

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 25th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

June is almost here and for a lot of teams Memorial Day Weekend really means a lot as it's a great opportunity to make a charge heading into the summer months. All of the division races are close no more than four games, with the exception of Milwaukee 6.5 in front in the National League Central and Boston 9.5 ahead in the American League East – in spite of dropping two of three at Yankee Stadium earlier this week. Here are some of the topics that have caught my eye around the diamond.....

Hall-Of-Fame Résumé:

His credentials certainly are worthy of a spot in Cooperstown. On Thursday night with his victory over the Mets and former teammate – Tom Glavine – Atlanta Braves veteran right-hander John Smoltz became the 106th pitcher in baseball history to win 200 career games. In addition to being the fifth member of the Braves to accomplish the feat, Smoltz is the only pitcher ever to win 200 games and record 150 saves. Not even Dennis Eckersley, a Hall-Of-Fame selection in 2004 that was the ALCS MVP in 1988 and both the league's regular season MVP and Cy Young Award winner in 1992, pulled that trick.

Since the 1976 free agent signing era began, only he and Glavine have won a minimum of 200 games for one club. To me, in a day and age of sports where players very seldom spend their entire career with one organization (see John Stockton in basketball and Dan Marino in football for recent examples), it's extremely impressive that he has stayed effective and not left for another team. During the team's unprecedented string of capturing 14 consecutive division titles, three of the mainstays were Glavine, Smoltz and Greg Maddux. Glavine left for the Big Apple, Maddux fled for Chicago to pitch for the Cubs and now is with the San Diego Padres, but Smoltz never decided to test the waters and go elsewhere.

A seven-time All-Star who was NLCS MVP in 1992 and National League Cy Young Award winner in 1996, Smoltz was an All-State basketball player as well as an All-State baseball player at Waverly High in Lansing, Michigan. Maybe what he deserves most credit for is keeping himself in tip-top condition so that he doesn't steadily decline with age and the risk for injury likely to increase.

His 15 playoff victories are the most for any player in postseason baseball history. He's also got a 2.65ERA during his playoff career. From a 2-7 rookie season to a 7-2 record now almost 20 years later, Smoltz hasn't stopped ticking at the age of 40.

While some wonder whether he should get in or not, to me it's a no-brainer even if he never plays a single game again. John Smoltz was and is a Hall-Of-Famer pitcher – no questions asked.

Hard-Pressed Hancock:

The father of deceased St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Josh Hancock filed suit on Thursday against Mike Shannon's restaurant, claiming that they served drinks to Hancock despite him being intoxicated before the crash. Of course, Shannon, who owns the place, has been a Cardinals broadcaster for many years and played for three World Series teams during the 1960's.

Authorities said the 29-year-old reliever had a blood content of nearly twice the legal limit for alcohol in his system when he crashed into the back of a tow truck. Furthermore, Hancock was speeding, using a cell phone and didn't wear a seat belt, according to Police Chief Joe Mokwa following the accident. Marijuana also was found in the SUV and Shannon's restaurant clearly was not responsible for that either. Shannon's daughter, Patricia Shannon Van Matre, is the restaurant manager.

It's understandable to see that Hancock's father is upset and wants some kind of consequences for what happened. But Shannon and the restaurant aren't at fault. Athletes – and all people today for that matter – need to come to the realization that drinking and driving never results in anything good. There's no positive that comes with it and that will be the case forever, bottom line, end of story. My question is why couldn't have Hancock called a cab? Why couldn't he have gotten someone to drive him home? Or better yet, why not drink in your own home where you don't put yourself danger or others in danger.

Calling it a disgrace might be a bit harsh on my part, but it is a shame. A shame that Shannon's restaurant can be seriously considered to be held partially responsible for the death and a shame that Hancock died so young

Big Hurt Still A Big Hit?

With his 493rd career home run, Toronto's Frank Thomas, who had previous stops with the Oakland Athletics and most of his career as a member of the Chicago White Sox, tied Lou Gehrig and Fred McGriff for 21st on the all-time list. Thomas currently sits two homers shy of matching Edgar Martinez (243) for the most ever as a designated hitter.

Not to be confused with the Walt Disney animator who died at the age of 92 in September of 2004, Thomas is coming off a huge surprise season last year as a member of the Oakland Athletics. He helped them make the playoffs and advance once there, plus the 'flash from the past' of the old Frank earned him big bucks, traveling north of the border to play for the Blue Jays.

But is he still a big hit? With runners in scoring position he's batting only .171. Big Hurt hasn't exactly given the Jays a jolt in their hopes of making a playoff run as they sit six games under .500 and that's after winning six of nine. While home run #500 is right

around the corner and undoubtedly attainable before the conclusion of this 2007 campaign, look for his moments to be fewer and fewer as he inches toward retirement.

