

MLB Weekly --- Friday, July 22nd, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Wheels & Deals: Breakdown of recent trades in Major League Baseball

Minnesota's Twins probably made the best bargain deal around the All-Star break. Since adding second baseman Bret Boone, the Twinkies, as they are often referred to as, have hovered around .500. So why is it a move that will groove in the long run? Because his presence has already started to rub off on other guys. They've won two key games over Baltimore this week that's propelled them back into the wild card race and maybe for good. What's next for them? A third baseman has been rumored about, and with the call-up of Scott Baker recently from Triple-A, another pitcher seems unlikely, even in an already stout bullpen.

Another pretty significant move was the Yankees picking up Al Leiter from Florida. Leiter, who was drafted in the second round of the 1984 draft by the Yanks, had a fantastic outing on Sunday night at Fenway Park. He got the win as the bullpen preserved a victory for him, only his fourth overall in 2005. Despite a 6.64ERA down south, Leiter can bring stability to the rotation. Nobody is asking him to be mow down ten batters a game, but he's better at this age still than Darrell May and Tim Redding. Plus, Leiter has pitched in the postseason before and might be able to make a few appearances there with his wealth of experience.

Oakland's all of the sudden passed by Texas in the American League West race. They've added another outfielder to an offense in need of some help, batting .263 as a team. Jay Payton patrols the outfield adequately and really saw his offensive numbers soar in Colorado's Coors Field opposed to San Diego's Petco Park. A member of the New York Mets at one time and Boston Red Sox player for the first part of this season, Payton has twice as many hits as strikeouts in 18 at-bats with the A's. He's also driven in four runs and knocked two out of the park in just four games there.

GM Jim Bowden and the Washington Nationals have made a lot of little moves such as waiver deals and equal player swaps to amazingly get themselves into first place at this point in late July. Most recently they acquired outfielder Preston Wilson, a former Florida Marlin, from the Colorado Rockies. To make a pro basketball analogy, he's the James Posey of Major League Baseball. Wilson offers speed, range with his glove and solid contact as well as power. What's next? Brining back Barry Larkin? Shortstop Cristian Guzman was signed to a four-year deal before the season began, but isn't producing. Guzman came into the week with a .190 batting average and has not done enough defensively to make up for that poor BA. Do I think they bring back Larkin out of the front office? I doubt it, and they've made enough moves of real importance. Bowden will watch this play out since he doesn't want to mess with the chemistry. Another pitcher like Eddie Guardado of Seattle might be on their radar screen... that would be about it really.

Cleveland made a swap with the Cubs, exchanging outfielders. Going to the Cubs will be Jody Gerut (22 homers in 2003) and the Tribe get Jason Dubois. It's a fair trade

for both clubs as the Indians needed a right-handed stick like Dubois, while it doesn't hurt the Cubs to see if Gerut can re-gain that power of two years ago and be the force on the right side of the plate they were hoping to get with switch-hitting CF Corey Patterson. Dubois, a Virginia Beach native that attended VCU, has a batting average below .240 and needs more patience in the batter's box.

Boston's been in need of bullpen help like they were two seasons ago. Alan Embree was designated for assignment recently following the return of Curt Schilling. When Keith Foulke went to the DL, Schilling was activated. Schilling, who last recorded a save with the O's prior to this new role as part-time closer, blew a save in his first game back last Thursday night vs. New York.

Latest Trade Buzz:

A.J. Burnett - His name has been everywhere. About 7-10 teams have been in serious contact with the Marlins about acquiring him from what I understand, and Florida's actually considering a move. What puzzles me about this is that the Marlins are right there in the wild card hunt, sitting just 5.5 games out of first with a good 50+ to go. Baltimore seems to be the team most interested in him as they would give up Jorge Julio and maybe a bat to go along with him. The perfect place for him would be in Detroit. Why's that? The young rotation they are building there with Jeremy Bonderman, who's been nothing short of terrific, Mike Maroth, Justin Verlander and Nate Robertson. He'd fit in, and with another solid hitter the Tigers would be a playoff contender for 2006-07 and beyond. My guess is a three-team deal at this point that would send him to Texas, who's desperately needing a starter, and the other team in the trade (that I don't know right now) would get second baseman Alfonso Soriano, who we'll talk about here shortly.

Mike Lowell - Florida may be regretting not shipping Mike Lowell to the Cubs in exchange for something younger and more valuable for their future. Chicago ended up working on a deal for a bunch of Pirates, including one 3B Aramis Ramirez, before falling to Jack McKeon's fish in the 2003 NLCS. Speaking of McKeon, he and Lowell are the two people I don't see lighting a fire under this team sadly. If Lowell moves somewhere San Diego, Los Angeles (Dodgers), Boston and the White Sox might be the possible destinations. Problem is the money he is making is outrageous for his average batting average. A team on the cusp of threatening someone like the White Sox would get a steal if he re-gained old power. There's no clause in a deal, though that guarantees power.

