

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Tuesday, April 17th, 2007

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Welcome to our first edition of MLB Weekly for this season on a Tuesday the 17th of April. Due to our focus on the upcoming 2007 NFL Draft, we've moved MLB Weekly up to Tuesdays during the month of April, but will return it to our regular Friday date in May through August. I'm very excited that spring has come, the temperature is beginning to warm up on a more consistent basis (sort of...) and baseball has begun. A lot has already transpired early on in this 2007 baseball campaign so lets get to it....

Weather:

Wacky weather, huh? As the weather is strange all across the country, the old saying 'April showers bring May flowers' really rang true to the start of the baseball season as the rain never seemed to let up in certain parts of the nation to begin the month. To give you an idea, the Mariners hadn't even played their sixth game of the season heading into Saturday, and Ichiro at that time last got a hit on April 4th. By April 15th there were a total 17 cancellations, marking the most in the last five years. We're on pace to have the most postponements since the 1997 season.

In fact, the weather has been so hectic, so crazy that they decided to move the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim's series with the Cleveland Indians to Milwaukee. The attendance for the series averaged 17,500, while the Brewers' series in Florida against the Marlins averaged less than 12,000. Milwaukee just so happens to be a strong, supportive and underrated baseball town as they drew around 15,000 the second day of the season with a snowstorm brewing. That aside, it has raised a couple of questions not only about the need for the Marlins to move, but also scheduling. Should they plan to always schedule the early games for the baseball in warm cities or places where there's a dome to limit the number of games played with low temperatures and rain or snow? Another question being battled around is should they reduce the length of the season?

My feeling is that we should focus on trying to start the season a week or two later. In the past the baseball season didn't start until about the second full week of April. It's a much better option than trying to have the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, Arizona Diamondbacks, etc. (i.e. warm weather teams) always open at home whereas the cold weather teams in cities like Boston and New York open on the road. It's also not fair and that easy when it comes to making the schedules in such a manner, plus they've made a pretty fair effort to do it anyway. And as far as shortening the season goes, that's unlikely because it's the same situation with the NBA Playoffs. They extended the first round series' to best-of-7 rather than keep them at best-of-5 because it generates more revenue for the franchises, owners and league. For baseball to shorten the season it would not be a financially motivated move – which means don't expect the 162-game schedule to change in the near future.

A-Rod:

“An A-bomb for A-Rod.” Yankees radio broadcaster John Sterling developed that call for when New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez goes yard. Expect to hear it quite a bit from Sterling this season as Rodriguez already is off to a fast start to the 2007 season. Mike Schmidt, the Hall-of-Fame third baseman from the Philadelphia Phillies, once had eight homers in his first eight games. During the 2001 season when he belted 57 home runs for the Arizona Diamondbacks, Luis Gonzalez cranked eight out of the park through his first ten games. A-Rod has hit eight homers in 12 games; it took him until May to blast his eighth last year. He leads the Majors in home runs, RBI and had a Grand Slam against the Orioles earlier this month with two strikes, two outs and his team trailing that finally gave him a ‘clutch moment’ in the Big Apple. Now everyone ought to embrace him...oh wait... that only happens if he does it on an October night in the playoffs.

New York is struggling, though with the Yankees can you really ever worry this early in the season? Probably not. A 6-6 record is acceptable all things considered. Injuries to Mike Mussina and Carl Pavano that have landed each on the DL puts the Yanks’ pitching rotation maybe not in shambles, but certainly hoping they can tread water for the next few weeks with a couple unfamiliar faces towing the rubber. As far as the bullpen goes, closer Mariano Rivera often times is untouchable, especially in the postseason. But was Sunday’s loss to the A’s cause for concern? Oakland’s Marco Scutaro, who was previously 0-for-6 lifetime against Rivera, got his second career game-winning home run – a 3-run walk-off shot as his team beat the Yankees 5-4 and won two of three in the series. Rivera was down to his final out, but even as great as he is we’ve found out that sometimes it’s not automatic. Nor should anything be taken for granted. For Scutaro, it was his ninth walk-off plate appearance since 2004 and the only player with more is Boston Red Sox designated hitter David Ortiz.

Despite chasing a tenth consecutive American League East division crown, the high-paid guys in pinstripes haven’t brought home a title for petulant Owner George Steinbrenner in seven years. They have enough offensive weapons and resources to add more to be in the mix all year long on into October. But the starting pitching is going to have to hold up, which certainly can be questioned whether or not it will, and they’re going to need the middle relief to build a good bridge to Rivera in the ninth.

Bottom line is this - when A-Rod swings the bat well you can’t complain if you’re a Yankee fan. That is until the postseason. A second Most Valuable Player award with Yankees in three regular seasons would be nice. Thing is nice doesn’t win guarantee a Championship. An MVP of the World Series? That generally does. To get the respect he deserves and silence the critics, Rodriguez will have to wait another six months.

