

MLB Weekly --- Friday, July 8th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

We're at the midway point of the 2005 Major League Baseball season. Last week I revealed my exclusive picks for the All-Star game, which will be played on Tuesday in front of a crowd of thousands in Detroit. In this week's edition, it is time for a mid-season report on every team and what their status is heading towards the end...

National League East:

Washington Nationals: A new home, scintillating play in the field and the wonderful managing of Frank Robinson have the Washington Nationals in first place heading into the weekend of the All-Star game. Had you told me that, I would've said you're out of your mind. Chad Cordero (**30/33 saves**), Gary Majewski, Luis Ayala and Hector Carrasco have been nothing short of spectacular in the bullpen. Liván Hernández (134.1IP) is the definition of an innings eater as a starter so far. Jose Guillen, Brad Wilkerson and Nick Johnson have provided the offense, each with 130+ total bases. Behind savvy GM Jim Bowden, Washington's gone out and added former Texas starter Ryan Drese, 2002 All-Star second baseman Junior Spivey and ex-Phillies outfielder Marlon Byrd in the first half. One more bat may be needed to stay in first.

Atlanta Braves: The National League East goes through Atlanta. Bobby Cox and company are right where they want to be, only 2.5 games out of first at 49-37. John Schuerholz might not even need to make a pre-deadline deal because of all the injuries they've suffered. When Chipper Jones went down Andruw Jones caught fire. Slugging a scary .733 during June, Andruw hit 13 home runs from June 11th to June 29th. The middle of the infield with Marcus Giles and Rafael Furcal is solid, while Ryan Langerhans and Kelly Johnson have done well lately in LF and RF. Coming off a complete game shutout on Thursday, Horacio Ramirez has helped make the absence of Tim Hudson seem insignificant. **This team's key is not getting in those close games as Danny Kolb and other parts of the bullpen have not pitched near the flawless level.**

Florida Marlins: Frying fish! Jack McKeon's Marlins are thankful for the 15 Interleague games (10-5 mark) they got to play. Why? Because without them they'd be at .500 instead of five games over the average line. Florida's got four All-Stars on their team compared to the three of the team they beat in the '03 World Series - the Yankees. Included on the list going to Detroit next week is lefty Dontrelle Willis, a candidate to take the mound first because of his 13-3 record. Also going will be Luis Castillo, Miguel Cabrera and hard-nosed catcher Paul Lo Duca. Off-season splash Carlos Delgado barely missed out. Josh Beckett's injury earlier in the week vs. Milwaukee raises concern. Vets Al Leiter and Brian Moehler just aren't as good when they take the mound as Willis or A.J. Burnett. To make the playoffs, Mike Lowell has to hit better at the left corner spot.

New York Mets: Willie Randolph's Mets are right where I thought they'd be, sitting in the middle of the pack of the NL with a record around .500. Pedro Martínez has pitched well because he's motivated. Will he be in late July, August and through September? Randolph has had to overwork a couple of middle relief guys such as

Roberto Hernandez. The bullpen could get worse is Braden Loper blows many more saves. What GM Omar Minaya adds around a lineup already featuring Reyes, Piazza, Beltran, Floyd and Wright will be key (likely a 1B or P). **New York's Mets are first in the NL in stole bases, while division leader Washington is last in that category.** Bases are bases; runs are runs. The Mets steal bases. The Nats score runs (**last in runs, but score them when they have to in close games**). One's in first; one's not.

Philadelphia Phillies: Streaky describes the first half for the Philadelphia Phillies. Philly went 12-1 on an earlier home-stand to go from 5th to 2nd in the congested National League East. Since then Charlie Manuel's guys have gone **7-15 in their past 22 contests**. Bobby Abreu will start alongside Beltran Edmonds in the outfielder for the All-Star game. He's right there with the Cubs' Derrek Lee and Atlanta's Andruw Jones for MVP consideration. One guy that's not who has been in the discussion in the past is 1B Jim Thome. He needs to swing the bat a little better. All-Star replacements Billy Wagner and Jimmy Rollins need to continue what they're doing and have big second halves. Right now the chances of Philly getting back in the race are slim. The bullpen is steady, but there a couple of guys who strikeout too much and average hurlers who lack K's.

