

**MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

**L**et summer officially begin! It's the first day of June, and in my mind, really the beginning of summer baseball. We're about one-third of the way through the season and now is the time where the contenders separates themselves from the pretenders. The All-Star break will be here soon and in a few weeks we'll reveal our picks for the NL and AL squads. But for the time being, let's take a look at the top storylines that are shaking the baseball world.....

**Red Sox Look To Make It A Long Summer For Yanks & Their Passionate Fans:**

The team with the best record in all of Major League Baseball – the Boston Red Sox – play host to a team spinning out of control in the wrong direction that has a pedigree and a history of winning – the New York Yankees. Few would've anticipated the Bronx Bombers being 13.5 games back in the division, out of first place and behind the guys from Fenway. And that's at any point in the season, whether it be on June 1<sup>st</sup> – or earlier or later than that time. In fact, at one point earlier this week they trailed the Red Sox by 14.5 games in the division – a first before the end of May since 1984. Right now the Red Sox can go .500 and still get to 91 wins. For New York to get to 92 victories and win the division, they'd need to 70-41 the remainder of the way.

Quite simply, a lot of things are going right for the Red Sox and wrong for the Yankees. Start with the Yankees' captain, shortstop, Derek Jeter. He's got more errors than usual; Jeter hasn't had more than 15 errors in a season since 2000 (when he committed 24) and he's well on his way there. Base running wise he's been a little spotty, too. Last year he had a career-high 34 stolen bases and was caught stealing only five times. So far through 50 games his stolen base total (5) matches his caught stealing total. Then you look at Alex Rodriguez, who following a fantastic start in April cooled off considerably during May. In a game on Wednesday with Toronto, Blue Jays infielder John McDonald claimed that when Rodriguez was rounding the bases from second to third that he said "mine," to distract third baseman Howie Clark in his attempt to catch a pop-up, whereas A-Rod declares he said "ha." Nonetheless, that – and the tabloid photos of A-Rod with a blonde (*who isn't his wife*) – have put him back into controversy, also putting other Yankees in a position where they have to continue to field more questions about the team's star third baseman.

Closer Mariano Rivera has guess how many saves? Four. And it's July, people. He just got his fourth a few days ago, too. Johnny Damon, formerly of the Red Sox, is shot, the bullpen as well and the team's bench is non-existent. A scout makes a statement about underachieving Yankees OF Bobby Abreu, calling him "a piece of garbage," this about a guy who's making \$15 million. "It looks like he's never played the game before in his life," he added. No surprise the scout wanted to remain anonymous either. As for the

latest on Jason Giambi could possibly be out for the year. At the very least Giambi will be out for a month's time while on the disabled list.

A big difference with the Yankees is they aren't winning the ways they used to get victories, which were having those occasional offensive explosions and putting together great comebacks. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays, who they currently are tied with in last place, lead the Majors with 18 come-from-behind wins, which speaks volumes considering those same D-Rays are 10-6 in games decided by one run while the Yanks are 2-10 overall in that category (worst in baseball).

From worst to first, the Red Sox are tops in the sport in on-base percentage, while the White Sox sit 29<sup>th</sup> in that category. Hmm... coincidence Roger Clemens makes his big league return against Chicago? It'd be extremely demoralizing to Clemens and the Yankees if he started against Boston at Fenway and he got bombed. Instead by pitching on Monday he avoids them and faces a team that's reeling a bit. Of course, Joe Torre and everybody involved with the organization will tell you that they are behind their three other veteran pitchers – Chien-Ming Wang, Mike Mussina and Andy Pettitte – 100% and will support them this weekend, liking their chances to win two or possibly three games. But fact remains, if Clemens really wanted to put his stamp on this weekend's series and have a grand return, he'd pitch in this series and come up with a stellar performance. By waiting though, they see far less disaster happening.

Meanwhile, things are just peachy in Clam Chowder town. Josh Beckett will put his perfect 8-0 record on the line Sunday night against Pettitte. Boston has been winning games uncharacteristically with pitching first and hitting second. That being said, Kevin Youkilis is playing about as well as any first baseman in the AL; they still have that lethal combo of David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez in the middle of the lineup; and veteran third baseman Mike Lowell hasn't declined like many thought, leading the team in homers with ten while batting an even .300. But the pitching is carrying them more than anything. The rotation is good, but the back of the bullpen has been especially impressive.

