

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 15th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Don't look now Boston, but the New York Yankees are charging towards you and charging hard on a nine-game winning streak. The Yanks enter the day just 7.5 games out of first place – quite the development considering it was this time two weeks ago that they trailed Beantown's boys by 14.5 games, appearing hopelessly out of the AL East division race. Meanwhile, their Big Apple rival they face this weekend – the New York Mets – are heading in the opposite direction. The Mets' big division lead has shrunk and the Phillies sit within two games of them. My how things can change in such a short period of time... and just think... we still half of June, plus the rest of July, August and September before October playoff baseball arrives...

Verlander - AL's Best Pitcher?

Let the debate rage on as to who the American League's best pitches is. But all we ask is that you include Detroit Tigers pitcher Justin Verlander in the equation. He doesn't have a Cy Young award yet like Johan Santana of the Minnesota Twins, Roy Halladay from the Toronto Blue Jays or the Angels' Bartolo Colon. He lacks the postseason success of a Curt Schilling (Boston Red Sox) or Roger Clemens (NY Yankees). Heck, there are some hard-headed folks out there that will say he's not even the best pitcher on that team with that honor belonging to Kenny Rogers or Jeremy Bonderman. And if you want to include relievers, the discussion begins and ends with Yankees closer and future Hall-of-Famer Mariano Rivera.

On Tuesday night, Verlander pitched the first no-hitter in Comerica Park history and sixth all-time in the franchise history of the Tigers as his team baffled the Milwaukee Brewers, 4-0. Now, I will give Milwaukee credit for bouncing back from the no-no to beat the Tigers two out of three in Detroit. Anyhow, the story is Verlander, not the hot/cold 'Brew Crew.' Now 7-2, Verlander became the first Tigers pitcher since Jack Morris in 1984 to throw a no-hitter. The 24-year-old righty from Goochland High School in Virginia and Old Dominion University threw 112 pitches, recording a career-high 12 strikeouts in the process. He got great defense in his outing, particularly from shortstop Neifi Perez, a well-traveled veteran from the Dominican Republic on his fifth different stop at the big league level. It doesn't stop there for the reigning American League Rookie of the Year, something many have forgotten about by now.

In fact, Verlander became the first non-Yankees pitcher to accomplish the feat in Interleague play (note: David Cone tossed a Perfect Game against the now extinct Expos and Don Larsen threw one, too, but did it in a World Series contest). Milwaukee was last no-hit on April 27th, 1994 by Minnesota's Scott Erickson. We didn't hear much from Erickson after that, though he did have his moments with the Baltimore Orioles.

And some are wondering is Verlander going to be a one-hit wonder? Another Mark Prior or Kerry Wood? What about Bret Saberhagen? Like most of the elite young arms, Verlander throws wicked heat. His final fastball clocked at ridiculous 102MPH. Injuries can slow even the best of pitchers down and there's no way we can definitively say he will be an exception who stays healthy all his career. What we can tell you is that he's among the top pitchers in the game currently today. During the 2006 season, Detroit stunned the baseball world by reaching the World Series and Verlander was a major part, bursting onto the scene with 17 victories in 30 starts. Simply, last year was no fluke for Verlander and company as he should be on his way to an All-Star Game appearance and his team will most likely be in the hunt for the AL Central title all season long. Even if they don't win the division, they proved last season that the Wild Card is viable option to make a run in the postseason.

San Diego could've drafted Verlander three years ago; now they're kicking themselves that they didn't. One can only imagine how good their pitching staff would be with him and Jake Peavy at the front-end of their rotation, a pair of Cy Young caliber starters to go deep into the game to get to a potential Hall-of-Fame closer in Trevor Hoffman, the game's all-time saves leader. With the top pick in the 2004 baseball draft, San Diego instead chose to select infielder Matt Bush, someone we've yet to hear from. As for Verlander, the noise he's making has only begun.



While the Tigers and Indians appear to be battling for postseason berths out of the AL Central, don't count out the Minnesota Twins, led by reigning league MVP Justin Morneau (shown above) just yet. At this time last season the Twins were 31-34 and 11 games out of first place, but had a fantastic second half on their way to a division title. (AP Photo)

Steady Eddie Is Out:

Tied for the NL lead in wins with 38, the Los Angeles Dodgers made an interesting, bold mid-season move on Thursday, firing hitting coach Eddie Murray. A former Hall-of-Fame player, Murray was hoping to make a push one day in the very near future to become a big league Manager. But LA's offense wasn't cutting it under his direction, settling in at 29th overall in all of baseball in home runs and below average in most of the other offensive statistical categories. Last season's team topped the charts in the NL in both batting average (.276) as well as on-base percentage (.348). Bill Mueller, an ex-third baseman with the Red Sox, Cubs, Giants and Dodgers, has been named the interim hitting coach.

It seems to me the way to go would've been to try and acquire another bat before the deadline rather than give up on Murray this quickly.

HOT:

Colorado Rockies - Though not super hot, the Rockies are on a pretty good tear. At 33-33 overall they've returned to the .500 mark for the first time since April 13th when they were 5-5. Colorado (8-4 its last 12) took two of three in Boston, the team with the best record in baseball, outscoring the Red Sox 20-5. Clint Hurdle, whose job was in jeopardy at one point, might make a push for NL Manager of Yr.

Oakland Athletics - Winners of five of six and ten of its past 12, the A's are on track to make some noise as usual in the AL West and at the very least contend for a Wild Card spot. Remember, they've traditionally been a second half of the year team.

Indians infielder Casey Blake - Capable of playing first or third base, Blake is on fire when it comes to swinging the bat. His hitting streak is at 23 games and this is the same guy who was stuck at .210 in early May. Now his BA is at .282 and he's only two doubles shy of matching his total from all of last year.

NY Yankees & OF Bobby Abreu - The Bronx Bombers have won nine in a row and Abreu's hot streak coincides with their success of late. He already has seven multi-hit games during the month of June with 12RBI in a 13-game span. Pretty good considering he finished May out without an RBI in ten games, plus a batting averaged that dipped to .228 before turning the calendar.

NOT:

Baltimore Orioles - After going on an encouraging 6-game winning streak to end the month of May, the O's have again become discouraging, dropping 10 of its last 12, including being swept by the Nationals. They've averaging less than four runs per game this month while allowing over five per game.

Astros pitcher Jason Jennings - Houston lost Andy Pettitte and Roger Clemens to New York. Their off-season acquisition of Jennings from Colorado hasn't exactly

paid off when you factor in that they gave up Willy Taveras, who's hitting over .300, in a deal to get him, and Jennings is still winless.

Reds pitcher Bronson Arroyo - A 14-game winner in each of the past two seasons, including in 2006 when he struck out a career-high 184 batters en route to his first All-Star Game appearance, Arroyo is not off to a good note this year (*no pun intended for the guy who released his first music album two years ago*). He's 2-7 with 96 runs allowed in 85 innings on the NL's worst team.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

First-year Manager Bud Black and the San Diego Padres hold the best record in the National League at 38-27 (.585) overall. That being said, with a 11-14 mark in one-run games, there is some cause for concern about them in tight, close game situations. In fact, those 14 losses in games decided by a single run are the most in all of baseball.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Last week Yankees Manager Joe Torre became only the tenth person in Major League Baseball history to win 2000 or more games. Which Skipper holds the record for the most career victories?

Last Week's Answer: Ken Griffey Jr. (10)