National League Central:

St. Louis Cardinals: Baseball's reigning National League Champion was embarrassed by the Boston Red Sox in last year's World Series. Right now you can easily make the case that these same Cardinals are playing as good as they were last season. The best team in baseball if you ask me also wants to prove they're for real. Right now St. Louis, managed by four-time Manager of the Year Tony La Russa, has a 12.5 game lead on the next best team in the division. They've done it without star third baseman Scott Rolen for the most part, too. Losing Edgar Renteria has become an afterthought with the hustle play of David Eckstein and solid manning of second base from Mark Grudzielanek. Jim Edmonds and Albert Pujols are going to do their thing, hitting over .300, belting 40+ homers and driving in over 100 when the season's completed. P's Chris Carpenter and Matt Morris are as good as it gets riding into the break. **Red Birds sense redemption!**

Houston Astros: All of the sudden, the Astros, who were 16-30 at one point, no longer bring up the rear in this division. In fact, Houston is in second place, hoping for another move like last season that can propel them into the postseason hunt. An offensive run producer would be welcomed here with open arms since Craig Biggio and Jeff Bagwell are the down part of their careers. In a division heavy on quality pitching, the Astros might have the best. However, they have the worst hitting (**.252BA - worst in majors**) of the six. Electric third baseman Morgan Ensberg is the only reliable guy in this lineup. Because of that, they'll have to continue to lean on microscopic ERA-leader Roger Clemens, Roy Oswalt, Andy Pettitte and lights out closer Brad Lidge until a deal happens if one does. **Key: minimize the damage better on the road (14-29).**

Chicago Cubs: Things have been so sour in Wrigley-ville that center fielder Corey Patterson has been sent down to the minors. Injuries have hit the Cubs pretty hard, but lets face it, it's not a surprising development. Nor should we think the Cubs would

definitely be in the hunt if talented arms Kerry Wood and Mark Prior were healthy for much of the first half. Prior to an injury earlier this week, first baseman Derrek Lee has been the story, chasing .400 and a triple crown. As well as the NL's MVP front-runner has played, Chicago still sits four games under .500 and in serious trouble of slipping to fourth place. Bringing an eight-game losing streak into Friday's play, the Cubs bullpen slowly improved for a short stint there until July came, where they are averaging **two runs per game**. Someone's got to help out Aramis Ramirez while Lee is out.

Milwaukee Brewers: Milwaukee believes its got the formula to be rather successful the next couple of seasons. They've been building for the moment where they could make a run in the NL Central and possibly be a playoff contender. Hot, young pups Prince Fielder, the team's first baseman for the future and son of Cecil Fielder, and second baseman Rickie Weeks have shown good things in limited action. Does that mean Lyle Overbay can be used as trading bait for the Brewers to get a prospect? Possibly since they already said bye-bye to Junior Spivey in exchange for Tomo Ohka. OF's Geoff Jenkins and Carlos Lee (NL's RBI leader) can put this team on their backs and power them to 75+ wins. Pitchers Ben Sheets, who throws heat in spite of his 4-6 record, Chris Capuano (9-6, 3.48ERA) and Doug Davis (97-48K/BB ratio) make up a sharp starting trio.

Pittsburgh Pirates: Pittsburgh already made a move earlier this season to acquire OF Michael Restovich. They may make another if they begin to falter prior to the July 31st trading deadline. Closer Jose Mesa is the ideal guy to get something for, particularly for a bit, now that Mike Gonzalez may be ready to play closer. Catching prospect Ryan Doumit is a future star for them as is pitcher Zach Duke, both highly regarded players by *Baseball America* who excelled in AAA. **The Pirates are the only team in the NL Central with a losing record, but peculiarly are 17-17 vs. league foes outside their division.** Starters Oliver Perez, a dominating at times lefty, Josh Fogg and team strikeout leader Kip Wells are pitchers the organization shouldn't let go like they did Kris Benson. Canadian OF Jason Bay - the lone All-Star rep - has made fans forget about Brian Giles.