Jonathan Papelbon made the right move staying as a closer rather than moving to the rotation as a starter. He's 13 for 14 on saves and has a 1.86ERA. Setup man Hideki Okajima is pitching just as terrific with a 1.05ERA and 4-4 on saves. When his fastball is on location, he's almost unhittable because of his sharp cutter and killer changeup.

It's now or never for the New York Yankees.

#### **Since 1969 - Largest deficits to overcome to win a division**

1978	NY Yankees *	14
1995	Seattle	13
2006	Minnesota	12.5
1973	NY Mets	12.5

\* - July 23<sup>rd</sup>

### **Things Warming Up In The Desert?**

The race in the National League West is better than most anticipated. Three teams – the Los Angeles Dodgers, two-time reigning division Champion San Diego Padres, and Arizona Diamondbacks – are all tied at the top with each nine games over .500. Over the last couple of seasons this division has been a mediocre at-best division. Right now Bob Mevlin's Arizona club, having won seven in a row and sweeping Philadelphia – a team with a productive offensive unit – on the road.

San Diego, under first-year Manager Bud Black, hasn't missed a beat. Their offense can have its quiet moments and fail to perform, but their pitching is performing up to par. Starter Jake Peavy looks like an NL Cy Young candidate and closer Trevor Hoffman always seems to be an All-Star. With those two leading the charge, some good things will happen. Chris Young and Greg Maddux are a couple more solid pieces to their pitching rotation, and the emergence of one Justin Germano is helping quite a bit as well. Germano is 3-0 with 1.08ERA in four starts and may very well be the x-factor for them in their chase to make a third consecutive playoff appearance.

LA is not a big surprise because they, like the Padres, made the playoffs a year ago and have some savvy vets in their lineup such as Jeff Kent, Nomar Garciaparra and Luis Gonzalez to name a few. Speedster Juan Pierre and Rafael Furcal add excitement, and their pitching is well above average with Brad Penny off to a great start and leading the way. In fact, Penny (70 innings) is the only starter not to allow a home run this year! That might be the best stat in all of baseball at the moment.

Arizona probably is the surprise because many felt they were a year away from seriously being a threat to win the division. They've scored more runs than any other team in the division, have an aging staff with guys like Livan Hernandez and Randy Johnson being key starters to go with last year's NL Cy Young Award winner – Brandon Webb – and their bullpen is known for being fragile. Described by some to be a 'roller coaster ride' Jose Valverde, the Diamondbacks' closer for the time being, had an ERA of 8.22 last year on July 7<sup>th</sup>. This season, to this point, he's been close to spectacular and a difference maker. Valverde is 19-21 on saves and has closed nine in a row, giving them stability for now. How long will it hold up is the key?

Even teams like San Francisco – with Barry Bonds headlining the lineup and a pitching staff that features Barry Zito, young rising star Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain, Noah Lowry and Matt Morris – and Colorado are bound to make some noise. But San Fran's lack of a closer and enough hitting punch could prevent them from winning the division title, while the Rockies' pitching and the detriment of playing at home in hitter-happy Coors Field will probably be their undoing in the quest of a winning season.

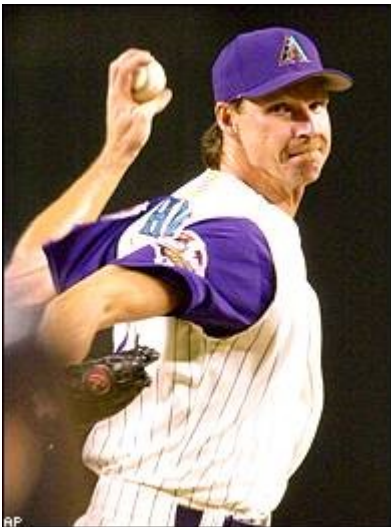
This wild, wild West division should be exciting all the way into September. For a team like the D-Backs, visiting Shea Stadium to take on a Mets team with the league's best record, it's a great opportunity to continue playing great baseball.

