

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 12th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

With much of the media attention on Barry Bonds in his quest to pass Babe Ruth on the all-time home run list and then possibly chase Hank Aaron for the record, a big-time hitting star has been born. In his first five seasons with the St. Louis Cardinals, Albert Pujols hit 201 home runs, had a batting average over .300 each season, drove in 621 runs and has a career slugging percentage over .600. Pujols not only could be in pursuit of breaking Bonds' single-season home run record (73) – if he doesn't get walked constantly – but also making a run at the all-time homer mark. Simply, we're watching a legend in the making right before our very eyes.....

Junior Griffey & The Injured Outfielders:

In his return off the DL, Reds center fielder Ken Griffey Jr. powered Cincinnati to an extra innings win over the Washington Nationals by knocking a three-run walk-off homer, keeping the club atop the NL Central standings. It marked the first time Jr. hit a walk-off homer since August of 2002. Since he is ever so injury prone, a key question arises with Griffey.

Is Jr. Griffey expendable? When he was on the DL, the Reds were winning without him. Cincy was able to re-group from losing the first two games of their series with the Diamondbacks last week by winning the final one on Sunday, avoiding the sweep. Their pitching has been better than they would've dreamed of, however, their fielding was very spotty the entire series against Arizona. Now that the Yankees, who played their series vs. the Red Sox without Gary Sheffield, have an injury to another outfielder in Hideki Matsui – New York may make a pitch for the man soon to swat career home run #540. Matsui's consecutive game streak ends at 518 and he's expected to be out three months at least so now is the chance for a move to be made. It would re-unite Griffey with his former teammate in Seattle, Alex Rodriguez, and the Reds could better their future. Boston rallied for a victory at Yankee Stadium on Thursday night, taking two out of three from their arch rival.

Matsui wasn't the only outfielder who got hurt on Thursday night. As the Phillies took two out of three in their series against the Mets, center fielder Aaron Rowand broke his nose when he made a running catch into the wall. Philly had its nine-game winning streak halted by Tom Glavine and those Mets on Wednesday night, but they returned the favor on Thursday with a 2-0 shutout. It marked the first time this season that either team from New York was shutout.

News & Notes:

How about the Rockies? They recently had two shutouts at Coors Field in the same week, one of which came from supposed ace Jason Jennings in a complete game

performance on Saturday, May 6th. Tops in the division, the Rockies' Brad Hawpe was steaming heat for a while there swinging the bat and now it's outfielder Matt Holiday (23-55 his last 14 games), who has four homers in the past week alone. Now throw in a healthy Todd Helton to that lineup and this club, which recently swept the reigning NL Champion Astros, can cause havoc all summer long.

Powerful First Basemen: Pujols is the man in the National League right now, but how about the first basemen in the American League? Both Jim Thome of the White Sox and New York's Jason Giambi, the Player of the Month for April, have been on a tear swinging the lumber to this point in the season. What makes it such a storyline to me is that both were said to be done last year. Giambi had the steroid cloud hanging over him, whereas Thome couldn't stay healthy in Philadelphia battling the injuries. Together they have driven in 70 runs and 36 balls out of the park. Expect the chants of M-V-P, too.

Webb-Gem: Earlier this week, Arizona's Brandon Webb (6-0) became the Major's first six-game winner. His great sinker really is doing the job and it's allowing him to get recognized thanks to the defense up the middle with Craig Counsell, moving from second base to shortstop, and newly acquired second baseman Orlando Hudson. Webb isn't a flame-throwing, strikeout machine hurler. He gets grounders and doesn't walk people and that makes him a Cy Young candidate if this continues and the Diamondbacks remain in playoff contention throughout the course of the season.

Canada's Team: Sitting only two games out of first place in the AL East, the Toronto Blue Jays – Canada's lone MLB club – needs to take advantage of the upcoming nine-game road trip and six games this month vs. the Devil Rays. Now is the time for this team, which dealt defense for offense during the off-season, to make its push. Troy Glaus homered twice in Thursday night and is really a great stick for this lineup. When healthy, Roy Halladay has shown he can be the AL's best pitcher or right near the very top. Weakness? Defense, which was one of their strengths. Toronto got rid of Gold Glove caliber second baseman Orlando Hudson in the off-season and it's translated into them placing last in the league in fielding percentage. They get that aspect figured out again -- and don't suffer any significant injuries -- they'll be fighting for a playoff spot in September. The Jays finish the month of May with six games against the White Sox and Red Sox, an absolutely pivotal stretch for them.

Lone Bright Spot: As they prepare for a series against the Padres, Chicago's Cubs are 15-19 and have struggled mightily offensively. The absence of Derrek Lee has clearly affected them and who knows what they'll ever be able to get out of pitchers Kerry Wood and Mark Prior. There is one lone bright spot, though. Carlos Zambrano, someone I feel would be a potential 15-20 game winner and Cy Young nominee on a winning team, leads the bigs in strikeouts with 54. He'd be the perfect power pitcher, missing piece for a team looking to get over the edge... if the Cubs are foolish enough to part with him.