Cincinnati Reds: Off to their worst start in 70+ years, the Cincinnati Reds may be on the verge of selling the mortgage (a.k.a. the big bats). All are on block, except the one untouchable: Willy Mo Peña. He began the season swinging a hot bat and has the potential to be the face of the franchise for the next five seasons. All-star SS Felipe Lopez (.310Avg. 14HR 48RBI) and young promising 2B Ryan Freel are also probably safe. Adam Dunn is a home run threat every time he steps in the batters box, but strikes out a lot. Ken Griffey Jr. has had a quietly productive season, though teams are iffy about taking a risk on him due to past injuries. Finally, Austin Kearns has underperformed enormously and a team like LAD may be interested. **Biggest disappointment. Why? We anticipated the Astros being shaky because they subtracted players, whereas Cincy added key ingredients (mainly pitchers) in the off-season.**

National League West:

San Diego Padres: Bruce Bochy continues to amaze me every year with the Padres. No Manager could do the job he's done there, seven years removed from their last playoff appearance. The Padres' pitching twosome of Adam Eaton and Jake Peavy may get them back there. San Diego hopes C Ramon Hernandez, who led all NL catchers in home runs last year, can be the player he was before a wrist injury landed him on the disabled list. Brian Giles has really had four seasons (two good, two bad) wrapped up into one through 86 games. Xavier Nady's given them some much needed offense the past couple weeks. GM Kevin Towers has the option of staying put with what he's got and hope that the 3-1 record at Busch Stadium this seasons come back in the postseason, or he can upgrade a couple of positions. 2B (Boone?) and a CF (Cameron?) are the spots.

Arizona Diamondbacks: Thanks to Luis Gonzalez' walk-off home run vs. St. Louis on Thursday night, the Diamondbacks avoid a sweep at the hands of the best team in the league, and remain 4.5 games back of first place San Diego. Arizona's pitching has been okay and 'The G-Force' has helped the offense be at the same rate as their arms. That's just the problem - everything has been decent; nothing really great. Since the division is so considerably weak after San Diego, they probably won't fall far if at all. Having that said, unless they go out and get something, which would be tough to do financially, their overall numbers will most likely fail to enhance. The bullpen hasn't done any better than I originally thought it would, but Tony Clark and Chad Tracy have exceeded expectations at first. Getting Russ Ortiz on back on track will be critical.

Los Angeles Dodgers: In a division where the Cardinals have as many people (6 total) going to the All-Star game as the entire five National League West clubs, the Dodgers have the most selections with two. Don't let that fool you, though. LA's 20th or worse in the Majors in hits, runs scored and doubles. Without the double play combination of Jeff Kent and Cesar Izturis, this team would be lost. No single injury expect the one to Barry Bonds in San Francisco has had as big an impact as the of Eric Gagne. Although Gagne's sorely missed, their problems concerning pitching haven't been in the bullpen alone. Other than 7-7 Jeff Weaver, nobody with at least seven starts on the team has a .500 record. Derek Lowe has yet to win a game on the road, indicating he's reverted back to his pre-postseason form of 2004.

San Francisco Giants: There's really no other way to say it: San Francisco's starting pitching and back-end of the pen... stinks. Tyler Walker began doing all right as the closer before he couldn't protect a lead vs. any kind of powerful batting order. Obviously the injury to Barry Bonds has taken an immeasurable toll on the team from a win/loss perspective as well as on the revenue side. The guys who've played at his spot in the field - Moises Alou, Pedro Feliz, Marquis Grissom, Michael Tucker, Ray Durham - haven't failed miserably. Bonds is simply just the rare type of player who will make the game shorter and easier for the pitchers. Now Brian Sabean is in an unfamiliar position. Does he try to improve this team for when Bonds gets back in August perhaps? Or should Sabean start over with youth? Big decision to make on Jason Schmidt as well.

