

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 4th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Boy, did April baseball fly by or what? In spite of all the rain delays, chilly weather in certain areas of the country and numerous injuries spread throughout the entire sport, May has always been in my opinion the month where some teams separate themselves from the rest in their division. Sure - June, July and August are better barometers for figuring out the real contenders, but a big month of May usually means an exciting summer for a team and its fans. In other words, if last place teams like Baltimore, Kansas City, Texas, Washington, Colorado and even reigning World Series Champion St. Louis don't get it turned out soon then it could be too late. Currently the best record in baseball (17-8) belongs to the surging Cleveland Indians, who have won nine of their last ten. Here are three teams to keep a close eye on during this month.....

3 To See:

Milwaukee Brewers: Through 28 games Ned Yost's Brew Crew has the best record in the entire National League. How about that for surprises? In fact, they recently swept the St. Louis Cardinals, outscoring them 23-3 and beating them 12-3 in the extra base hit category. It marks the first time since 1984 the Brewers have been found atop their division this late into the season (*and since it's not late in the season... well, that tells you how bad they've been for so long*). You have to go all the way back to the Robin Yount days when the Brewers formed a group known as 'Harvey's Wallbangers.' Back in 1982 when Milwaukee brought home an AL Championship they had such names as Paul Molitor, Gorman Thomas, Cecil Cooper, Ted 'Simba' Simmons and Charlie Moore swinging the bats with Rollie Fingers and Mike Caldwell as two of the primary hurlers. Anyhow, 25 years later they are in good shape with a finally healthy and effective Ben Sheets as the ace of their pitching staff; Jeff Suppan (4-2, 2.55ERA) paying off after being acquired from the Cards following his successful postseason; and Chris Capuano (4-0, 2.90ERA) has yet to lose a game. Sheets' status as the season goes on is going to be monumental, but Milwaukee also will need the bats to stay lively. Young infielders Prince Fielder - Cecil's son - Rickie Weeks and shortstop J.J. Hardy have produced the runs and power, combining for 17 homers and 50RBI. Just think... neither Hardy nor Weeks put up those kind of numbers all of last season. And in the bullpen, Francisco Cordero is pitching lights out for a team that experienced serious relief problems in the middle of 2006. Cordero is a perfect 10-for-10 on save tries without allowing a run in 11.1 innings.

San Francisco Giants: Though they sit a couple games out of first in the National League West, the Giants got off to such a horrible start as a team that it looked like another bleak year out in the bay area. Under first-year Manager Bruce Bochy, formerly of San Diego, they've turned it around and certainly have an opportunity to contend for the NL crown. In perhaps his finest hour as he chases Hank Aaron for the career home run record, Barry Bonds is off to a great start individually. He's batting .348 with nine dingers, 21RBI and 19 runs scored while being walked 23 times in 25 games. Expected to break Aaron's record some time around mid-late July or even early August,

Bonds could do it before the end of June. In the rotation, San Francisco has two potentially stellar starters in off-season acquisition Barry Zito and Matt Cain. Matt Morris (3-1 with 3.34ERA) is holding up fine so far and will become an even better force if he ever gets his walk total down. Noah Lowry rounds out a pretty formidable staff, which gets an addition at the end of the weekend when 22-year-old phenom Tim Lincecum makes his Major League debut against the Phillies. Some feel Lincecum is going to be the next big thing when it comes to young starting pitchers at the ML level. So does it all mean it finally will be the Giants' year as Bonds' career inches closer to an end? Believe it or not, this team may very well be one piece *away* (*cleanup hitter behind Bonds or an upgrade in the bullpen?*) from winning the National League. Simply, they're for real and the starting pitching could carry them back to the playoffs.

Minnesota Twins: The telling month for the Twins is going to be this month. That's right – May – just may determine their postseason fate in 2007. Last year's squad made a hard charge in the second half, but it also had Francisco Liriano to work with Johan Santana at the top of the rotation. This season's version doesn't and will depend on its fancy glove work, timely hitting and steady bullpen to carry them through into October. Minnesota dropped two in a row to Tampa Bay coming into Friday night's home series with the first place Boston Red Sox. It's the beginning of a tough schedule up ahead for Ron Gardenhire and company. Not only do they play the Red Sox, but Minny faces the White Sox six times; Cleveland three times on the road; a three-game series with Detroit sandwiched in between playing those teams; visit a Milwaukee team that has the best record in the National League; and their light series' come against Texas and Toronto – neither of whom qualifies as an easy opponent. If the Twins finish the month atop the AL Central then they will win their division yet again in my opinion. Of the team's 16 home runs (fewest in the AL), Justin Morneau and Torii Hunter have combined to hit 12 of them, so you get the feeling the others will begin to step it up eventually.

Really Feeling The Injury Bug:

The New York Yankees have had four different starting pitchers land on the disabled list, including starters Chien-Ming Wang, Mike Mussina and most recently promising youngster Phil Hughes – all with hamstring injuries. Philadelphia was hit with a key injury when vet closer Tom Gordon, who turns 40 in November, went on the DL with a right rotator cuff inflammation. It has forced the Phillies to put former starter Brett Myers in the bullpen for now to sure up things. But the team most affected by injuries through one month of this 2007 season is the Oakland Athletics. Currently eight members of the A's are injured and earlier this week it was Mike Piazza, one of their prized off-season acquisitions, going down when he went diving into third base. Two of the franchise's younger talents in shortstop Bobby Crosby and starting pitcher Rich Harden have already had injury-plagued career up until this point, though it hasn't prevented them from winning the AL West. To repeat as division winners they will have to get healthy real fast. Don't count on it, however. What you might be able to count on is some prominent name on the team being moved before the trading deadline with the likeliest

candidate being Harden. Trade discussions have already begun for the Canadian born right-hander battling a right shoulder strain.



Jose Reyes and the Mets head into Friday night's game with the Diamondbacks having won 11 straight in Arizona. (Photo Courtesy of ESPN Deportes)

HOT:

Mets pitcher John Maine - He enters his Friday night showdown with the Big Unit with a 4-0 record on the season and a 1.35ERA. Maine won six games in all of 2006; he may get that this year before June strikes.

Red Sox pitcher Josh Beckett - Six starts and six wins in his second full season in Beamtown. Beckett's ERA last year was 5.01 and now it sits at 2.72. Credit his improved control + location for his success as he currently holds a 35-9K/BB ratio.

Twins outfielder Torii Hunter - Over the last seven days Minnesota's Mr. Web Gem is getting it done with the lumber. He's 9-for-23 with a pair of homers and 4RBI over that span, helping the Twinkies keep pace in the tough AL Central.

NOT:

Cardinals third baseman Scott Rolen - With St. Louis slumping so is their star corner infielder and we're not talking about Albert Pujols either. Rolen has been swinging a cold bat, going hitless in his last 14AB's over the past week.

Angels first baseman Shea Hillenbrand - After posting a career-high 21 home runs last year in his split duty with the Blue Jays and Giants, Hillenbrand (1BB on the year) currently is homer-less in his new home. And he's in a 3-for-24 slump.

Braves pitcher Mark Redman - While Atlanta comes into the day tied with the Mets hovering atop the NL East, one of their best acquisitions certainly was not Redman. Playing on his seventh different team since 2001, Redman is 0-4 with a 10.62ERA.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Name the only team in Major League Baseball where every player in the starting lineup/batting order is under the age of 30?

Last Week's Answer: Washington Nationals