

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, April 14th, 2006

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Welcome to our first edition of MLB Weekly for this season on Good Friday. I'm very excited that spring has come, the temperature is beginning to warm up on a more consistent basis and baseball has begun. A lot has already transpired early on in this 2006 baseball campaign so lets get to it....

Bonds, Barry Bonds: No Laughing or Lying Matter:

It never ends with Barry Bonds, does it? Third on the all-time home run list, trailing only Babe Ruth and Henry 'Hank' Aaron, Bonds has been the center of attention for the baseball media and sports media. No surprise either. Just look at all the stuff revolving him; he's a human lightning rod for public interest. The latest thing in the Bonds timeline: a federal grand jury investigating whether or not he committed perjury in 2003 when he testified in 2003 that he never used steroids. The news was first broken on Thursday night by CNN. What's it all mean? That spotlight is only going to shine brighter, and maybe not all for the better.



Barry Lamar Bonds is still stuck on 708 home runs for his career, an illustrious one at that I might add. (AP)

Lets take a closer look at all the happenings surrounding the man chasing the Babe as well as Aaron's mark of 755 career dingers. Before the season, Bonds dressed up as Paula Abdul, garnishing more than a few laughs. However, the steroid allegations and the release of the book '*Game of Shadows*' was no laughing matter for the Bonds party. Neither was the syringe incident in the team's first road trip of the season at San Diego – a mild-mannered place compared to spots like New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago. ESPN even went as far as to give him his own television series entitled, '*Bonds on Bonds*' allowing the fan to see things from his perspective as he broke down in tears at the end of the inaugural show. Now this... the latest in the #25 saga.

What gets lost in all this Bonds discussion? That his team, the San Francisco Giants, are 5-3. What else? That Barry is struggling a bit, batting a mere .188 with a single RBI, four runs scored and has gone home-less thus far. No need to worry, it's early. The Riverside, California native also turns 42 this July. But the good news is the Giants' starting pitching, thanks to the addition of Matt Morris and maturation process of

both Noah Lowry and Matt Cain, looks stronger. With starting pitching alone playing in a.) a weak division and b.) having good experience – they should be able to hang a record above .500 and contend for a playoff berth. That being said, they need more production out of... you guessed it... Bonds. When will it all ever end? Not anytime soon, at least until he decides to hang 'em up.

Meet the Mets, The Amazin' Mets:

For the first time since 1988, the New York Mets have the best record in all of Major League Baseball. Considerable improvement compared to their 1-5 start a season ago. With their 13-4 win over the Washington Nationals on Thursday, they improved to 7-1 and did so by having the #3, 4, 5 and 6 hitters all going yard for the first time in team history. Hitting in those spots: center fielder Carlos Beltran, first baseman Carlos Delgado, David Wright and Cliff Floyd.

After being unceremoniously booed in the home opener, Beltran has taken it upon himself to show people why the team spent so much money on him following his monster 2004 postseason. He's currently hitting .296, while Delgado has cashed in with three long blasts and seven RBI of his own. Floyd may be hitting just .222, but showed excellent power by leading the team in homers last season. Then there's the third baseman Wright, who along with shortstop Jose Reyes (.333Avg., 3E), makes up one of the best left sides of an infield in all of baseball [even if they're second in their own city behind the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez and Derek Jeter]. Is it fair to think Wright could be the National League's RBI Champ? Possibly. He's already got 12 and even if he doesn't drive in a run over the next four games, his RBI total will match his games played total.

Even though the Mets' only loss, which came on Wednesday, April 5th at home to the Nats was a devastating one, think back to how it happened. The Mets blew a lead late in the game when newly acquired closer Billy Wagner gave up a bomb, and I do mean bomb, to third baseman Ryan Zimmerman. Then came in Jorge Julio, a command-lacking reliever that throws so hard that he often pays for it, and he couldn't come through. That game withstanding, their bullpen is clearly better as a whole – if for no other reason than knowing Wagner will get the job done most of the time in the ninth. Entering Friday, all the division leads were two games or less. Except the NL East, where Manager Willie Randolph's Mets have a four-game cushion over Atlanta – the reigning Division Champ for years, and years, and years (14 to be exact).

So what's the key to New York reaching their first World Series since the Subway Series of 2000? Easy. Getting their starting pitching to hold up – particularly Tom Glavine and Pedro Martinez. But the encouraging plus they have on their side is that GM Omar Minaya will be willing to spend the extra buck to get that one arm that'll put them over the top.

Closers: The Good, Bad, Ugly & The Injured

Good: Boston's Jonathan Papelbon – Manager Terry Francona probably wasn't really sure where to use him. He could be a fifth starter, middle relief guy who occasionally starts, setup man or closer. Well, whatever role Papelbon has it looks like he'll take it on with fire and tremendous stuff. So far as the team's closer, he has thrived, saving every opportunity he has gotten. He has the potential to become an elite one with that stuff of his, often hiding his pitches too. His breaking ball is effective, throws a nice splitter and the fastball is there as well. This allows them to use Keith Foulke – whose been struggling since midway through last year – and Mike Timlin in setup situations.

