

MLB Weekly --- Friday, August 12th, 2005
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Baseball is America's pastime and America's pastime is coming down the home stretch. There's less than 50 games to go in the regular season before we come to the postseason. Speaking of the postseason, there are four second place teams separated from the first place one's by six games or less. Only the White Sox and Cardinals really have their divisions wrapped up and next week the topic will be what teams are serious contender threats to them and who are the pretenders. This week I've got other things on my mind such as....

Rubber Matches:

Quite a few key rubber matches (that means when a series is tied 1-1 or 2-2) took place this week. Three stood out to me and they are as follows:

Athletics vs. Angels - What a series. The Angels stole the first game off five runs batted in by Mr. Vlad Guerrero, the reigning American League Most Valuable Player. John Lackey (10-4) pitched seven strong innings, allowing just four hits and no runs. Barry Zito went to the hill the next night and got the job done, keeping the grand slam man from the day before (Guerrero) hitless in a 4-3 A's win. Oakland did a good job throughout this series of keeping the top and bottom parts of the Anaheim lineup from torching them and no Garret Anderson there helped tremendously as well. Thursday's series finale, a game that saw Athletics third baseman Eric Chavez lead the way with three hits, was by far the most intense and exciting of the head-to-head battles. LAA struck first with a run in the second, one more in the fourth and added an additional two runs to go up 4-0 heading to the bottom of the seventh. There the A's were able to tie things up with homers by Chavez and Jay Payton. The dramatic conclusion came in the

Why the A's, not the Angels, are now in first: The pitching and defense has been much better. Anaheim lost the second of this game in the series in my opinion because the middle of the infield - half of which is patrolled by off-season addition Orlando Cabrera - has played sub-par. Cabrera hasn't made the fielding plays that he did in the postseason with Boston and has a batting average under .260. Lets stay up the middle where Steve Finley has missed a number of games in center field and is hitting a career low disappointing .225. Oakland's best pitcher may not be Rich Harden or Zito, but rather Danny Haren. Haren goes into Friday's game without a loss since May 28th!

White Sox vs. Yankees - Fans at Yankees Stadium saw their beloved team [only in New York] win the first game of the series, 3-2. However, the next two games the White Sox outstanding pitching in the rotation and bullpen won out in consecutive 2-1 victories. Neither Jon Garland nor Mark Buehrle went those two days either. It was Jose Contreras and Orlando Hernandez stifling the Yankee bats, while relievers like Cliff that was very Politte of you, Damaso Marte and Neal Cotts setup shop for closer Dustin Hermanson. Politte and Marte have combined for 31 holds, and Cotts improved to 4-0 on Wednesday afternoon. Although it was the normally dominant Mariano Rivera that gave

up a triple to Juan Uribe in the ninth of Wednesday's rubber match, I still question Hermanson's ability to be the guy vs. a dangerous lineup come postseason time. So far so good for him as Hermanson has closed 30 of 31 opportunities and has an ERA under 2.00 for the first time in his big league career. **How the White Sox won two of three: Limiting the bats other than Alex Rodriguez, who was responsible for three of New York's five runs in the series. Chicago's speed/hustle guys like Uribe, Scott Podsednik and underrated CF Aaron Rowand have blended well with lumberjacks Jermaine Dye and Paul Konerko (28HR).**