K-Rod:

When you have a 0.00ERA, you can’t be doing much wrong at all. Not anything wrong. Such is the case with Seattle ace pitcher Felix Hernandez. The numbers are

tremendous for the Venezuelan right-hander who recently turned 21 years old earlier this month. Thus far Hernandez has gone 17 innings in two starts, walking four compared to 18 strikeouts and giving up a total of four hits without allowing a run. In fact, the man known as K-Rod joined exclusive company before hitting the age of 21. Six days before his birthday on Opening Day, King Felix set a career-high with 12 strikeouts and only Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals back in 1967 against San Francisco and the Cubs' Lon Warnke back in 1934 struck out that many while not surrendering a run on the start of the baseball season.

That day Hernandez got 12 ground ball outs to go with his 12K's; didn't need a single fly-ball out. His fastball hit an average of 96 miles per hour, making it easy to figure out how he whiffing it by batters. What Hernandez usually does is locate his pitches down in the strike zone as opposed to up and in on a hitter's hands. With his brilliant performance on April 2nd, he became only the third pitcher on Opening Day in the past 25 years to get 12 strikeouts. Then nine days later with much anticipation for a Red Sox/Mariners matchup that featured Daisuke Matsuzaka making his Fenway Park debut opposite Ichiro and company, King Felix stole the thunder from right under the feet of both. He shut down a powerful lineup and went seven innings without yielding a hit when J.D. Drew broke up his no-hit bit in the eighth inning. Through his two starts only seven hitters have gotten the ball out of the infield, which speaks volumes to the improvement he has made one season after surrendering 23 homers and more than a hit per inning (he's looking more like the 2005 Hernandez that went 4-4 with a 2.67ERA, had 77K compared to 61 hits allowed in 84.1 innings and gave up just five dingers).

While some have debated who might be the next young, big star pitcher – names such as Mark Prior, Kerry Wood, Dontrelle Willis and others mentioned – this fellow might be the next marquee performer at his craft.



Seattle Mariners pitcher Felix Hernandez could be an AL Cy Young candidate if he continues on the current pace he's on to start the 2007 season. (Adrian Wyld/CP Photo)

Jackie Robinson Tribute:

Ten years ago on April 15th, the jersey number 42 was retired by Major League Baseball in honor of the great accomplishments of Jackie Robinson. This past Sunday, the

sport celebrated the 60th anniversary of Robinson's debut when he broke the color barrier, becoming the first African-American Major League player of the modern era. Throughout baseball he was recognized by numerous teams and players, who wore his number – un-retired for this special day – to honor him. The idea to wear the number was thought up by Ken Griffey Jr., the outfielder with the Cincinnati Reds that asked for permission to wear the number and others followed once it was approved by Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig and okayed by Robinson's widow, Rachel. She, Selig and Henry 'Hank' Aaron were among those in attendance this past Sunday night for the Dodgers' game with the San Diego Padres and held a pre-game ceremony to remember Robinson.

In 1947, Robinson earned Rookie of the Year honors. Robinson was the National League Batting Champion and NL Most Valuable Player during the 1949. Come 13 years later, the six-time All-Star was inducted into the Baseball Hall-of-Fame.

Curt Flood, who donned the #42 jersey during his days in the minors, wore #21 when he got to St. Louis because he stated he thought he was half the man Jackie Robinson was.

A wonderful, thoughtful idea. Just like baseball's tribute to Robinson was on Sunday.

Cubs Crashing?

"We'll make some changes if we have to. Put some different people in there and let them play." That's what a calm Lou Piniella, Manager of the Chicago Cubs, said recently about his team's floundering play and inability to hold a lead in the early juncture of his first season in the Windy City. However, Piniella had a tempered blow-up last week when he was asked after a loss "what's not working?" He responded in Sweet Lou fashion, asking the reporter "You see the games don't you?" My surprise pick to win the NL Central, the Cubbies are struggling-ggg, currently in last in the division and for plenty of reasons. Among them are the injuries to Prior and Wood again – which comes as no surprise.

It's going to take some time to get going, but it does look like the Cubs are responding to Piniella. Following his outburst at a press conference last Friday night – somewhat similar to the one Detroit Tigers Manager Jim Leyland used to get his team going last year en route to their World Series run – Chicago answered on Saturday with a win where Shawn Hill took the ball and went seven strong innings without allowing a run and striking out five in a win over the Reds. Right now the team is lacking power, particularly in the outfield. Their corner infield combo of Aramis Ramirez and Derrek Lee have been hitting fine; the two at .406 and .372BA's respectively at one point. Together though they had one home run combined at that point. Those two individuals need to provide most of the power production to ease the pressure off their spotty defense and undependable bullpen.