News & Notes:

*** It was just two years ago in 2005 that the Chicago White Sox surprised much of the baseball world by getting off to a great start, sputtering down the stretch but holding on to make the playoffs, where they swept the then defending Champion Boston Red Sox in the opening round and won a Championship of their own. Last season's team left a lot to be desired and the pitching was not nearly as consistent and effective as it was in the previous year. Nonetheless, fiery Manager Ozzie Guillen has a talented bunch with hopes of returning to the postseason party. Right now, though the team sits behind Cleveland and Detroit in the AL Central. Earlier this week GM Kenny Williams [*who's not the best of friends with the aforementioned Frank Thomas... i.e. they had a spat or two*] called the team out. Not only is their bullpen having its share of problems, but one of the team's top hitters – Paul Konerko – can't get in a groove either. Konerko is batting a mere .213 with six homers and 12 more strikeouts (34) than walks. We'll see what effect Williams speaking out has in the coming weeks.

*** Just when Atlanta thought they were in good shape after taking a series from the Mets and staying right near the top of the NL East race, something bad happens to their revamped bullpen. Reliever Mike Gonzalez, who they acquired in the off-season from Pittsburgh, likely is going to be on the shelf for the rest of the year due to elbow ligament replacement surgery. It means the team will put more emphasis on guys such as Bob Wickman and Rafael Soriano shutting the door in the eighth and ninth innings.

*** A lot of people are talking about Jason Giambi and the whole controversy centered around him with amphetamines/steroids/baseball should've apologized a long time ago for everything that has happened in this 'drug era' for the sport if you will. He may or may not get suspended and I wouldn't be completely surprised if he gets a minimal suspension or fine. My only opinion on the issue – besides the fact that this is just yet another controversy the Yankees don't need – is that he shouldn't have opened his mouth to begin with and that there is plenty more to come. More names will surface before the season ends.

*** Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki just continues to pile up numbers and get it done year after year after year in the Major League's. Ichiro brings a 17-game hitting streak into tonight and is arguably the game's best leadoff hitter – Mets shortstop and NL MVP candidate (possibly front-runner) Jose Reyes included. This guy would be winning the AL MVP award every year or every other year if the Mariners were more competitive than they are. As a hitter, fielder and base runner there's little if anything that this guy can't do. I ask you is there a more underrated player in the game than him? Until Seattle starts winning again, it'll stay that way, too.



After battling injuries and watching his days in Chicago with the White Sox come to an end, Detroit's Magglio Ordoñez is off to an MVP-caliber start, and because of it, the Tigers have won 18 of their last 26 to earn the best record in the AL Central. (Photo Courtesy of the Associated Press)

HOT:

Twins outfielder Torii Hunter - Over the past week, Minnesota's center fielder is batting .333 with 3HR's and 11RBI. On the campaign he has 40RBI, 29 runs scored and his 16 doubles through 44 games nearly matches his 21 in 147 from last year.

Tigers outfielder Magglio Ordoñez - His third season in the Motor City has clearly been his best. Fourth overall in batting average (.361), Ordoñez leads the bigs in slugging percentage (.710) and RBI (45). On Thursday he went 4-for-4 with 3RBI.

Mets pitcher Oliver Perez - Without a healthy Pedro Martinez in the team's starting rotation, Perez, a former member of the Pittsburgh Pirates, has picked up the slack. Perez (6-3, 2.54ERA) owns a 1.06WHIP, 53-18K/BB ratio and is victorious in his last three starts while going 7+ innings in each of those outings.

NOT:

Orioles catcher Ramon Hernandez - Not even hitting .250 (his BA is .244) with only six extra-base knocks, Hernandez' struggles are carrying over to his team. He's 1-for-14 over the past seven days and Baltimore is 3-7 in their last ten contests.

Twins pitcher Ramon Ortiz - Spending his first six years in baseball with the Angels, Ortiz now is a well-traveled player since then, playing on his third different team in as many seasons. It hasn't gone well thus far, with a 5.36ERA and 3-4 record.

Giants outfielder Barry Bonds - He's 5-for-33 in his last 33 at-bats, hasn't homered since May 8th and it seems that Bonds really cooled off after a better than expected start. Still, he's 42 years old and Barry Bonds, meaning the numbers should decline, but because of who he is he remains one of the game's most feared hitters.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

1961. Yes, it was the year that Roger Maris hit 61 home runs, setting at the time what stood as the single season home run record until Mark McGwire blasted 70 in 1998 (followed by Barry Bonds' total of 73 a few years later). But it also was the last time the Cleveland Indians and Detroit Tigers played for first place in their division this late in the season. Both could be headed on a playoff collision course.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

With Atlanta Braves pitcher John Smoltz winning his 200th career game on Thursday night in a 2-1 victory over the New York Mets, it put him in elite baseball company – and exclusive when you factor in his 154 career saves. In 1985 Smoltz was the 574th overall selection of the amateur draft, going in round 22 to the Detroit Tigers. Who did the Tigers trade Smoltz for?

Last Week's Answer: Boston Red Sox & Minnesota Twins