Padres vs. Mets - Brutal. That describes the collision between Mets outfielders Mike Cameron and Carlos Beltran. In the first game of the series, New York sent Pedro Martinez out to the mound. Pedro found it hard to get outs against a Padres lineup that's among the worst statistically in extra base hits in the National League. Mets third baseman David Wright made one of the most spectacular bare handed catches all season in one of these games. However, it was the other team's third baseman - Joe Randa - that got the last laugh. Randa, who became a member of the Padres via a trade with Cincinnati, had three hits in Thursday's rubber match win. Manager Bruce Bochy is trying to find Xavier Nady a place in the everyday lineup. A guy that has found a place in the Mets everyday lineup is shortstop Jose Reyes. Reyes entered the series with a 20-game hit streak, but 0-for-8 vs. San Diego. That in my mind was the difference. **Can the Padres make it to the NLCS? Yes. They showed in this series, and I believe they will continue to show as we approach the postseason, that they can seal games with their bullpen as long as the offense can provide that extra insurance run. It's vital Ryan Klesko, Brian Giles and Khalil Greene get going. Because if they do, the Padres will go from having an ordinary lineup to one that can frustrate you with patience.**

National League MVP Candidates:

St. Louis Cardinals 1B Albert Pujols - .339Avg. 32HR 91RBI 99R 11SB

Chicago Cubs 1B Derrek Lee - .349Avg. 35HR 88RBI 35 2B

Atlanta Braves CF Andruw Jones - .278Avg. 37HR 90RBI 1E

Philadelphia Phillies OF Bobby Abreu - .291Avg. 21HR 71RBI 25SB

Los Angeles Dodgers 2B Jeff Kent - .298Avg. 22HR 80RBI 27 2B

Florida Marlins OF Miguel Cabrera - .348Avg. 26HR 83RBI 32 2B

Biggest snub on this list of six - besides maybe a pitcher (i.e. Roger Clemens) is Milwaukee's RBI machine Carlos Lee. The other Lee - Derrek - has watched his totals and batting average since the All-Star break drop significantly. It tells us now how much that triple crown stuff was a joke. Pujols might be the most lethal hitter in the National League. He's clearly the marquee swinger on baseball's marquee regular season team since 2004. And since there is no Barry Bonds there to take the award from him, he seems like the logical choice. I like what Miguel Cabrera has done lately for the Marlins, leading them when Carlos Delgado and Mike Lowell have been off. My pick, however, is for Braves CF **Andruw Jones**. With a team decimated by injuries, he has been the

main force of offense through rough times and good times. He's the reason why Atlanta will be winning yet another NL East division title, too.

American League MVP Candidates:

Boston Red Sox DH David Ortiz - .291Avg. 26HR 93RBI 30 2B

New York Yankees 3B Alex Rodriguez - .314Avg 33HR 90RBI 1.011OPS 11SB

Boston Red Sox LF Manny Ramirez - .288Avg. 32HR 107RBI 56BB

LA Angels of Anaheim RF Vladimir Guerrero - .315Avg. 23HR 81RBI .946OPS

New York Yankees RF Gary Sheffield - .305Avg. 23HR 87RBI 75R

Texas Rangers 1B Mark Teixeira - .279Avg. 31HR 94RBI 24 2B

No Baltimore Orioles shortstop Miguel Tejada? What is wrong with you? Well, look at the simple numbers. Tejada has 17 fewer runs scored and nine fewer home runs than Teixeira, who's having a monster year on a Rangers team that's starting to slip. Alfonso Soriano has the numbers, but does he deserve to be ahead of the red hot Teixeira with spotty fielding? **My pick is for Guerrero right now.** It is for Most Valuable Player and Guerrero is just that for the Angels. Ortiz and Manny both are important for the Red Sox, but probably equally important. A-Rod has the best numbers of anyone in the AL, including that killer OPS. Problem there is some say Gary Sheffield is the most dangerous hitter on that team and Derek Jeter has the label of Captain right?

