasts on Thursday night. If nine more homers, 30 more RBI's (almost double), 29 more runs (also almost double) and a .291BA compared to Tino's average .225 average is not enough, then what is?

Second Baseman - Brian Roberts (Baltimore Orioles): This is the toughest position to pick in the field in the American League. It's really between Roberts and Soriano, both of whom will make the team. Question is who will be the starter? When you crunch the numbers it's as even as you can get. Teams are about equal. Roberts holds the edge in BA, steals and fielding. Soriano is the better power guy with better stats in homers, RBI and runs scored. Where the O's guy gets the edge is strikeouts (about half the number of Alfonso) and the fact he can be the league's leadoff man as a switch hitter.

Third Baseman - Alex Rodriguez (New York Yankees): A-Rod is A-Rod, which in most cases is pretty darn good. Scratch that, he's outstanding. Then why aren't the Yankees in first place right now? Well you can't attribute it to him. He's done his job, drilling 20 home runs, driving in 66 runs, and hitting .329 in the process. The numbers are MVP-like. Problem is he's taken a step backwards at third.

Shortstop - Miguel Tejada (Baltimore Orioles): My top candidates for MVP in the American League are as follows: Tejada, Ortiz, A-Rod and either Soriano or Roberts.

Tejada is the clubhouse leader. Reason is he's riding a nine-game hit streak into July with 13 base knocks since July 21st. The team is struggling and 2-7 in their last nine. So he's been good when the team has been bad and very good when the team's playing well. **Also, did we mention he's played all 162 games the last four seasons?**

Outfielders - Ichiro (Mariners), Manny Ramirez (Red Sox) and Vladimir Guerrero (Angels): The questionable pick of the three, if there is one, is Vladimir Guerrero believe it or not. Yes, Vlad made a trip to the disabled list not too long ago, but you what's astonishing about this guy? **He's got a hit in every game vs. Texas in his career!** Teammate Garrett Anderson is a worthy backup, Johnny Damon's done nice things and is there as far as average goes, and I've got no problem with Gary Sheffield making the team. I just think Sheff is a head case, that's all. Many = RBI's (2nd in all of baseball) and Ichiro is the complete package with the exception of a little less power than the rest of the guys in the discussion.

Designed Hitter - David Ortiz (Boston Red Sox): Big Papi is as lethal and as clutch as they come. Ortiz won the Red Sox two games in a 24-hour period vs. the Yankees in last year's ALCS. Boston's DH hits monster shots, and I do mean monster shots, in all three directions. Always smiling, Ortiz ranks third in baseball's RBI department. To think, the Twins let this guy go like it was nothing.

NATIONAL LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Ramon Hernandez (San Diego Padres): Hernandez had an awesome month of May as did the Padres. San Diego rolled to the best record in the bigs during May and Hernandez played a vital role. He's near the top of the NL in just every imaginable statistical category among catchers. It's a disgrace the guy isn't even in the top 3 of the fan vote and it'll be an even more travesty if he misses the team altogether.

First Baseman - Derrek Lee (Chicago Cubs): Had we told you at the beginning of the season that Derrek Lee, a former member of the Florida Marlins 2003 World Championship team, would be in the hunt to hit .400 and win the Triple Crown, you would've said I was crazy. Fact is the 1994 first round draft pick of the San Diego Padres is going to probably set career highs in home runs, RBI's, batting average, hits, doubles, runs scored and OPS. **Our NL MVP at the midway point.**

Second Baseman - Jeff Kent (Los Angeles Dodgers): Kent's committed eight errors so far, but that's okay when you have a near flawless type of shortstop and double play partner like Cesar Izturis. What's really gone unnoticed through three months of play is that Kent, who spent the first five years of his career playing with Toronto, the Mets and Cleveland, is on pace for his best offensive year arguably since his MVP season of 2002 with the Giants. Somewhat even more remarkable is that he's doing it at age 37.

Third Baseman - Morgan Ensberg (Houston Astros): This is a hard position to pick in the National League. Rolen, when healthy, is without question the #1 third baseman in the NL and almost as good as A-Rod in my book (plus more cost efficient).

A .246BA, 5HR and 20 RBI through 40 games doesn't do it for me. Chipper Jones has missed a considerable amount of time so he's out. When you compare the numbers with Enberg, Aramis Ramirez of the Cubs and Arizona's Troy Glaus, they are pretty close. Ramirez is the worst fielder of the three, but has a .301 average and has picked up the power. Glaus has stayed healthy early on, nailing 17 HR and 48RBI and connecting for 19 doubles. His .258 average hurts his cause. Meanwhile, Enberg is one of just four players this year to have a three-home game. Also has the most RBI's of the trio.