Juan Pierre - You didn't think we were done with the Marlins quite yet, did you? Pierre's contract is not going to prevent him being dealt to a team like the Yankees or someone else needing a center fielder. What will is how much the Marlins do before the deadline, what their record is as we inch closer to July 31st, and flat out whether or not management wants to let him go. I think it would be a terrible decision. With Luis Castillo's speed not exactly the same as it was about two years ago, Pierre has become their prime base stealer. If he's gone I'm not sure you can ask Castillo, an All-Star hitter and fielder, to lay it all on the line and try to be the same base stealer he was in the past. An occasional one here and there, that's fine. Pierre has also made great strides since coming over from Colorado, where he was a well below average glove man.

Rangers & Soriano - Texas has slipped into third place past the red hot Oakland Athletics, who have been the best team in baseball the past few years after the All-Star break because of pitching. Obviously the Kenny Rogers incident has hurt them and he will today appeal his suspension levied down by Bud Selig and Major League Baseball. Pedro Astacio was let go as was Ryan Drese. Chan Ho Park may be the next guy on the move, but nobody will dare take on that contract. In the off-season a deal that would send second baseman Alfonso Soriano to the Cubs for Kerry Wood was pondered by both clubs. The deal never materialized, though and can't now one would think with Wood hurt. Texas has enough power and won't struggle to score runs. Names like Kip Wells of Pittsburgh, the Mets' Kris Benson, Bronson Arroyo (Boston) and Carl Pavano (NY Yankees) are one's to watch. Buck Showalter has also butted heads with Soriano, or to phrase it a little better, the two haven't gotten along like best friends. John Hart knows Soriano is shop-able. They will only pull the trigger if equal value comes back (i.e. someone that can really help them).

White Sox making a move? - They're lead in the American League Central is more comfortable than a big man's recliner at 11PM. However, GM Ken Williams knows they could always take on another hitter and someone more reliable in the bullpen. **That's one of the big reasons why I don't think the White Sox will get to the World Series: no defined closer, or an average one in Dustin Hermanson.** No personal knock on Hermanson, who has made a valiant transition from the rotation to the bullpen, but he's not the guy I want on the mound vs. a dangerous American League lineup, in the ninth, come October. Shingo Tatkatsu was the person who was supposed to be their closer before the season began. He hasn't lived up to his hype, meaning they might want to deal him. A team like Arizona, who's got a bevy of talented, young prospects, sees the NL West within reach so they might consider him. I mean the D-backs have the **worst** bullpen ERA in the big's, partly due to the injury of Brandon Lyon and the lack of production from the rest of their relievers in his absence.

Seattle Mariners - The **LOCK of this trade deadline in my opinion will be a move, or two, or three by the Seattle Mariners.** Entering Friday they are in last place in the American League West at 41-53. A team in the National League would **LOVE** to get aging left-handed pitcher Jamie Moyer. It would be a two-year investment max, but the move could pay off for someone if they are to meet the Cardinals in the NL playoffs.

Staying Pat at the Deadline: St. Louis

Is this year's version of the St. Louis Cardinals more dangerous than the 2004 team we saw shockingly get swept by the Boston Red Sox in the Fall Classic? **Yes.** Reason is the starting pitching they have, which has never been healthier. Matt Morris had the best record of any pitcher that did not make the All-Star game. Morris is currently 11-2 with a **WHIP of 1.10.** Chris Carpenter, who will started in the mid-summer classic and will make an appearance tonight, has a 14-4 record with a ERA well under 2½. Carpenter will be in the running for Cy Young for how he has bounced back from an injury that kept him out of last year's postseason. I've equated that injury to the one the LA Lakers had to endure in the 2004 basketball playoffs with Karl Malone. Joining Carpenter and Morris is Mark Mulder, maybe the team's best 'stuff' guy. Mulder

has postseason experience with Oakland and is capable of shutting down a lineup in the playoffs. Then you get to Jeff Suppan and Jason Marquis. One can be the fourth guy on that staff come October and the other (most likely Marquis) can come out of the pen early. By the way, have I mentioned that their lineup is really, really good?

Getting Healthy at the Perfect Time: Atlanta

Atlanta was missing three-fifths of its starting rotation for a good portion of the season. Also out was star third baseman Chipper Jones, a former recipient of the National League Most Valuable Player award. Still, behind the smokin' bat of Andruw Jones, the Braves have caught Washington atop the National League East. Going into Friday's play both teams are tied at 54-42 overall. Not only are the Braves a better road team and have a better record since the break, but they have scored more runs and allowed fewer. A quiet leader to go with Jones' stick has been pitcher John Smoltz. Second in all of baseball in innings pitched, Smoltz has returned to the rotation with good starts after a tough start where he got literally no run support whatsoever. Getting back Tim Hudson, Mike Hampton, John Thompson and Chipper will be their acquisitions and I ask you how do you match that? By beating them in the playoffs, how else?

