

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 2nd, 2006 BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

On Saturday, May 27th, 2006, San Francisco Giants slugger Barry Bonds changed history. No longer is Babe Ruth second on the all-time home run list, but rather Bonds – following his 715th career blast, coming off Colorado’s Byung-Hyun Kim – is the man behind Henry ‘Hank’ Aaron. My question now is, what does ESPN do with Pedro Gomez? He was joined at the hip to Barry like Sal Paolantonio was to the Eagles and the Terrell Owens situation. In this week’s edition of MLB Weekly, we take a look back at the week that was, what may be on the horizon and breakdown how the All-Star voting looks here in the first week of June.....

All-Star Voting:

Last year my big beef was why on Earth was Nomar Garciaparra one of the top vote getters in the National League? Before his groin injury last year, Garciaparra was batting .157 with no home runs and only four runs batted in; this year it’s a completely different story. Nomar is hitting .357, has driven in 36 runs, has six homers and is among the league leaders in doubles with 16. So why isn’t he a projected starter for the All-Star game right now? When it comes to fan voting for All-Star games and such, often times it comes down to a popularity contest. Does that mean Nomar’s popularity has dropped significantly? Not quite. There is this guy named Albert Pujols (25HR, 65RBI), maybe you’ve heard of him, playing for the St. Louis Cardinals and dominating from the first base position with his base and not doing too shabby defensively. Then you come to the New York Mets’ Carlos Delgado, whose hit 15 homers himself to this point in the season. Nonetheless, Nomar deserves a spot on the NL team as a reserve.



St. Louis’ Albert Pujols is having the type of first half most players would only dream of... for an entire season. All we ask from this guy: please participate in the Home Run Derby.

The 2006 All-Star game will be played in Pittsburgh this year and that has significance for this reason: there won’t be a DH, meaning Boston’s David Ortiz goes on the ballot as a first baseman. And is there a better one? Big Papi is still swatting balls out of the park left and right. His RBI total: 48 – even more than RBI-machine teammate Manny Ramirez, one of the three vote leaders among American League outfielders. But

what about White Sox first baseman Jim Thome? He's having an MVP-type season with the lumber in his hands after being injured last year. If Nomar is the NL Comeback Player of the Year favorite, there's no debating Thome (whose 20 homers and 52 RBI are only bettered by Pujols in all of baseball) is the AL version. Remainder of the infields for both teams seems pretty cut and dry, though I'd be willing to argue someone like Arizona's Orlando Hudson over Craig Biggio of the Astros at second base not from a statistical standpoint, but just a share importance factor as to what Hudson has meant to that D-Backs team. David Wright from the Mets will also give Scott Rolen a run for his money at third base.

Behind the plate, we've got the Mets' Paul Lo Duca, who extended his hitting streak to 13 on Monday night, and Jason Varitek. Minnesota's Joe Mauer is batting a scorching In the outfield, a lot of arguing can be done there, though it's hard to take the Angels' Vlad Guerrero, Ramirez and New York's Johnny Damon off that AL team. Alex Rios of the Blue Jays and Jermaine Dye from the White Sox deserve closer looks for bench spots. In the NL, I'd be hard pressed to take Jim Edmonds (St. Louis) and Andrew Jones (Atlanta) off because they've been so productive offensively for years and terrific making big-time defensive grabs. Alfonso Soriano (Washington) and Carlos Lee (Milwaukee) are the likely candidates to push Carlos Beltran for that final outfield spot.

No voting on pitchers is out there, but I'd think in the AL we could have Mike Mussina and closer Mariano Rivera from the Yankees; Josh Beckett, Curt Schilling and closer Jonathan Papelbon from the Red Sox; Jose Contreras (White Sox); Tampa's Scott Kazmir; Toronto's Roy Halladay and a surprise pick - Justin Verlander (Detroit). On the NL side of things, look for Brandon Webb (Arizona), Pedro Martinez and Tom Glavine from the Mets, Carlos Zambrano (Cubs), Bronson Arroyo (Cincinnati), Roy Oswalt (Houston), Brad Penny (Dodgers) and closers Tom Gordon (Philly) and Derrick Turnbow (Milwaukee).

