

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 11th, 2007

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

America's pastime. It has them peeing in Milwaukee. Huh??? That's right – peeing. One fan of the Milwaukee Brewers, the team with the best record in all of baseball believe it or not, has setup a website entitled: peeyourpantsforthebrewers.com. "I have never seen a full Brewers season where they make the playoffs," writes this 24-year-old fan on the page. "Born in July 1982, I missed that amazing World Series run. It's been a long 24 years – the longest playoff drought in baseball. With a young team of quality stars and shrewd management, we're boldly making our move. I get so excited thinking about the Brewers now, a little pee comes out. In fact, when the Brewers make the playoffs I will pee my pants."

How about that Brewer Mania? They've had 1479 people already pledge to the site. Needless to say, that town is tingling with anticipation for the postseason to arrive... and the Brewers aren't even guaranteed to be there yet. We'll talk more about Ned Yost's ball club though, the return of Roger Clemens to the Yankees, why Toronto could be done before June and much more.....

Rocket Man Returns:

Roger to the Rescue! Last Sunday up in George Steinbrenner's box, Roger Clemens announced to fans at Yankee Stadium that he's coming back. And he's coming back to pitch in pinstripes. Clemens inked a \$28 million dollar pro-rated contract and is expected to make \$4.5 million per month starting as early as June 1st. The return was inevitable and only a matter of time. His resume is unquestionably Hall-of-Fame worthy and some may tell you when his career is all said and done that he was the best ever to tow the rubber. Clemens has won seven Cy Young awards; three with Boston; two in Toronto; and one in New York as well as one in Houston. The 1986 AL MVP is eighth all-time on the career victories list with 348, is an 11-time All-Star and a two-time World Series Champion as a member of the Yankees in 1999-2000.

But 'The Rocket' turns 45 on August 4th. So the question becomes can he fix the Yankees' starting pitching situation? As discussed in last week's *Baseball Weekly*, they've had four pitchers land on the DL and three – Chien-Ming Wang, Mike Mussina and Phil Hughes – all with hamstring injuries at some point in the season. Offensively, Joe Torre's team is fine, scoring more runs than anyone else in the Majors. Clemens is another year older and it might be a little much to ask him to lead their rotation and get them back to the World Series for the first time since failing in 2003 against the fish from Florida. However, he can help them get back to the playoffs and once there anything is possible with his numbers proving to be very good in New York (7-4, 3.17ERA, 98-35K/BB ratio in 102 innings with the Yanks in the postseason).

NL's Best Could Be Decided This Weekend:

With a record of 17-4 in their last 21 games leading up to this weekend's series showdown with the New York Mets, the Milwaukee Brewers have baseball's best record at 24-10. Not only do they sit seven games in front of the Chicago Cubs in the National League Central division, but they also enter Friday on a six-game winning streak. Here are some things in my opinion that have contributed to Milwaukee playing so well.

Power Surge: Leading the way is Cecil Fielder's son, Prince, with 11 homers, 30RBI and seven doubles while still hovering around .300. Shortstop J.J. Hardy has 10HR's, 11 doubles and a .336 batting average, and veteran outfielder Geoff Jenkins isn't far behind with eight blasts and a .340 batting average (his previous career-best was .313). Only the Cincinnati Reds in all of baseball have belted more home runs than this crew.

Weeks' Improved Defense: In his previous 191 games coming into this season, Brewers second baseman Rickie Weeks committed 44 errors and struggled as a fielder. Through 32 games in 2007 he has made only one error and is flashing the leather much better. The rest of the team is playing pretty solid defensively, too with just 20 errors and a fielding percentage above the league average. Jenkins, a mainstay for years, has only 13 errors over the past six seasons combined.

Healthy Sheets/Staff: Chris Capuano and off-season addition Jeff Suppan have five wins apiece and ERA's under 2.65, making them All-Star candidates. Dave Bush might have an ERA of 5.73, but his 34-8K/BB ratio and averaging over six innings per start as a back-end starter is a good sign. Dominican Republic 29-year-old Claudio Vargas, who quietly went 21-16 the past two seasons with Arizona, is off to a great start at 3-0. Vargas also has an ERA of 2.65 and a team-high 37 strikeouts. Then there's Ben Sheets, the rotation's ace that has been unable to stay healthy the past few years. Sheets' numbers are kind of ordinary: 2-2, 4.04ERA, 1.20WHIP and 21-9K/BB ratio. After two injury-filled seasons though, this might be the year Sheets finally reaches 200+ innings again for the first time since 2004.

Much-Needed Relief: Get three quality relievers, including a ninth inning stopper, and your bullpen can be among the best in the sport. Closer Francisco Cordero is truly having his bust out year, going a perfect 15 for 15 thus far on save opportunities. He wasn't nearly this good in Texas, but the deal they made getting rid of Carlos Lee actually is turning out to pay off, given the fact Lee is now in Houston playing for a division rival of the Brewers that is lower than them in the standings. In 14 relief appearances, Carlos Villanueva has been steady and dependable, posting a 3-0 record and 2.95ERA. Last but not least, former closer Derrick Turnbow is thriving in his new role as setup man. Turnbow is 1-0 with a 1.76ERA, converted his only save try, has allowed just eight hits and holds a respectable 23-6K/BB ratio.