National League Cy Young Candidates:

St. Louis SP Chris Carpenter - 16-4 2.26ERA 161K 39BB

Florida SP Dontrelle Willis - 15-7 2.87ERA 113K 34K

Houston SP Roger Clemens - 11-4 1.38ERA 139K 44B 0.96WHIP

Houston SP Roy Oswalt - 14-9 2.46ERA 121K 32BB

NY Mets SP Pedro Martinez - 12-4 3.06ERA 167K 31BB

This is very tough because in reality you can make a convincing argument for anyone of these five guys. For Pedro it's really been a treat as he's been the Mets best pitcher by a mile and never complained. Boston would love to have him back right now. Houston has gotten back in the race with Clemens' success on the road and Roy Oswalt being the proven #2 guy that very seldom fails. If he does it's because of very little run support and the same thing goes with the rocket man. Florida's Dontrelle Willis had the best start of the season, but since late June may be the Marlins second best pitcher. Reason is A.J. Burnett, who tossed a 5-0 shutout vs. the Diamondbacks on Wednesday night, has been lights out to kill all trade talk. My pick is **St. Louis' Chris Carpenter.** Just watch this guy. Mark Mulder is a more polished pitcher, Matt Morris was maybe more flawless early on, and the other starters around him haven't been terrible. Plus, he has the NL's best lineup to help him out. All that put aside, Carpenter definitely should be commended for bouncing back from an injury that kept him out of the postseason last year. He is hungry, will win 20 games (barring a catastrophic occurrence) and wants to show everyone this October.

American League Cy Young Candidates:

NY Yankees RP Mariano Rivera - 5-3 1.03ERA 31/33 Saves 59K 11BB

White Sox SP Mark Buehrle - 13-4 2.79ERA 100K 27BB 1.13WHIP
White Sox SP Jon Garland - 16-5 3.29ERA 153IP 1.14WHIP
Oakland SP Rich Harden - 9-5 2.90ERA 99K
Detroit SP Jeremy Bonderman - 13-9 3.96ERA 128K

Fact of the matter is Toronto's Roy Halladay would be winning this award and be my pick to win it if he didn't go down with a season ending injury. Fact is he did, leaving likely to one of the White Sox pitchers. Since they've both been terrific I am going to go another route and take Yankees closer **Mariano Rivera**. Rivera has never won the Cy Young award, but may go down as the greatest relief pitcher in baseball postseason history. He's had his bad moments too, such as the 2004 ALCS vs. Boston, '95 AL playoffs against Cleveland, and who could ever forget the Diamondbacks' improbably comeback in the bottom of the ninth of Game 7 (2001). Rivera responded from early season trouble against the BoSox and has been the glue of the Yankees. If they make the playoffs he deserves this honor in my book, whether they do anything good or not. He's won World Series MVP before and now it's time to give it up to him for his regular season work. Rich Harden of Oakland and Detroit's Jeremy Bonderman are two guys that I like as far as 'stuff' goes. They'll be sound candidates in '06, '07 and beyond.

Five Teams to Watch in 2006:

Here are five teams to watch the rest of 2005 and on into 2006. It's very unlikely that any of them will catch fire the last month and a half and make a postseason charge. But don't count them out from playing the role of spoiler. I will **GUARANTEE** that of the five teams listed in this category - at least one will make the playoffs in 2006. Now that's a bold statement friends.

Milwaukee Brewers: This team is so on the cusp of breaking out and credit Manager Ned Yost. The Brewers have swung the bats well. For a team that had 21 more strikeouts than base hits in 2001, Milwaukee has come on strong offensively. From one through seven in the order now with Bill Hall replacing J.J. Hardy at shortstop, the Brew crew are solid. All-Star caliber first baseman Lyle Overbay may not be back in 2006 because of the prospect behind him in Prince Fielder. Rickie Weeks is a budding star for the future in the middle part of the infield, whereas outfielders Geoff Jenkins and Carlos Lee have already established themselves as bona-fide run producers. Leading the pitching staff is righty Ben Sheets, whose pitches fluctuate speed. Sheets has a really nice 12-6 curve, breaking pitches and has had really positive outings lately. Finding another reliever that can get to Derrick Turnbow, a decent utility guy at the bottom of the batting order and a #3 or #4 type starter to assist Sheets and Capuano are priorities.