Final Notes:

*** Orlando Hudson might join K-Rod and A-Rod as one of the three hottest players in baseball (note: you'll find a Hot/Not section later, detailing more players off to fast and cold starts.). Hudson leads the Majors with a .389 batting average and also has an impressive .438 on-base percentage. Last season Hudson posted career-highs in games played (157), at-bats (579), runs scored (87), on-base percentage (.354) and batting average (.287) while pumping out 58 extra base hits. We all knew he was a Gold Glover fielder at second base, but what some didn't know – and it was why Toronto let go of him – was the kind of offensive player he was capable of being. So far, so good and the Blue Jays' loss clearly is turning into Arizona's gain.

*** When the Mets went to St. Louis to start the season in a series re-match of last year's NLCS, you knew they would be aching to get some kind of revenge. They did, sweeping the Cardinals and outscoring them 20-2 in the series, marking the first time in Mets history that they allowed only two runs through three contests. St. Louis' 0-3 start made them the first reigning Champ to begin a season like that since the 1984 Baltimore Orioles. Tony La Russa's club went 1-for-15 with runners in scoring position, and in two games, hit into seven double plays – the most for them since 1983. The Mets didn't turn their 7th double play until their 15th game. Other than Albert Pujols, you really don't fear this St. Louis batting order. The bullpen always is susceptible, and while their fielding has really done a good job of bailing them out at times, their pitching could do a bad job of putting them in trouble with a couple of ex-relievers in their rotation and Chris Carpenter not healthy at the moment. At 6-7 overall, the Cardinals are off to the worst start for a defending World Series Champion since the 1998 Florida Marlins. That team was nothing like the '97 Marlins and the same looks to be true for the Red Birds this year after last October's furious finish.

*** For the second time in the past five years, Toronto's Roy Halladay pitched ten innings in a single game and won while allowing no more than one run. The only other guy to accomplish the feat? Mark Mulder of the Cardinals, who did it back in 2005 in a shutout. Mulder is still on the DL recovering from shoulder surgery and what many forget is that St. Louis won the title last year without his services. As for Toronto, they sit atop the AL East and their stay there may be short because closer B.J. Ryan is off to the DL for 4-6 weeks, joining Troy Glaus and Reed Johnson among the Blue Jays' notable injuries.

*** Last Friday, Astros pitcher Roy Oswalt joined Mike Mussina (43 L's), Tim Lincecum (45 L's), Roger Clemens and Pedro Martinez as the only pitchers since 1990 to get to 100 wins with fewer than 50 losses. If Houston is not contending for a playoff spot around the middle of the summer, then don't be surprised to see the Mets make a major push to get Oswalt before the trading deadline. It nearly happened last year and Omar Minaya has his eye on him.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

On Thursday night, the Washington Nationals became the first team ever to not score a single run in the first three innings of each of their first 10 games. Not exactly getting out of the gate fast, are they?

HOT:

Indians CF Grady Sizemore – A trendy preseason pick to be a candidate for the AL MVP award, Sizemore hasn't disappointed the pundits thus far. Not even 25 years old, Sizemore is quickly becoming one of the game's top center fielders and his numbers – including a .323 batting average, four homers, 6RBI, 11 runs scored and three stolen bases through nine games – show why his future is oh so promising.

Rangers 2B Ian Kinsler - Batting .343 and a full 67 points above the league average, Kinsler is tearing the cover off the baseball for Texas under its new Manager, Ron Washington. In addition, with seven homers and 13RBI, Kinsler is second and third in the Majors in each category respectively.

Mets SS Jose Reyes - Making an early case for being an NL MVP candidate, Reyes is the speedy catalyst for the New York lineup. Right now Reyes, to no ones surprise, leads the NL in runs (13), stolen bases (6) and is fifth in the league in RBI (11) despite hitting at the top of the batting order.

NOT:

Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter - Not only does Jeter lead the Majors in errors, but the Yankees do as a team. That's right - even more errors than the Nationals and Royals. While Jeter's bat seems to be doing fine, as indicative by his .319 BA, he is struggling defensively and has been caught steal twice already (was caught stealing five times in each of the past two seasons).

Cubs outfield - Going into Monday, the Chicago Cubs had yet to receive a home run from their outfield group of Alfonso Soriano, Jacque Jones, Matt Murton and Cliff Floyd (who went yard on Monday). Keep in mind, pitcher Carlos Zambrano had hit one before then. Soriano, batting .234 at that time, is expected to miss the next 7-10 days with a hamstring injury, too.

Diamondbacks first baseman Conor Jackson - Hitting an even .200, this Arizona corner infielder is really in a slump. Going into Tuesday night's game with the Dodgers, Jackson is 0-for-12 in his past 12 at-bats.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Bruce Bochy is one of only three Managers all-time to manage the San Francisco Giants and the San Diego Padres. Can you name the other two?

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...