

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 19th, 2006

BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Interleague play starts today and there's nothing like it in Major League Baseball for the fans. The rivalries, particularly the one's in New York between the Mets and Yankees, and in Chicago between the Cubs and White Sox, captivates us. Even the west coast battles between the LA teams – Angels and Dodgers – as well as the A's and Giants should be rather intriguing. This year marks the 10th season for Interleague play, and amazingly, the National League holds just an eight-win advantage of the American League all-time. That's competitive for you. Strap in and hold tight, because a few teams' season could be made or broken this weekend vs. foe from the 'other' league.....

A Look Back At The Week That Was:

*** On Saturday, following a four-hit game from the night before, Padres catcher Mike Piazza did it to the Cubs again. His game-winning three-run jack to left in the top of the ninth broke a string of 26 consecutive saves dating back to last July for closer Ryan Dempster. San Diego has been doing it with improved defense in the field, sharp pitching and timely hits when they've needed them most from guys like Brian Giles, Khalil Greene, Dave Roberts and even Piazza. The next day Giles tied the modern record walks in a nine inning game (five) as the Chicago was not only shutout, but swept. St. Louis' Albert Pujols drilled home run #19 on the season, and late that night, Seattle's Richie Sexson finally got back on track with a game-winning homer to defeat the Angels in the 13th.

*** It was a memorable Mother's Day for Bill Hall and his mom Vergie. With his mother's name engraved on the pink bat [used to benefit breast cancer], the Brewers infield swatted a walk-off homer in the bottom of the 10th to send Milwaukee home happy. Also that day, the Phillies improved to 13-1 in their last 14 games by besting the Cincinnati Reds in a 12-inning affair. Philly got two blasts from Ryan Howard. And in Toronto, pitcher Josh Towers finally got his first win of the season as ever Blue Jays starter in the lineup recorded a base hit.

*** Tuesday saw five games decided by two runs or less – a vintage night of baseball. The Yankees rallied from down 9-0 vs. the Rangers to win 14-13 on a walk-off, two-run blast by Jorge Posada. Atlanta defeated Florida in 11 innings thanks Jeff Francoeur's homer off Dontrelle Willis (a.k.a. the D-Train) to tie things in the ninth. Interestingly enough, Francoeur earlier in the week became the first Braves player to hit a walk-off grand slam since Brian Jordan back in 2001. Cleveland ended its losing ways with a Travis Hafner walk-off HR to beat the Royals. Scott Kazmir, who has been brilliant (6-2 with a 2.73ERA) got the job done vs. the White Sox and Ty Wigginton nailed his 10th homer on the campaign. And who's atop the NL West after Tuesday night? The Arizona Diamondbacks, a team that had the worst record in the sport two years ago.

Speaking Of That.....

The Detroit Tigers were horrendous a few seasons ago. In 2003 they won a franchise-low 43 games, marking one of the worst records in baseball history. Detroit rebounded with back-to-back 70+ win campaigns so now with a 27-13 start, including an active seven-game winning streak, this team is off to its best start since 1993. At this point, anything less than 75 wins would probably come as a surprise. Who's the guy to credit for Detroit holding the best record in the bigs? GM Dave Dombrowski, who brought in a proven, no-nonsense Manager in Jim Leyland.

As you may recall, Leyland was the guy who managed Florida to a World Championship over the Cleveland Indians in the 1997 Fall Classic. Leyland would be viewed as a major baseball savior in Detroit if he's able to get similar results. And why not? Last year the White Sox were picked to finish as low as fourth in their division by people, myself included, and won it all. Baseball's best pitching team at the moment? These Tigers, led by aging lefty/camera man attacker Kenny Rogers, the Majors' first seven-game winner who is also not to be confused with the singer Kenny Rogers. Back in '03, Jeremy Bonderman and Mike Maroth were quite young and quite ineffective from a wins and losses perspective. However, it proved to be a good, though not enjoyable, learning experience for them as they are a combined 9-4 with 64 strikeouts. Then you have the 23-year-old from Old Dominion, Justin Verlander (5-3, 3.18ERA), who was sharp in his last outing.

In the bullpen, the combo of Fernando Rodney and Todd Jones has for the most part been lights out. They're big reasons why the Tigers have been able to protect leads and go 7-4 in one-run contests. Offensively, Detroit got a huge month of April from Chris Shelton. He's still producing and now Magglio Ordoñez (.299Avg. 10HR 26RBI and 9 doubles) is, too. Pudge Rodriguez and Carlos Guillen (13 doubles) are both batting over .300 and that's helped them score runs more consistently. In a division where the White Sox and Indians were supposed to be the class of the division with maybe a slight scare from Minnesota, Leyland's club is thinking big. And that may include a big run into the postseason come October.

Keep An Eye On Those 'Comeback Sleepers'

My two sleepers heading into this baseball season were the Toronto Blue Jays and Milwaukee Brewers. Neither I had making the playoffs when I did my predictions before the season, but both I feel can stay in the chase all season long and maybe, just maybe, sneak in at the very end. Toronto enters Interleague play only 1.5 back of the first place Boston Red Sox in the American League East, while Milwaukee sits four games back of the St. Louis Cardinals in the NL Central. What do the Brewers and Jays have in common besides both being up and coming? They know how to really rally – both doing so once again on Thursday.

