

**MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2006**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

**B**arry finally did it last Saturday, tying Babe Ruth for second place on the all-time home run list. His blast off Oakland's Brad Halsey, career #714, must've seemed like a weight was lifted from Bonds' shoulders. Now Mr. Bonds goes for #715, which would give him sole possession of second place on the all-time home run list, just ahead of Ruth. In a non-related story, Giants minor leaguer Abraham Nuñez was suspended on Thursday for 50 games after testing positive for a performance-enhancing substance. Here are some other baseball topics that have caught my eye on this Memorial Day Weekend.....

**Strange Way To Get A Win:**

On Thursday night at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium, the Washington Nationals defeated the Houston Astros of the NL Central by a count of 8-5. We saw and learned a few things in this one game. First of all, Andy Pettitte (now 3-6 with a 5.76ERA) isn't the same Andy Pettitte of last year or from season's past. The Astros could clearly use a rocket arm [if you get my drift...] in that rotation to help him and some of the younger pitchers out. Washington's Alfonso Soriano, now rather comfortable in left field [for the time being], recorded three more hits and scored three more runs in the victory. He's putting together an All-Star season once again. Another thing we found out is that after Soriano stole his 11<sup>th</sup> base of the season that he can still be aggressive on the base pads.

Jose Vidro currently leads the National League in batting average at .347 and pounded his fourth homer of the season, a big-time shot in the second inning with two outs for the Nats. Third baseman Ryan Zimmerman, who we're watching develop right before our very eyes, in my opinion is the future of this franchise. Really, he isn't too far behind the Scott Rolen's and David Wright's of the world among the elite third baseman in the National League. We're also seeing that Jose Guillen, batting .212, clearly isn't the same force in the lineup he was for this .500 ball club during 2005. A reporter asked Manager Frank Robinson about him and it brought the veteran Skipper and former all-time great player to tears. No, he wasn't emotional about Guillen, but rather what catcher Matthew LeCroy went through.

LeCroy saw the Astros steal seven, count 'em, seven bases on him and he further helped their cause by committing two errors. It was the roughest of rough nights for a Major League Baseball professional and that's what LeCroy, a career .262 hitter, has been his entire career, which began back in 2000 as a member of the Minnesota Twins. Robinson was emotional during his postgame press conference about the whole situation and felt "embarrassed" for him having to suffer out there in front of over 24,700 fans. In a nutshell, it truly overshadowed a Nationals win, their third consecutive.

**Mets Moves:**

Injuries to their starting rotation have forced the Mets to make a move... in May. Rumors have had it and some still have them going after Oakland's Barry Zito or Florida Marlins southpaw Dontrelle Willis. My initial thought was for them to wait until June and get a cheaper, more accommodating pitcher say like a Livan Hernandez, an innings eater with postseason experience. Someone like him also wouldn't demand a hot-name prospect like Lastings Milledge in return but rather someone less sought after. Well, I was right in Hernandez, except the wrong one. On Wednesday the Mets pulled the trigger on a deal that sent reliever Jorge Julio, a hard-thrower that often gets beat in a big spot, in exchange for Arizona's Orlando Hernandez. Otherwise known as 'El Duque,' Hernandez has a wealth of postseason experience pitching in New York... for the other team. He was a valuable member of the Yankees' title run and helped the Chicago White Sox get out of one of the most memorable jams in last year's ALDS vs. the Boston Red Sox. Despite his current 2-4 record and 6.11 ERA, El Duque has four Championship rings (three with the Yanks; one with the Chi Sox). Omar Minaya company want that kind of Championship experience on the roster to help their youngsters further along.

One may question, myself included, why the D-Backs would even do this deal? It puzzles me a bit, but part of me understands their thinking despite disagreeing with it overall. Arizona had the worst bullpen in all of baseball last year. No, it wasn't one of the worst; it was the absolute worst. Sadder than sad; badder than bad. This year it is improved by maybe a smidgen or two, though they wouldn't mind having a hard-throwing arm to stock in a division that is very much up for grabs at this point. All five clubs in the NL West are separated by 3.5 games or less. Even the last place San Francisco Giants (24-23) took six out of eight against the Astros and A's – two of baseball's hottest teams last summer – and have a guy named Barry Bonds in case we all forgot. Nevertheless, this was a smart move by the New York squad currently in first place [note: the Yanks sit a game back of Boston in the AL East]. Not only did the Mets get a versatile pitcher in Hernandez, who showed he can start and make a relief appearance as he did last year for Chicago, but they acquired Dave Williams from Cincinnati. Williams has made eight starts thus far in 2006 and can help hold down the fort until New York's pitching gets healthier. Translation: he's a short-term answer to their problem while they sit in front of Philly.

