

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, April 21st, 2006

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

On Thursday night, Mets pinch hitter Julio Franco, 47, became the oldest player in baseball history to homer in a game. Three teams (Reds, Orioles and Indians) have already scored over 100 runs in less than 20 games played. Two teams (Reds and Pirates) and allowed over 100 runs, while Kansas City and Baltimore have allowed 99 apiece. One team has yet to win on the road (Royals); another still winless at home (Nats). Detroit's Chris Shelton not only has lit the world on fire with an AL-best nine home runs, but also leads the majors in batting average at .426. Three pitchers – Erik Bedard (O's), Curt Schilling (Red Sox) and reliever Oscar Villarreal (Braves) – are tied for the ML led in wins with four each. What else is happening around the diamond? Find out here...

Major Blow for the Cubs:

Two weeks after inking a \$65 million dollar contract extension, the worst has come for Derrek Lee and the Chicago Cubs. Lee, who won the batting crown last season with a .335BA and also belted 46 homers, could be on the shelf for 2-3 months. That's because he collided with LA's Rafael Furcal and when it happened, and broke two bones in his right wrist. The injury will put the All-Star in a cast for a minimum of six weeks. This is a major blow to a Cubs team that is used to injuries to its pitching, particularly Mark Prior and Kerry Wood. Chicago now is temporarily in the market for something they didn't think they would be: a first baseman.



Batting .405 heading into Friday's play, Todd Walker will have to keep it up with Derrek Lee out of the Cubs' lineup. (Photo Courtesy of the Associated Press/Paul Connors)

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Coming into Easter Sunday, the San Francisco Giants had five players batting under .200. So far it's been the hitting, not pitching, as their weakness.

Stock Rising/Stock Falling:

Florida Marlins - Stock Falling - How can we tell? Not only did they practically get rid of every experienced, contributing veteran from last year's team, but they are also off to a 4-10 start. This time last year they were #4 in my power rankings with good team speed, an offense capable of producing runs and a pitching staff effective enough to keep the bullpen well rested. None of those things are really the case this season. New first-year Manager Joe Girardi, a former catcher in the big leagues, called a second team meeting when the Marlins blew a lead on Wednesday. If they can split their final eight games in May that wouldn't be too bad. Problem is they only have one really bona-fide hitter in Miguel Cabrera and one legit 15+game winner in left-hander Dontrelle Willis.

Milwaukee Brewers - Stock Rising - Even though they are at .500 and went 3-6 on a road trip through St. Louis, New York (vs. the Mets) and Houston, Ned Yost's Brewers are only 2.5 games removed from first place in the National League Central. And remember, it's early. There's plenty of time to prove they can be a Wild Card threat in the NL. Chris Capuano leads the majors in strikeouts, Ben Sheets has returned to the rotation and Derrick Turnbow converted his first four save opps. Carlos Lee is one of the finest hitters in baseball, showing it with his bat with a game-winning homer at St. Louis after flashing the leather in the previous inning. Prince Fielder (.383Avg.) has delivered so far at first base and Bill Hall can be a nice utility option behind Rickie Weeks and Corey Koskie. Improving defensively could be this team's area to improve as we move along.

Detroit Tigers - Stock Rising - Even though I think of the team's stock 'rising' that it'll be hard for the Tigers to make the playoffs – much harder than say a Milwaukee – Jim Leyland refuses to let this team stink. Detroit has gotten seven of its nine victories on the road and after Leyland lashed out, blew up if you will, at the team, they responded by taking two of three in Oakland. In case you needed reminder, the A's won two of three against the Yankees so the Tigers are clearly getting better. Also credit the moves the front office made, including the acquisition of aging left-hander starting pitcher Kenny Rogers (now 3-1).

San Diego Padres - Stock Falling - Adding Mike Piazza helped their offense... on opening day. But since, it's been the glaring losses in the starting rotation that has hurt a Padres team that a.) lacks offensive juice to begin with and b.) plays in spacious Petco Park where balls seldom fly out compared to a place like Coors Field in Colorado. Jake Peavy would ordinarily be a Cy Young candidate, but not on this team where he doesn't get the necessary run support. Chris Young will get about ten wins when it all said and done – some cheap, some not. And if they aren't careful, the Pads could go from winning the division to finishing last a season later.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

On Tuesday, April 18th, Arizona Diamondbacks outfielder Luis Gonzalez became only the 21st player to record 300+ home runs and 500+ doubles. Name the only other active player that has accomplished the feat?

Final Notes:

*** Like the Baltimore Orioles batting order? It delivered 21 hits and 18 runs in a win over the Indians on Wednesday. They may have lost some high-profile name players such as Sammy Sosa and Rafael Palmeiro from a season ago, though the addition of Ramon Hernandez has helped them pack a powerful punch this April.

*** Has the Braves rotation finally gotten back on track? John Smoltz pitched a complete game shutout last Saturday against the Padres, allowing only four hits and two walks while striking out four. His slider was near unhittable and he had a low pitch count throughout. However, coming into that game, the Braves' starting pitchers were 0-5 with a 8.17ERA, averaging 4.2 innings per outing and had a .352 opponents' batting average. Then after losing the opening game of a series at Shea, Atlanta rebounded with a complete game 7-1 win by Kyle Davies over the Mets and another complete game win – this one from Tim Hudson – over New York.

*** Are the Angels appointing a new ace on their staff? Maybe. Kelvim Escobar was exceptional on Tuesday night, striking out ten in six innings. Manager Mike Scoisica may use John Lackey and Ervin Santana as the #2 and #3 guys of the rotation. Bartolo Colon, reigning Cy Young winner in the American League, may go from that to the #4 starter so that Escobar, finally working his stuff, can lead this team as a flame-throwing presence. Who knows, maybe Colon flourishes as the #4 guy with less pressure on him.

HATFIELD'S POWER RANKINGS:



1. New York Mets - Despite dropping two of the last three at home to Atlanta, the Mets might have the NL's best offense and a Cy Young candidate in Pedro Martinez.



2. Boston Red Sox - There's not a better 1-2 starting pitching combo out there than Curt Schilling and Josh Beckett. And don't forget about Manny and Papi w/the bat.



3. Chicago White Sox - Winners of five straight, some may argue the defending Champs should be at the top after Javier Vazquez pitched a two-hitter on Wednesday.



4. Cleveland Indians - Last year Cleveland's offense didn't get going until the very end of May. Consistent pitching now has over taken hitting on the 'to-do' list.



5. St. Louis Cardinals - Holes at second base, right field, left field and in the bullpen make the Cards a little shakier than the last two years when they won 100+ games.

Honorable Mention: Houston, NY Yankees and LA Angels of Anaheim