Colorado Rockies: No team in Major League Baseball has hit more guys than Colorado (58HBP; 11 by BK Kim). It's one of the major reasons why the Rockies sit at the bottom of the National League standings with a 30-54 record. They are 23-21 at

hitter parks Coors Field, but just **7-33 away from there**. Maybe the Rockies, who's franchise player Todd Helton is not having a great Helton-like year, are becoming too dependent on their ball park. Alaskan born pitcher Shawn Chacon, who was adopted at the age of five, has changed how he's set up on the rubber, trying to return to the rotation full-time with more strikes and fewer balls. He hasn't been that good and most of the Rockies' pitchers are faring likewise. Only versatile reliever Brian Fuentes (9 career W's) and 8-5 rookie Jeff Francis can honestly say they've been effective throwing the ball.

American League East:

Boston Red Sox: One would tend to believe our defending World Series Champions have more offensive firepower than anyone else in the American League. David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez swing the bat exquisitely, and first time All-Star outfielder Johnny Damon rode a 22-game hitting streak going into Thursday. Boston's upgraded its defense with Alex Cora and John Olerud as backups. Pitching questions remain as BoSox Nation awaits the return of Curt Schilling... perhaps to the bullpen. Speaking of the bullpen, that's where the pitching questions primarily are as Boston's been awful there and struggled mightily in relief spots. Keith Foulke's pitches have been slow and over the heart of the plate. Foulke is now on the DL, equaling more outings for guys like Mike Timlin. By the way, Matt Clement (10-2) has been the staff savior so far.

Baltimore Orioles: Rotations' in a rut and the relievers are getting roughed up. After leading the same division the Red Sox and Yankees play in for practically the first three months of the season, reality has caught the Baltimore Orioles. They simply do not have the necessary pitching to make it to the World Series unless they go out and acquire a Jason Schmidt or someone of that caliber. Making the postseason right now will also be hard to do with NYY coming on strong. **The Orioles ERA was in the 3's through May 26th. Since then, it's nearly 5.50.** Atlanta and San Diego have been the injured ducks in the National League, while the O's have endured hardships because of more injuries than anyone else in the AL. It'll be up to the dazzling infield of Miguel Tejada, Brian Roberts and Melvin Mora to lead them when Sammy Sosa isn't producing.

New York Yankees: The Yankees followed up their amazing winning streak earlier in the season with a horrendous losing skid. Now, New York finds itself just 3.5 games out of first with a chance to better their spot before the break. All this without the necessary starting pitching (not the necessary players because they've got that) and proper fielding it takes to be in the playoffs. George Steinbrenner, Brian Cashman and the rest of the Yanks organization has made it no secret they want a better defensive center fielder. Mark Kotsay and a number of other players will be on their short list that's actually kind of long. Jason Giambi's caught fire the last week at first base. And before we forget, thank you Mariano Rivera. Arguably the greatest postseason reliever of his time, Rivera has closed 18 of games with an ERA under 0.85. He's been money from early May on.

Toronto Blue Jays: Amazingly, Toronto's Blue Jays are only three games out of the wild card. There's no question about it, they are where they are because of

Roy Halladay. Maybe the AL Cy Young for 2005, Halladay has gotten the win in 12 of the 18 games he's started. He's pitched two shutouts, has five complete games on the year, an ERA of 2.33, and has 104 strikeouts compared to 18 walks. Toronto's fielding is all-around good as Russ Adams (15E's) is the only player with more than five errors to this point. Shea Hillenbrand's been better than what they bargained for, earning a trip to Tuesday's special exhibition at Comerica Park. Orlando Hudson's name has been thrown around. He may stay if they are still fine in late July. These Jays have got to play better at home (22-17) like they've done to a degree on the road (nearly .500 in the states).