### **Wrap-Up:**

\*\*\* Quick! If you have to make a pick for AL Cy Young, who you got? Some may say White Sox right-hander Jose Contreras. Shoot, the guy has a Major League best 1.90 ERA and a 5-0 record to back that up. What about one of Boston's two aces – Curt Schilling or Josh Beckett? Each has seven wins, ERA's under four and plenty of strikeouts. Or how about a bold one? Toronto's Roy Halladay is 6-1, has an ERA of 2.77, a K/BB ratio of 38-10, a WHIP of 1.03 and averages over seven innings per start. Let's go one further. How about Tampa Bay 22-year-old left-hander Scott Kazmir, the guy the Mets let go? He's 7-2, but most impressively, he's 7-2 on a bad team (21-27 club record, last among all AL East teams). Kazmir has been nothing short brilliant as of late, posting an ERA of 2.39 in a division and league stacked with exceptional hitters. The guy is doing it at such a young age, too. His WHIP – solid – at 1.28. That strikeout-to-walk

ratio? The 67-21 figure shows he's controlling his pitcher better than last year when he walked 100 batters and struck out 174 in 32 starts. He's on pace for 201 K's for this year. Simply, if the voting was done today, Kazmir would be my choice.



**One of the few holes on the Boston Red Sox appears to be at shortstop, where Nomar Garciaparra played for eight and a half seasons before being traded to Chicago. Now in LA he's a catalyst for one of the game's top offenses.**

\*\*\* How good is the Los Angeles Dodgers offense? Pretty good. Entering Friday's play, the Dodgers, managed by Grady Little, lead the National League in runs scored with 257. That's eight more than the next closest team in the NL, the Cincinnati Reds, who have an identical overall record at 27-20. However, the Reds have allowed a boatload more runs – 43 more than LA's 192 to be exact. A lot of people will tell you picking two of the division winners in the NL is not that hard to do: St. Louis Cardinals and New York Mets. What about the other? Watch out for the Dodgers, my preseason pick to capture the division crown. They've got the pitching – led by Brad Penny – their hitting has been consistent through two months of play and if they can be decent defensively I don't see anyone catching them. And to top it all off, they'll get a boost when Cesar Izturis returns, who can also be used as trade bait to bolster the team elsewhere.

\*\*\* It's going to take time to build a winner again in Florida, but if they are patient, it can be done. For the fourth time in fifth games on Saturday, the Marlins allowed a walk-off homer. First-year Manager Joe Girardi was probably about ready to pull his hair out (and still may be at 14-31), but the team showed resiliency on Tuesday by rallying back from a 4-1 deficit to win their second game in a row, beating the Cubs 5-4. Florida had lost seven in a row before that game and now enter Friday on a three-game win streak. All in all, their offense isn't that terrible. Hanley Ramirez (16 stolen bases), Miguel Cabrera (18 doubles) and Dan Uggla (team-high 40 singles) all have an OPS at .860 or above and a batting average no less than .315. Mike Jacobs and Josh Willingham are slowly coming along for them, and if they just firmly say 'no' to all the D-Train suitors, they'll have something to build on for 2007-08. Of course, we're all in a 'win now' mode so it's much easier said than done.

\*\*\* Key to Cleveland getting back in the AL Central mix with the White Sox and Tigers: C.C. Sabathia. Sabathia pitched a complete game shutout on Wednesday as the Tribe blanked the Twins 11-0. Since returning from the DL, Sabathia has gone 4-1 with an 0.91ERA and we all know eventually that both Detroit and Chicago are going to cool off substantially and Cleveland will get a chance to make a push. He'll be a vital piece.

### **HOT:**

**Los Angeles Dodgers - LA is home to the hottest team in all of Major League Baseball. The Dodgers have won seven consecutive, including 15 of their last 18. Nomar Garciaparra, also known as the husband of Mia Hamm, has hit extremely well to this point in the season. He's batting .375 with 25 runs scored and has 14 doubles, surpassing last year's total. Best of all, the Dodgers could expect closer Eric Gagne back some time in June, giving them a great shot to make a playoff run.**

**Rangers second baseman Ian Kinsler - Fresh off the disabled list, the rookie Kinsler homered twice on Thursday night in Texas' win over Oakland. He's come through with 13 hits on the season in 25 at-bats and could be a staple in the Rangers' infield for a lot of years to come. So far in nine games he's made only one error, too.**

### **NOT:**

**Kansas City Royals - I mean let's be honest here, the Royals could be on the 'Not' list practically every week right? Right. But when you have lost 13 in a row [blowing a four-run lead and six-run lead in the same week], haven't won a game since May 10<sup>th</sup> and travel to Yankee Stadium this weekend for a series, we can officially declare KC's playoff chances as dead as a doorknob.**

**Oakland Athletics - This team hasn't recovered from dropping two of three Interleague games to the Giants last week. Because since, they have been in a terrible spell and have now lost six straight. Thankfully, they're in the AL West.**

### **STAT OF THE WEEK:**

**Last Saturday, Reds outfielder Ken Griffey Jr. hit a grand slam at Comerica Park as Cincinnati went on to defeat Detroit in ten innings. It marked the 42<sup>nd</sup> park Griffey has homered in during his career. Which player has homered in the most ballparks? That would be Fred McGriff, who has gone one better: 43.**

### **TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:**

**Which inactive, living pitcher not in the Hall-of-Fame has the most wins in Major League Baseball history?**

*Last Week's Answer: Only 114 Times*