Shortstop - Cesar Izturis (Los Angeles Dodgers): A number of players can make an argument here. Izturis and Kent turn double plays like nobody else in the National League. The Venezuelan also means speed for your team. Izturis' triples and stolen bases are down from last year, but expect for them to pick up here in the coming weeks. Jose Reyes of the Mets, Colorado's Clint Barmes and the Cardinals' David Eckstein all make solid cases to be reserves on the '05 team.

Outfielders - Bobby Abreu (Phillies), Andruw Jones (Braves) and Carlos Lee (Brewers): All Lee has done is hit balls out of Miller Park at an extremely high rate. His RBI total of 72 is best in the Majors and the 22 homers he's belted is third. Abreu might be the most underrated great player in the game today. Whether it's running, making plays with the leather, or causing havoc with the bat as shown by the 17 homers and numerous doubles he's hit in Philly. Andruw Jones has been tearing it up and hit a walk-off homer to win it for Atlanta this past Saturday. It was then his Major League leading 23rd of the year and 11th dinger in the last 14 games/days. Andrew's added two since breaking the 4-4 tie in the 9th vs. the O's.

Designated Hitter - Albert Pujols (St. Louis Cardinals): You dirty dog! Remember, the game is played in an American League park this year in Detroit. That means the National League must have a designated hitter and who better than Pujols? St. Louis' top slugger, who happens to be an MVP candidate, has improved his fielding at first as well. He's the model of hitting consistency in the game today. Since entering the league in 2001, Pujols has had 40+ doubles, 30+ homers, 120+ RBI, fewer than 100 strikeouts, and a BA better than .310 each year. Fat Albert is well on that pace again.

PITCHERS:

AL Starting Pitcher - Mark Buehrle (White Sox): He's elevated himself from good to great status in one half a season. Want to make it clear from the start here, though that it wouldn't bother me seeing either Roy Halladay of Toronto or Buehrle's teammate Jon Garland starting this game.

Rest of the Rotation - Roy Halladay (Jays), Jon Garland (White Sox), Johan Santana (Twins) and Bartolo Colon (Angels): Have trouble putting Kenny Rogers on the All-Star team with his last few sub-par outings and camera incident. Also feel that the 'snub' here is 9-1 Matt Clement, a pleasant surprise for Boston. Without Halladay the Jays would be buried, period. Garland began the year as his team's #5 starter and in all actuality would be the first or second guy to start for them in the postseason. Santana's

been beat, most recently by Milwaukee's Prince Fielder. Nonetheless, he's right there with Curt Schilling when it comes to who you got with one game to win in the playoffs.

Closers - Bob Wickman (Indians) and B.J. Ryan (Orioles): All Mr. Wickman has done is convert an American League best 21 of 24 saves in 30 innings of work. What's really interesting to me is he doesn't have to strike guys out to do it either. People said he was done about two years ago and it's really a feel good story. Ryan makes it based on making the transition from setup guy to closer and sporting a 56-9 K/BB ratio.

NL Starting Pitcher - Dontrelle Willis (Florida Marlins): Willis is the most entertaining pitcher in many people's opinion to watch. His herky-jerky delivery confuses hitters at the plate and enables him to punch some pretty good batters out. Keeping the ball down and having control of his control has been his biggest concern in the past. Hasn't been a problem at all as the D-train is 12-3 2.04ERA entering tonight.

Rest of the Rotation - Roger Clemens (Astros), Jake Peavy (Padres), Chris Carpenter (Cards), Pedro Martinez (Mets) and Livan Hernandez (Nats): Clemens is starters material once again. No matter how much this guy ages he still remains ten times more effective than the next guy, striking out already 104 men heading into July. Clemens' 1.50ERA and 0.94WHIP makes up for just six wins, showing the world just how little run support he's received. Carpenter quietly has 11 wins with an ERA of about 2.77. The last two spots came down to Peavy, a seven-game winner with a nice ERA and 100+ strikeouts, Brandon Webb of Arizona and the methodical Livan Hernandez. Hernandez has been so good that he deserves a spot, averaging seven innings every time out. Peavy gets the nod over Webb with two losses, a win in a head-to-head matchup earlier in the year, and the best Earned Run Average.

Closer - Chad Cordero (Washington Nationals): Cordero's 15 saves in June tied a Major League record. He's been the guy converting all those saves for the Nationals in close ball games, blowing only two of 30 tries with an ERA under 0.90.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Earlier this week, Astros player Craig Biggio set the Major League record for times being hit by a pitch, passing Don Baylor. How many runs has he scored on those HBP's?

Last Week's Answer: Bob Tewksberry

OUR TOP TEN HITTERS/PLAYERS OF ALL-TIME:

Ty Cobb – He played in a different generation, but his production would simply remain the same. Cobb, the first Hall-of-Fame inductee in baseball history, was the purest hitter that ever lived in my book.

Already on My List: Ruth, Musial, DiMaggio, Bonds, Mays, Aaron and Williams