Tampa Bay Devil Rays: Lou Piniella wants out of Tampa Bay, and wants out quick. The D-Rays have been a disappointment to me due to the fact I picked them to finish in fourth place ahead of Toronto before April. Tampa's 27-59 record is worst in the American League, worse than Kansas City. Their 8-35 mark on the road doesn't bare repeating either. My personal belief was that Carl Crawford would be the team's All-Star, instead closer Danys Baez (13/19 saves with 20 walks) was the pick. Aubrey Huff has had a kind of quiet year with only 12 doubles and a .262BA. Huff needs some of the young players to be brought up and surround him so that they can get the feel for what's needed come 2006. Pitcher Scott Kazmir has been a bright spot, throwing a team best 80 strikeouts in 99 innings. He'll be around for '06 and beyond.

American League Central:

Chicago White Sox: Running away with the American League Central is Ozzie Guillen's Chicago White Sox. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought they'd be 57-26 through 83 games. And you know what? I'm hard-headed and still not sold on them completely. Their pitching has been out of this world, led by All-Star picks Mark Buehrle and Jon Garland - making his first appearance in the mid-summer classic. Freddy Garcia, Orlando Hernandez and Jose Contreras have also pitched nicely in their starts. Can they keep it up, though? Offensively, the White Sox go in part because of Scott Podsednik's speed. Podsednik leads all of baseball in stolen bases and is the headliner of a team that's changed its approach from slugging you to death to being aggressive. Staying just aggressive and not becoming overly greedy on the base pads will be imperative.

Minnesota Twins: Instead of breathing down the White Sox' throats, the Twins have Cleveland breathing down their throats in the wild card chase. **Minnesota's 25th in the majors in doubles.** Most of their hits are on speed plays such as infield bats and things of that nature. They'd love to get their hands on Orlando Hudson of Toronto or the recently designated for assignment Bret Boone. For now, Jacque Jones and Torii Hunter have to continue leading this ball club. Ron Gardenhire is hoping for more hits from Joe Mauer and Justin Morneau, each hitting over .270. He's also looking for the strikeout-to-walk ratio of **251-40**

Cleveland Indians: Cleveland's rockin' and rollin,' despite falling to the Yankees last night and hitting a bump vs. Boston. Travis Hafner was the best RBI (29 in June) man in the month of June and has carried it over to July, hitting 11-for-25 going into Friday. The Indians bullpen has done yeoman's work, pitching better than I could've

ever dreamed. Arthur Rhodes and All-Star Bob Wickman deserve a lot of credit for what they've done. Eric Wedge's starting staff really got going in late May, early June. There are so many good offensive clubs in this league that the Indians are going to have to out-pitch the White Sox and Twins, and out-hit everyone else. Since much of the team is relatively young, you can only help but wonder if they wake up in late August right in the thick of the chase and cool off. It's Wedge's job to prevent that from happening.

Detroit Tigers: Don't count the Tigers out for making a run in the second half. Of course, whatever kind of run they make probably won't be enough to threaten the White Sox atop the American League Central. Trading Ugueth Urbina to Philadelphia for Placido Polanco helped them at second base. Problem is it hasn't translated into the Tigers getting over .500. Dmitri Young showed his power in the season opener vs. KC, belting three home runs. Right now, Young is in a slump, and catcher Pudge Rodriguez (5HR) is capable of performing better. Jeremy Bonderman's been brilliant as the team's starting right-handed ace. The rest of the Tigers pitching has been at par or just under par. Whether lose Tigres are buyers or sellers should be decided some time in the next couple weeks. Magglio Ordoñez' return could help them become permanent buyers.

Kansas City Royals: Three Manager changes in one season and we've yet to hit the All-Star break. And the Royals have yet to hit the baseball, placing near the bottom of baseball in most batting categories. KC's marquee young pitcher - Zach Greinke - also has had a rough 2005. Doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the Royals are one of the 14 teams with only a single player going to next week's All-Star game. That guy is first baseman/DH Mike Sweeney. What Kansas City is hanging their hat on is first half home sweeps of both the Dodgers and Yankees - two of baseball's most historic franchises. Fans will come if Angel Berroa and the rest of the lineup play with the energy of a team in contention. At times they do, but in other instances the fire is nowhere to be found.