One for the Ages: On Wednesday, 43-year-old Mariners lefty Jamie Moyer went up against 22-year-old Devil Rays southpaw Scott Kazmir. It turned out to be a pretty good duel as Moyer gave up only one run in eight innings, while Kazmir went seven strong allowing no runs and striking out nine. The end result: Tampa Bay won. Seattle bats Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson, both of whom were given big bucks to come prior to the start of last season and have a major impact, have yet to get on track. Hitting .225, Beltre has as many hits (29) as he does strikeouts, and Sexson (3HR, 40K) is batting .186.

Is This the Year? Yankees pitcher Mike Mussina, who began his career in Baltimore back in 1991, has never won 20 games in a season despite a career 230-128 record. With a win head-to-head vs. Curt Schilling (5-2) on Wednesday night, Mussina moved to 6-1 on the season and holds a 47-9K/BB ratio. Will this be the year that Mussina finally wins 20 games in a season? It might very well be because his ERA is the lowest it's been since his second year in the league – 1992 when he went 18-5 with a 2.54 ERA.

Some Tidbits: Saturday the Braves moved to 0-16 when trailing after eight innings. Atlanta has gotten off to troubling starts and aren't playing well from behind; they're better positioned when ahead.... Edgar Renteria ran his hit streak to 21 last Friday, though the Braves lost in extra to the Mets that night to make us forget about that.... Detroit is in second place in the AL Central and eight games over .500 because of not just the starting pitching, but the relievers too. Setup man Fernando Rodney (1.20ERA), who shares the closer role with Todd Jones, has looked impressive to me thus far.... Minnesota is where it is – at 15-19 – mostly because they fell to 0-12 vs. the Indians, Tigers and White Sox on the year last week..... Yankees Manager Joe Torre earned career win #1000 on Sunday and it was the fifth consecutive win for New York at the time... The Florida Marlins and Pittsburgh Pirates will battle this weekend to see who's the real worst team in the National League. If those clubs are smart, they won't let Dontrelle Willis or Zach Duke even sniff the trade market.

And Wrapping It Up: Jake Peavy fanned 13 as the Padres won their second in a row over Milwaukee. Suddenly, San Diego, which is 10-1 in the month of May, only sits a game out of first in the log-jammed NL West [all teams separated by 3 games or less].

HOT:

Philadelphia Phillies - Winners of nine of their last ten, the Phillies are breathing right down the throat of the New York Mets. They only trail them by three games in the division and still have 16 head-to-head meetings left; ten coming in August. Tom Gordon has saved ten of 11 tries with a 1.72ERA and offensively, they have 45 homers (tied for 8th in the majors). Consistent starting pitching will be the key.

Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter - So far, Jeter is playing like an MVP candidate for the Yanks. His .349 batting average is tied for the fifth best in all of baseball and he

hasn't hit .349 since 1999. Out of the leadoff spot, Jeter (24RBI) has been able to drive in runs and on Thursday night he went 3-for-4 with an RBI.

White Sox pitcher Jose Contreras - A former member of the Yankees, Contreras has carried over his success from last year's postseason into the '06 regular season. In six starts he has a 5-0 record, ML-best 1.41ERA and has only given up 28 hits.

NOT:

Blue Jays pitcher Josh Towers - The Toronto pitcher who went 13-12 last year with a 112-29K/BB set a record on Tuesday... but not one he'd like to be remembered for as he became the first pitcher in history to lose his first seven starts. Towers currently has a 10.09ERA and opposing batters are hitting .380 against him.

Pirates infielder Jose Hernandez - A defensive-minded player in the truest form, Hernandez committed just seven total errors in the two previous seasons leading up to 2006. Offensively, he's struggled, hitting a mere .150, including a 1-for-13 slump.

Cleveland Indians - Eric Wedge's Tribe are coming off a series with the Kansas City Royals where they were swept. It's bad enough to give lose three straight to them, but to give up 24 runs during that series and be 1-5 vs. them is even worse.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Want to know why the Colorado Rockies are in first place in the NL West? Besides having an 11-7 road record, Clint Hurdle's bunch is 3-0 in games where the opposing starting pitcher is a lefty and 4-0 in extra inning affairs. Side note: Kansas City and Detroit are the only two teams that have yet to play an extra innings game and the last place Royals are 0-8 vs. left-handed starting pitching.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

In his 35th game of this season, Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols hit home run #18, tying him for the most in Major League Baseball history through 35 games. Who else had 18 home runs through 35 games?

Last Week's Answer: The Atlanta Braves