Detroit Tigers: Considering they set the AL record for most losses in a season during 2003, the currently 53-61 Tigers (3-7 their last ten) are on the up and up despite recent struggles. Jeremy Bonderman has come into his own and may be a Cy Young candidate come 2006. Who would've ever imagined that after what he and Mike Maroth had to go through in '03? Jason Johnson remains a reliable pitcher vs. the Kansas City's and Tampa Bay's of the world. Other than that, how far this team goes will depend on how young people in the rotation and bullpen (such as first round pick Justin Verlander

from Old Dominion) do in the near future. Detroit could use another power guy to go alongside aging players Pudge Rodriguez and Dmitri Young. Young outfielder Nook Logan has provided them speed with 20 steals, and Craig Monroe and Brandon Inge together have 71 extra base knocks. Did we also mention there's a good chance that one, if not both of their closers - Troy Percival and Ugueth Urbina - will be back in '06?

Cincinnati Reds: Here's a really interesting team. The Reds have enough offense to around, especially in the outfield. One of their prime-time outfielders - Ken Griffey Jr. - is still rumored to go to the Chicago White Sox in a waiver deal. If he does and Cincinnati gets an adequate pitcher or two in return, they can make a push next season. Bottom line is one of their outfielders, whether it's Griffey, Adam Dunn, Austin Kearns or Willy Mo Peña (the guy that needs to stay), must go. Adam Harang should be their best starting pitcher and is a decent 8-10 with an ERA of 3.90 to go along with a team high 121 strikeouts. After that, the rest of the current starting staff is dreadful without a single guy having an ERA under 4.00. Paul Wilson went from leading this team to the best record in the NL Central to June of 2004, to now 1-5 with a 7.77ERA. Finding a reliever has to be objective #1 since closer David Weathers has just seven saves. Overall, the young hitting foundation is there for them to make a splash next year. It's up to management to find a good Manager and wisely spend

Seattle Mariners: Last year the Mariners beat up on division foe Texas towards the end of the season. They have the bats like Richie Sexson and Adrian Beltre that'll constantly frustrate young pitchers. Ichiro and Raul Ibanez add more fuel to the fire, and the M's aren't too bad defensively. What it all comes down to for them to finish this year and on into next season is whether they have the following two men: Joel Pineiro and Jamie Moyer. Both may become waiver bait, in fact Moyer almost went to the Yankees, but said no. They can form a surprisingly tough pitching staff along with 10-8 Gil Meche and Ryan Franklin at Safeco. Let me also point out that steady Eddie Guardado hasn't been picked up on waivers yet either. He's still an elite closer anytime, anywhere.

Colorado Rockies: The Colorado Rockies... a spoiler? You betcha. Look at the roster. It's filled with young talent and a couple of young flame throwers that can maybe do something out of Coors Field. When they are in Coors Field they become very tough to beat if you're a team trying to get into the postseason picture for good. No ballpark in all of Major League Baseball is more conducive for producing home runs than the one in Colorado. Last I checked Todd Helton was having a sub-par season, but has been a consistent first baseman in the NL for quite a few years. He wants to have a fabulous finish and may playing by young infielders Clint Barmes and Garrett Atkins. Take the Washington team for instance coming into Coors for a three game series. They may have trouble keeping up, and don't think it's a guarantee to make a rally as Brian Fuentes (20/23 saves) has developed into a premier closer for Clint Hurdle's Rockies.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Ed Crosby, the father of Oakland Athletics shortstop Bobby Crosby, played for what Manager in the 1970's that still is coaching in the game today?

Last Week's Answer: Boggs - Carl Yastrzemski, Tony Perez, Tom Seaver & Dennis Eckersley Sandberg - Eckersley, Steve Carlton, Ferguson Jenkins & Mike Schmidt

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

Christy Matthewson & Warren Spahn

Already on the List: Walter Johnson, Cy Young, Bob Feller, Rogers Clemens, Sandy Koufax & Bob Gibson