Third base is still a problem (using vets Craig Counsell and Tony Graffanino to hold down the spot), so the Brewers might look into picking up someone at that position before the trading deadline because let's face it, an upgrade wouldn't hurt.

On the New York side of things there are several pluses to look at, despite currently not being in first place and slow starts by 3B David Wright and 1B Carlos Delgado. Shawn Green is tearing the cover off the baseball and the same for shortstop Jose Reyes, a true NL MVP candidate who should finish among the top three in the league in stolen bases, hits and runs scored. If he can achieve that and win the MVP award he certainly would be joining rare company, especially at such a young age. Another positive – the Mets have given up the fewest number of runs in the NL, which is a pleasant surprise to me because their starting pitching was a big question mark heading into the season without Pedro Martinez available. Closer Billy Wagner hasn't blown a save yet and middle reliever Pedro Feliciano has yet to allow a run.

The Mets probably aren't as good as last season, but I'd combat that with saying were the 2006 Cardinals better than the St. Louis teams from the previous two years? Probably not, and yet they managed to win the World Series.

NL's Worst... Already Decided:

Already 13 games back in the NL East and 9-25 overall, the Washington Nationals find themselves in a hole that could be too tough to climb out of and make any noise in 2007. To say this team is horrible offensively might be an understatement. Their pitching isn't anything to write home about either, but the hitting is much worse. Nobody on the team has more than three homers. Not even one single player has more walks than strikeouts. Washington's top hitter is backup catcher Jesus Flores, who's batting .280

A native of Carupano, Venezuela, Flores was acquired from the Mets on December 7th during the Major League phase of the Rule V Draft. While the expectations weren't much and it's not like they are a huge disappointment from an offensive standpoint (see the Chicago White Sox, the AL's lowest scoring team, for that), it is tough to be the only team in baseball yet to score 100 runs heading into Friday night's action.

Toronto Trepidation

Maybe it's too early for me to be doing this, but I'm now officially writing off the Toronto Blue Jays. Earlier this week they learned that closer B.J. Ryan is done for the season and had Tommy John surgery on his left elbow on Thursday. It's a major blow to a Toronto bullpen that relied on him heavily, especially after the departure of Justin Speier when he decided not to return after becoming a free agent in the off-season.

Now the news has broke that starting pitcher and ace Roy Halladay is out 4-6 weeks (appendicitis). Velocity problems contributed to him allowing 17 runs in his past two starts. Without their two best pitchers it's going to be impossible for the Jays to keep pace in a division where they compete with the Red Sox, Yankees and a Baltimore team that is staying in practically every game that they play.

MILESTONE OF THE WEEK:

At 37 years of age, Reds outfielder Ken Griffey Jr. on Thursday tied Rafael Palmeiro for ninth place on the all-time home run list with 569 career blasts. We should celebrate a guy like Griffey, who despite battling injuries for the latter part of his career, has played the game with dignity, class and been clean in this steroid-era. Griffey sits four home runs behind Harmon Killebrew for eighth place.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

The Orioles begin a pivotal series this weekend in Boston and with a win on Friday night and can get back to .500. Baltimore has dropped 22 of its past 25 to the Red Sox.

HOT:

Detroit Tigers - Winners of nine of their last ten, the Tigers have now claimed the best record in the AL Central, despite not having pitcher Kenny Rogers and watching outfielder Gary Sheffield get off to a slow start.

Red Sox pitcher Tim Wakefield - After starting the season 2-3, Wakefield has dropped his ERA from 2.59 to a league-low 1.79 with a pair of seven-inning shutouts against the Twins and Blue Jays on the road this month. His WHIP also is 1.10.

Dodgers pitcher Brad Penny - His ERA of 1.39 is the lowest in the bigs and this past Monday against his former team, the Florida Marlins, he threw 14 strikeouts up on the board while not allowing a run in seven innings of work.

Braves shortstop Edgar Renteria - Traditionally a solid hitter, Renteria brings in a 16-game hitting streak into Friday night's play. He's well on his way to batting over .300 for the fourth time in his career.

NOT:

Pirates offense - Pittsburgh's leading RBI man, Jason Bay, has driven in 21 runs. To give you an idea of how much they are struggling, Atlanta – the team they begin a series with this weekend – has five guys with 20+RBI.

Toronto Blue Jays - This club trailed in every inning but one in their recent series with the Boston Red Sox. They head into the weekend having dropped nine straight and now the injuries are starting to mount for the AL East's last place team.

Devil Rays outfielder Rocco Baldelli - The Rhode Island native is 1-for-22 since last week and on the season Baldelli is batting a mere



Tim Wakefield has helped the Red Sox to a comfortable lead in their division.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Earlier this week the Diamondbacks' Randy Johnson and Philadelphia's Jamie Moyer, a pair of southpaws, met for the first time since 1989. The 17 years and 230 days between the Unit and Moyer faced off head-to-head marked the longest such span in baseball history. What two pitchers previously held the record?

Last Week's Answer: Florida Marlins