Of Milwaukee's 22 wins – a Major League-best 15 have come with the Brewers doing it coming from behind to win. No, their fielding isn't the best in the world and they

do miss Ben Sheet out there on the mound, but this team's offense can strike at any time and Derrick Turnbow (13 of 14 saves) has been extremely serviceable in the pen. Milwaukee has pounded out a Major League high 61 home runs, but also are 2nd in the Majors in strikeouts, trailing only Florida. Prince Fielder, Carlos Lee, Geoff Jenkins and company have no problem swinging for the fences in late game situations as they are coming off a sweep of the red hot Philadelphia Phillies.

Meanwhile, for Toronto, the Jays got a tremendous outing from Roy Halladay last Saturday. Halladay, improving his record to 5-1, went the distance (i.e. pitched a complete game), striking out three and walking only one as the Jays defeated Tampa Bay. He threw 89 pitches and was able to get 18 groundouts. Toronto themselves have 13 come-from-behind victories, including the most recent against the Angels. To overtake the Yanks and Sawx' in that division, they'll have to show the ability to be 'clutch.'

HOT:

Indians outfielder Casey Blake - Despite striking out twice in Thursday's 6-5 win over the Royals, Blake has been on a tear as of late. He currently leads the Majors in hitting with a .370 batting average, drove in a pair of runs last night and will take a 15-game hit streak into the team's critical series with Pittsburgh this weekend.

Braves outfielder Jeff Francoeur - The guy has come through in the clutch twice this past week and over the last seven days has four homers to go with his 10RBI. In his last 28 at-bats, Francoeur has 11 hits – three of which came in a 9-1 win over Florida on Thursday evening.

NOT:

Indians catcher Victor Martinez - Remember him being in a slump around this time last year? Martinez has come up hitless in his last 15 at-bats. I think the Tribe are about to bust through with a serious win streak here (currently have won three in a row) and for it to happen he must be a power catalyst in the heart of that order.

INTERLEAGUE SERIES' BREAKDOWN:

Interleague play can be a huge success for some teams and a terrifying disaster for others. Last year the Cleveland Indians and Washington Nationals both thrived playing against the opposite league as the Tribe went 15-3 vs. the NL and the D.C. squad won 12 of its 18 games against the AL. For clubs like the Mets and D-Rays, it was another story. New York went 5-10 vs. the AL and Tampa won just three of their 18 games against NL opponents. Whether you like it or not, one must admit that Interleague play has been a huge success for the sport from a TV ratings, ticket sales and marketing standpoint. Now here are some quickie 'breakdowns' of the big series' and my predictions.....

Yankees @ Mets

Could the Subway Series between the Mets and Yankees be more evenly matched? The Yanks are 23-16 and half a game out of first, while the Mets are 24-16 and two games up on the Phillies. This year the Mets have a feel about them that they are no longer going to play second fiddle to their city rival. They want to get out of that shadow. Look for young bats David Wright and Jose Reyes to add excitement going up against the more established, HOF left side of the infield combo of Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez. Even though Randy Johnson has been struggling quite a bit as of late, I give him a major edge to win on Friday, but like the Mets to take the next two. **Pick: Mets 2-1.**

Cubs @ White Sox

Kerry Wood took the mound on Thursday in his first start of the season. The result? Not so pretty. Three of Wood's 71 pitches were hit for home runs. On Friday, Chicago's Cubs will go with Greg Maddux opposite Mark Buehrle, who amazingly gave up nine runs in the first inning of Sunday's game against Minnesota and somehow got the win. It may be the Cubs best chance to get a W unless they can get leadoff man Juan Pierre aboard aplenty and Carlos Zambrano can out-duel 5-0 Jose Contreras, the AL's ERA leader, on Sunday. **Pick: White Sox in a sweep.**



White Sox Manager Ozzie Guillen may not be too crazy about the idea of Interleague play, but his team needs to rebound from losing two of three to the Devil Rays by beating up on the struggling Cubs.

(Photo Courtesy of Getty Images)

Angels @ Dodgers

Can the Angels get a bat or multiple bats going besides Vlad Guerrero? It's a key question and one that may be answered before the weekend is done. All six starters in this series have ERA's over 3.45 or higher so it leads me to believe it'll come down to bullpen, fielding when runners are aboard and hitting with one out and two outs. Ervin Santana and Kelvim Escobar should be decent enough on the weekend for the Halos to use their speed game/hustle in a series victory. **Pick: Angels 2-1.**

Giants @ Athletics

All eyes in this bay series are on Barry Bonds, whose pursuit of history takes a pit-stop in Oakland. Perhaps this could be the place we see Bonds playing next season if he decides to go another year? Maybe – if he's willing to be a DH. The A's enter atop their division with a four-game win streak; the Giants' 21-20 record, thanks to three straight wins, puts them just two games back in the crowded NL West. Oakland has their pitching clicking so I favor them in this series. **Pick: A's 2-1.**

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Up until Wednesday, the Boston Red Sox had won 13 consecutive games head-to-head vs. the Baltimore Orioles. Baltimore won 4-3 on Wednesday.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Hall-Of-Famer Lou Brock had 11,240 plate appearances during his 19-year career, which saw him steal 938 bases as a member of the Chicago Cubs and St. Louis Cardinals. How many times did Brock ground into a double play?

Last Week's Answer: Cy Williams, Philadelphia Phillies (1923)