

**MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

**I**t's my belief that we're almost at that point in the season where teams start falling out of the race in their division for good and those we weren't sure would be able to hang around continue to perform well or start slipping. Besides the Washington Nationals (9-20), Florida Marlins (8-18), Pittsburgh Pirates (8-22) and Kansas City Royals (6-20) – there's a lot of uncertainty. Ten teams in the National League hold a record of .500 or better [that doesn't include the Braves either], while eight in the American League. That doesn't even include the Braves and Angels, both of whom won their respective division a year ago. Over the next few weeks in May we'll start to see who's for real and who's not heading into the dog days of summer.....

**Series To Watch: Arizona vs. Cincinnati???**

Some people thought these two teams would finish in last place in their divisions. Instead, they are both in first place on May 5<sup>th</sup>. Yes, we've still got 130+ games to go and it's unlikely they get into the playoffs, but it's very possible they hang around all the way and you have to be encouraged by how they've started. Cincinnati, with its NL-best 20-9 record, has gone 8-2 in the past ten games. Last year they fired Manager Dave Miley when the team had a 27-43 record. It would take a 7-34 mark of the next 41 games to be there again and that's not going to happen again [I'm really going out on a limb aren't I?]. Even with household, franchise name Ken Griffey Jr. out of the lineup, they are sitting pretty thanks to the hustle of Brandon Phillips, Ryan Freel and Felipe Lopez (10SB), and the starting pitching of Bronson Arroyo and Aaron Harang.

Acquired not long before the seasons started, Arroyo and Phillips have been bargains to this point. Arroyo, the former Boston Red Sox pitcher, has a 5-0 record in the NL to go alongside a 2.06ERA. Phillips, who once played for the Cleveland Indians, has driven in 23 runs – only bettered by third baseman Edwin Encarnacion on the team. His .308 average and just nine strikeouts in 78 at-bats shows the type of disciplined, good hitter he is. Add in his five stolen bases to go with the 18 total already from Freel and Lopez and you have a pretty aggressive ball club. After going 11-13 last season, Harang is off to a wonderful start this year. He's got a 5-1 record, leads the Majors with 45 strikeouts and allowed only one run in 8.1 innings on Thursday night at Coors Field.

Tied with Colorado for first in the NL West, the 17-13 Arizona Diamondbacks have won eight of their last 11, including five straight. For the D-Backs, second baseman Orlando Hudson may be hitless in his last 18 at-bats, but has flashed the leather at the second base position. Just like Miguel Batista may have a 5.29ERA, but his 3-1 record make up for that for now. Chad Tracy (6HR, 22RBI) and Luis Gonzalez (5HR, 19RBI) have combined for 20 doubles; they're providing the power out there in the desert. What's going to be the key for this unit the remainder of the season? Getting winless starting pitcher Russ Ortiz on track. Because with Jose Valverde solidifying the closer's

role with eight saves in nine tries, the bullpen doesn't look as bad as it did last year. And believe me, it was rather dreadful. Brandon Lyon has been a steady guy leading up to Valverde, while newcomers Eric Byrnes and Johnny Estrada are both hitting over .285 for an offense that quietly is fifth in the majors in doubles. The winner of this weekend's series between the Diamondbacks and Reds should remain in first place. They're hoping it won't be a temporary deal either.



**Cincinnati's Adam Dunn, whose belted ten home runs thus far this year, and the rest of the Reds square off in a series vs. Arizona beginning Friday night.** (AP/Nam Y. Huh)

### **Three Things That Have Caught My Eye:**

**#1** - St. Louis' Albert Pujols leads all of baseball in home runs with 15. He's on pace for a record season and quite possibly a legendary hitting career. What's interesting is the 15 blasts he's hit equals the amount of the entire Kansas City Royals baseball team.

**#2** - Getting guys on-base clearly doesn't translate into a team scoring runs. Just go ask the Washington Nationals, who left 15 men started in a 3-1 loss to Atlanta on Sunday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**#3** - Weren't Craig Biggio (Astros) and Mike Lowell (Red Sox) supposed to be done? Not quite. Biggio's 12 doubles is best among all NL players, while Lowell's 13 ties him with Texas' Michael Young for the AL lead.

### **HOT:**

**San Diego Padres - Winners of five in a row, the reigning NL West Champion Padres have put themselves right back in contention for that division crown, sitting**

only 2.5 back of leaders Colorado and Arizona. Their 9-4 road record is bettered by only two teams in all of Major League Baseball: Detroit and Cincinnati. In fact, Bruce Bochy's guys have scored 75 of their 117 runs outside of Petco Park.

Indians slugger Travis Hafner - You have to like this guy as an AL MVP candidate. Hafner, who leads the league in RBI as well as runs scored, has gone 10-for-26 with four home runs and 14RBI in a week's time. Now if the Indians can get their pitching to finish off the job then they'll be seriously challenging the White Sox.

Texas Rangers - Kevin Mench adjusted his shoe size from a 12 to a 12½. The result? Success for him and his team, too. Texas has won six in a row and moved to the top of the AL West standings.

Yankees center fielder Johnny Damon - On Thursday night, Damon went 2-for-5 with a homer and drove in four. Over the last seven days he's gone 9-of-22 with three homers and seven RBI. He's a big reason why they have scored a Major League best 161 runs.

#### **NOT:**

Los Angeles Dodgers - Interestingly enough, this team has outscored its opponents 137-135 so far, but have sunk to the bottom of the division. LA, which has lost seven of its last ten and five consecutive, need to improve its 12-17 record starting tonight when the Brewers come to town.

St. Louis Cardinals - Just when you thought they had gotten over their NLCS loss to Houston, the Red Birds drop four in a row to division foes on the road. They still have nine games coming up this month against the Royals, Marlins and Rockies. That should help them considerably.

Nationals infielder Royce Clayton - He's in a 1-for-18 slump currently and Washington, which has dropped eight of their last ten contests, is in need of some offensive punch.

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

Phil Garner's Houston Astros are an astonishing 10-1 so far this season in games decided by a single run.

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

Last week the Milwaukee Brewers rebounded from a 4-10 slide to sweep a particular team for the very time in the franchise's history. What team was it?

*Last Time's Answer: Barry Bonds*