### **Benitez Back To Florida:**

If Tuesday night's series opener between the San Francisco Giants and New York Mets at Shea Stadium was any indication, Armando Benitez soon would be on his way out the door. And out the door he's gone, being shipped off to Florida in exchange for Randy Messenger. San Francisco elected to pay \$4.3 of his \$4.6 million dollar salary.

Benitez on Tuesday blew it against the Mets, balking in the tying run. Then, in the 12<sup>th</sup> inning, Mets first baseman Carlos Delgado went yard off Benitez, hitting his fifth career walk-off home run. It marked Delgado's 42<sup>nd</sup> career multi-home run game. On the season, Benitez is 0-3 with a 4.67ERA and only nine saves (when he should have about 15... not to mention his ERA has been over 3.50 every year in San Fran). Although he played in New York with the Mets from 1999-2003, this was one of the few times those fans were cheering because of him.

Sometimes in baseball there's addition by subtraction. For the Giants, this is that case as Benitez was never a really dependable closer for the team, causing some fans to try and pull their hair out. By sending him to Florida they get him off their hands, plus it'll give Benitez a chance to re-ignite some of that magic when he saved a career-high 47 games for the Marlins to go with his respectable 1.29ERA.



**Shown here during the 2001 World Series, pitcher Randy Johnson and the Arizona Diamondbacks could find themselves in the playoffs for the first time in five years.** (Associated Press Photo)

### **HOT:**

**Red Sox first baseman Kevin Youkilis - With 13 doubles during his 22-game hitting streak, Youkilis is emerging as one of the best hitters. He had nine consecutive multi-hit games and his .354 batting average places him third in the Majors.**

**Baltimore Orioles - Winners of six straight, the O's believe or not are only 3.5 games behind Detroit in the Wild Card race (albeit early). A big help for them has been starting pitcher Erik Bedard, the Majors' strikeout leader with 88.**

**Mets closer Billy Wagner - Off a shaky postseason, Wagner has bounced back and been nothing short of brilliant. He's 13-13 on saves with a 1.50ERA, 0.96WHIP and a 30-6K/BB ratio.**

**Pirates outfielder Jason Bay - Over the last seven days, the Canadian born Bay is 12-for-24 with a pair of homers and 8RBI.**

**NOT:**

**Texas Rangers - Ron Washington's team lost 20 games during May. That's the most the franchise has ever lost in the month of May in its history. They've now sunk to 15 games below .500 and only Kansas City is further (16 games below).**

**Phillies outfielder Pat Burrell - Despite Philadelphia leading the NL in runs scored with 274, Burrell is in a bit of a funk. His .233 batting average, including just 3-for-23 since a May 22<sup>nd</sup> loss at Florida, shows how much he's struggling.**

**Cardinals pitcher Anthony Reyes - Not exactly flourishing as a starting pitcher, the 25-year-old USC product is 0-8 with a 6.08ERA and 50 hits allowed. In none of his starts this season has he gone more than six innings.**

**Royals designated hitter Mike Sweeney - Kansas City has the worst record in baseball and one of their top production guys hasn't fared all too well since batting .300 in 2005. Sweeney is 0-for-15 in his past four games and holds a .236BA.**

**DID YOU KNOW???**

**Tony La Russa's St. Louis Cardinals currently are the only team in baseball that has yet to eclipse the 200 run plateau for this 2007 season. They've scored a Major League-low 194 runs. On a positive note, pitchers Chris Carpenter and Mark Mulder will likely be back in August, but that doesn't score them runs and it might be too late to save their playoff hopes by then.**

**STAT OF THE WEEK:**

**The Colorado Rockies earlier this week went on a seven-game winning streak for the first time since 1998. During the streak the club had an ERA under 2.00, but since then their pitching woes have returned. Colorado now has dropped two straight and only Florida and Cincinnati in the NL have given up more runs.**

**TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:**

**Last season the Milwaukee Brewers used Derrick Turnbow (64 career saves) as their closer until they acquired Francisco Cordero in a trade that sent slugger Carlos Lee to Texas. Cordero is a perfect 19-19 on save tries with a microscopic 0.41ERA, essentially ensuring himself of a spot on the All-Star team next month. Turnbow is fifth on the Brewers' all-time saves list. Can you name any – or all – of the pitchers ahead of him?**

*Last Week's Answer: Doyle Alexander*