American League West:

Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim: If Bartolo Colon pitches like he is the last several starts come August and September, he'll be right there with Halladay, Buehrle and Garland for AL Cy Young. This team's offense went into a hole when Vlad Guerrero went down. When he came back, they were about as good as Boston, Texas, etc. **Garret Anderson is the most under appreciated player in all of baseball in my opinion.** He does so much for them as do guys like Chone Figgins, Darin Erstad and catcher Bengie Molina. Veterans Orlando Cabrera and Steve Finley both provide great glove work, and can be real nice pluses if each can climb over .250. How rookie Dallas McPherson does once he starts to see more field time should pay dividends or take them back a step. When these guys beat up on Texas they gave themselves an eight-game breathing room. Avoiding the big blow-ups from starters John Lackey and Jarrod Washburn is mandatory.

Texas Rangers: Manager Buck Showalter is seeing first hand how devastating the Kenny Rogers-camera man incident was to his team. Rogers, Texas' lone star pitcher, was sputtering a little before the incident, which was what led to him getting in trouble

and suspended. Texas released two of its starters - Ryan Drese and Pedro Astacio - and must get someone with Chris Young to be a stabilizing force in this rotation. Mark Teixeira, the AL's starting first baseman, has hit all of his home runs as a left-handed batter. He tears up the righties, while Alfonso Soriano (20HR 52RBI 9SB), Hank Blalock and Michael Young take care of the rest of the pitchers. That infield is one of the best in the game alongside Baltimore's. Kevin Mench is slowly but surely becoming a terrorizing outfielder after his three home run game on the final day in June.

Oakland Athletics: Ken Macha's A's are unbelievably 2.5 games back of Texas for second place in the AL West. **Even more remarkable, Oakland had the best record in the AL during the month of June.** Rich Harden has been a hot pitcher as of late for Oakland, showing he's got the ability to be as good as any of the big three were. Eric Chavez should snap out of a slow start like he's done in the past. Eric Byrnes and Bobby Swisher have played well in the outfield, and they'll be twice as exciting to watch now that Bobby Crosby is back. Good to see 10-year veteran Justin Duchscherer make it to the All-Star team. Don't know that I would've picked him, but he's a part of a relief group that's making progress. When it's all said and done, I doubt they make the August run because there aren't the experienced pitcher and reliable run producers here.

Seattle Mariners: Led by slap hitter Ichiro, Seattle's pitching has failed them miserably to the midway point. Neither of the Mariners' two big free-agent acquisitions - Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson - has played poorly. What they've yet to get from either is a long streak of red hot hitting, something the Mariners could really use. Randy Winn was their best player in my opinion during Interleague play. Since they have a couple of future stars in the outfield, Winn could be had for the right price by a team needing a center fielder (Padres, Yankees, Cubs, etc.). Brett Boone being designated for assignment was only the beginning. Jamie Moyer could be next on the way out as plenty of teams are searching for that left-handed starter for the stretch run. **Seattle strikeout per nine innings: 5.20 - last in Major League Baseball.**

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

How many U. of Houston players are currently in Major League Baseball?

Last Week's Answer: 95

FIRE OFF:

Like St. Louis, the Astros (.237 vs. lefties) don't hit left-handed pitching well. One of the ways they can counter it is with getting speedsters on the base pads. Their best guy in those situations might be center fielder Willy Taveras, who has set a franchise record this season for bunt singles with 17.

OUR TOP TEN HITTERS/PLAYERS OF ALL-TIME: (no order)

Aaron, Ruth, Bonds, DiMaggio, Musial, Mays, Williams, Cobb, Mantle & Gehrig

**** Note: There will be no MLB Weekly next week. The next edition will come on Friday, July 22nd, 2005. Then we will begin our Top Ten Pitchers of All-time, a list that has a good 20-25 candidates for consideration. *****