Bad: Atlanta's Chris Reitsma – I don't like to dwell on the bad [or ugly for that matter] so I'll keep these as short and sweet as possible. This guy just is not the Braves closer answer. If you remember last year – say around mid-April – Danny Kolb blew a game in Philly and later Bobby Cox turned to Reitsma. Not that he's done an awful, horrible job or anything, it's just he probably will be unable to preserve them nearly the amount of leads John Smoltz did in this role before returning to the rotation. Reitsma saw the Giants rally for two runs in the ninth last Sunday and I'd expect a change eventually.

Ugly: St. Louis' Jason Isringhausen – Hold up for a second you say. How can this guy be on the ugly label as a closer? This player was an All-Star selection in 2005 and has 219 career saves before even hitting the age of 34. Isringhausen came into the season with a 36-36 record; now it's 36-38. His ERA is 15.00. He blew a save on Sunday night by allowing a grand slam to the Cubs, who swept the Cardinals at Wrigley. The strikeout-to-walk ratio: 1-5. Either bringing in Braden Loooper will be a plus, allowing them to push Izzy so that he pitches at a higher level, or it'll blow up in their faces.

Injured: Los Angeles' Eric Gagne – And he isn't expected to return any time soon. Last year the Dodgers could've sorely used him arm, capable of producing upwards of 45-50 saves. With his injury they aren't even sure that they will ever get the same type of production out of Gagne ever again. Right about now they'd sign for a guy who could be a reliable setup guy or closer at times when healthy, which might not be until the All-Star break. At least they were prepared for this kind of thing when they went out and inked Dannys Baez during the off-season.

.... Early on last year there were some closers – such as Braden Loooper and Trevor Hoffman – who failed to close the door. That's normal because it takes time for some of these guys to get in a groove. Isringhausen is more alarming to me, though. I've never looked at him on an elite level and the Cardinals could have some serious trouble down the road if he remains their closer and continues to pitch the way he has been. Papelbon is extremely intriguing to me because I'm sure fans are itching to see how he does up against Mariano Rivera at Yankee Stadium in the summer... perhaps in October.

Other Tidbits:

*** Arizona's attendance has reached a new low and that's not good for fans of the Diamondbacks like myself. On Wednesday night in the team's 5-4 come-from-behind

win over the Colorado Rockies, where Luis Gonzalez drove in the game-winner, they had just 18,664 at the park. That's the smallest crowd ever for an Arizona home game since the team came into inception back in 1998. Low attendance figures for the Diamondbacks as well as the A's, who couldn't bring loads of people for their home opener vs. the Yankees, doesn't bode well for these franchises. One is experiencing its financial problems, while the other may be moving to Las Vegas in the very near future.

*** Speaking of the A's, is their a better pinch-hitter in the clutch than Marco Scutaro? As mentioned in my **SEASON PREVIEW**, I don't believe so. In the team's 4-3 win over the Yankees on Tuesday, April 4th, Scutaro delivered the game-winning RBI in the bottom of the ninth. Oakland won nine games a season ago in their final at-bat and look for this guy to be at the center of heroic activities when they make a postseason run.

*** One streak came into an end, while the other one is still going. Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins saw his pursuit of history, chasing Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak, come to an end in the third game of the team's series with St. Louis. The streak finished off at 38, but he responded the very next time out with a three-hit performance. Meanwhile, Angels outfielder Vladimir Guerrero has now hit safely in 39 consecutive games... versus the Texas Rangers. We've known the Rangers have yearned for good pitching for quite a while now, but is it that tough to get the former AL MVP out? He swings at everything for goodness sakes, even the pitches way, way out of the strike zone. Well, maybe it is when you look at the damage he's done with the stick in his hands. Nonetheless, I hope we don't remember these two individuals for a couple of streaks, instead for their all-around great play. Both should be in the mid-summer classic.

*** The Reds believe they got the better of their trade that sent Willy Mo Pena to Boston in exchange for right-hander Bronson Arroyo. That's because Arroyo became only the second pitcher in history to homer in his first two starts of a season. The other was Houston's Sean Bergman back in 1999. Bergman had a 5.21ERA at that time, while Arroyo's sits at a nice 1.97. I wouldn't have believed a soul had they told me Arroyo would have two more homers than Bonds, let alone two in the first place.

*** Can stars go into a slump, too? Sure they can. Look at Seattle's Ichiro and Minnesota starting pitcher Johan Santana. An ex-Cy Young award winner, Santana began the season 0-2 with a 5.73ERA – very much unlike himself. A former batting Champ, MVP winner and Rookie of the Year winner, Ichiro went into an 0-for-18 slump before snapping out of it and returning to form with a base hit vs. the Indians. Even St. Louis center fielder Jim Edmonds, who plays almost at a flawless level defensively, committed two errors on Thursday. He's won eight Gold Gloves – six consecutively – and had just two errors all of last season. Guess nobody can be perfect.

COMING NEXT WEEK:

I'll reveal my first 'Power Rankings' of the baseball season – and take a look at whose stock is rising and whose stock is falling...