Livan Hernandez:

Livan Hernandez is having one of the best seasons of his pro baseball career. He has an overall record of 12-4, an ERA .90 under the league average, a 1.41 WHIP and eats up innings like nobody else in this profession. On Wednesday night had hit four Colorado Rockies, tying a modern day record in the team's seventh loss in the last ten games. Hernandez said following the game that he's contemplating season-ending knee surgery. It would be a devastating blow to a Washington rotation that has lived on his Major League leading 149.1 innings pitched. Hernandez also hinted at frustration, saying that he'll let everyone know what he is upset about at the end of the year. If you ask me it could be that he is constantly having to go deep into ball games. Maybe he feels that they are overusing his arm and an extended period of rest is in order if they don't cut down on his innings a bit.

Hernandez, now calmed down, put to rest it all on Thursday night saying, "I don't got no problem." Look on the bright side folks. A.) he has changed his mind and B.) at least he didn't say, "I *ain't* got not problem."

Bullpen Burnout?

The New York Yankees re-captured first place in the American League East earlier this week for the first time since early April. Question is are the Yankees relying too heavily on their relievers? Numbers say yes. Tanyon Sturtze, Tom Gordon and flawless closer Mariano Rivera have been lights out in the 7-8-9 innings. You can very well make the case that no trio has preserved more leads than them. Unless they go out and add another starting pitcher here before the deadline (and heavens knows they need a center fielder), it's up to Manager Joe Torre to let the starters go deeper into ball games. Of course, Torrey can only do so much with Chien-Ming Wang, Jaret Wright and Carl Pavano all out due to injury. Randy Johnson, Mike Mussina, Kevin Brown and Al Leiter

cannot be pulled before the 6th inning of ball games, though. New York's offense has put up runs with ease the last 25-30 games so struggling to score runs won't be an issue.

Mark Cuban - A Fit for Baseball?

It was reported earlier this week that Mark Cuban, current Owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, is interested in purchasing the Pittsburgh Pirates. What's up with this multi-millionaire? Has he officially gone wacky if he hadn't already? Cuban did make some bold moves to get the Mavs, a predominate doormat of the hoops league, and turn them into a minor playoff contender. Can he do the same in baseball? First off, there is no salary cap so that may provide it's share of twists and turns. It could be a benefit for him or a disadvantage, and again, this is all pure speculation. Entering Thursday, Pittsburgh had fallen into a tie for last place with Cincinnati, dropping eight of their last ten games. A managerial change might soon be coming, which would not be something Lloyd McClendon wants to here. Jason Bay has been a nice story for the Bucs, tying for second on the team in stolen bases, hitting .290 with 17 homers, smacking 27 doubles and representing the team in the All-Star game. Still, a big bopper is needed. **Pittsburgh has ZERO** players that are hitting .300 or better. Zilch, nada, nobody. Does Cuban want to delve into this endeavor with this team? Probably not, although it would be a good fit for a team that has a couple [underscore couple] of nice prospects. As far as my personal feeling towards the guy... well, they're not that strong, but that's for another time...

San Diego Stumbling:

Bruce Bochy's San Diego Padres head into the weekend stumbling a bit. They went to Shea Stadium and lose three straight to the Mets and are 50-46 overall. Still, critics need to step off this team and I'm not just saying that because I picked them to go to the World Series. Only three teams in the National League - St. Louis, also sputtering Washington and Atlanta hold better records than the guys who play at home in Petco Park. My point is that if the playoffs are to start today they'd be in and you can only say definitively one team is better. That team would be St. Louis, who lost three of four to them at Busch Stadium earlier this season. If the Cardinals bats suddenly and surprisingly go cold like they did last October vs. Boston, look out. All I'm saying is that they are going to win this division and they are going to be a threat in the postseason if they can get some offense. GM Kevin Towers needs to be on the phone every day, every hour from here until the trade deadline to find a third baseman with power. Sean Burroughs hasn't been the guy, being a decent slap hitter at best. Mike Lowell (Florida), Joe Randa (Cincinnati), and Toronto's Eric Hinske might sound like good options. In reality they most likely are going to be unable to snag one of them. A veteran like Bill Mueller of the Red Sox might be an option if San Diego's willing to give up a low-profile reliever. **Note:** The Padres are also getting Mark Loretta back at second base earlier than projected. The Northwestern alumnus was the best player for them last season.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Former Phillies and Cubs outfielder Richie Ashburn was voted the Mets' team MVP in their inaugural season of 1962. What unique item did he win as part of the award?

Last Week's Answer: Five - Number of U. of Houston players in MLB

OUR TOP TEN PITCHERS OF ALL-TIME: (no order)

Walter Johnson & Cy Young - These are no brainer selections in my mind and that's a hard thing to say sometimes when you could easily put 15-20 names on this list. Johnson has more 1-0 shutouts than Curt Schilling and Pedro Martinez combined. He played in a different era, but would still be truly special in this higher ERA generation. Cy Young won 30 games five different times, which would nearly impossible to do today, and was so good that the best pitcher in the National League and American League receive the Cy Young award. How can he not be here?

My Top Ten Hitters of All-Time List:

Babe Ruth

Hank Aaron

Willie Mays

Ted Williams

Lou Gehrig

Stan Musial

Joe DiMaggio

Mickey Mantle

Ty Cobb

Barry Bonds