***** Be sure to look for our official All-Star picks here in the coming weeks prior to the mid-summer classic next month. *****

Bonds Interview:

I found Barry Bonds' interview with ABC/ESPN's Jim Gray earlier this week somewhat intriguing. Gray asked the proper questions, didn't press any wrong buttons [but I'm sure it was controlled... just like Barry's ESPN show '*Bonds on Bonds*'] and even though the answers didn't reveal anything extraordinary, they had a different feel than the boring responses of a bland Bonds press conference. One gets the impression that it meant more to Barry to pass Babe Ruth than it will if he gets the chance to become the all-time home run king, passing Hank Aaron. What means more to Barry: winning a World Championship or passing Aaron? He said he'd take the ring first, but wouldn't mind to have either. Is either a priority? Didn't sound like either was a 'must' on his list. You don't get the vibe that he's ultimately determined to go chase a ring or Aaron as hard

as he pursued passing Ruth. To me, it seems like Bonds' biggest goal was passing the Babe and now he's done that, satisfying his needs... at least for now.

A Look Back At The Week That Was:

*** Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling, who got career win #199 on his daughter's birthday, got career win #200 on Saturday, May 27th – his son's birthday. What are the odds on that happening?

*** It's rather interesting how the Red Sox are getting it done now. No, it's not with constant offense and a bunch of home runs day after day (although that is nice when it happens), but rather some defense. Terry Francona's team has committed the fewest errors in all of baseball and the 'Sawx have a .990 fielding percentage.

*** Has the Big Unit re-invented himself? Hardly... yet. In his Memorial Day gem – where he pitched six innings, struck out four, allowed only two hits and gave up no runs – Johnson was kind of different. He didn't throw the slider pitch, showed a split-finger fast ball, a changeup and was changing speeds every so often. The win by the Yankees that day marked the first time the Tigers got shutout in back-to-back games this year. Speaking of those Tigers, the one terrible stat about them: they've been caught stealing more times than they have stolen bases.

*** How about the Pittsburgh Pirates? Yes, they are still in last place in the six-team NL Central and have the second worst record in the National League. But Canadian born outfielder Jason Bay is going to the All-Star game... again... even if it means he'll be the only Pirates player there. On Sunday, Bay homered in his sixth straight game and the night before in a win over the Astros he scored the game's winning run. His hot hand seems to be spreading as second baseman Jose Castillo – getting rave reviews as well – homered in five consecutive games this week. It almost was six, but his double originally called a home run was just that – a double. At least Bay and Castillo are giving it their all, which is more than Manager Jim Tracy can say about the rest of the guys.

*** Sunday the Atlanta Braves pounded out eight home runs to beat the Cubs in extra innings. It got me to thinking (gee, that's a first) about Manager Bobby Cox. Cox doesn't get nearly enough respect nor the credit he deserves for getting this ball club to win at a high level year in and year out. Biggest thing of all: his players respond from slow starts to make a run at the trophy in October, and although the franchise has only one World Championship to show for their string of division titles, Atlanta has been as consistent as they come.

*** Entering Tuesday, the NL West-leading Diamondbacks were batting an even .300 with runners in scoring position and two outs. The Dodgers have as good an offense as anyone in that division or the entire league. San Diego, the reigning division Champ, is still trucking along at 28-25, and the Giants are an above .500 last place team at 27-26. Most surprising thing in the NL West? The Colorado Rockies. They shutout the

Padres on Monday night and could, if they keep up the pace their on, surpass their franchise record of 83 wins. Only three times in the team's history have they won 80 games and we've seen nothing yet to give us the indication winning 80 games this season is impossible.

*** The Mets called up outfielder Lastings Milledge earlier this week to replace Xavier Nady, who went on the DL with an injury. Milledge is one of the pieces for the future, and while some feel they called him up to show teams interested in him for a trade what he can do at this level, it's more probable they hold onto him. It is especially likely if Cliff Floyd stays hot and cold [also note he is likely gone after this season] and Nady might not be back anytime soon. When it comes time to try and make a trade for an extra arm, the Mets might want to think about dealing someone else and holding on to this young guy.

Peeking Ahead:

There are two upcoming series' that appear to be key one's in my mind. They are... **Cubs @ Astros** (June 6th-8th) and **Red Sox @ Yankees** (June 5th-8th). Who's the pressure on?

Pressure On: Red Sox & Cubs - Why is the pressure on Boston? They sit half a game in front of the Yankees. At the same time, they only sit 2.5 games in front of a Blue Jays club that hasn't had a healthy A.J. Burnett pitching, and let's be honest here. Toronto's .301 batting average leads the Majors and the Jays have 13 more homers and ten more doubles than the Red Sox. Quite frankly, the Red Sox haven't exactly had a great deal of success [dating all the way back to a sweep they suffered last year] vs. them either. The Yankees are banged up and bruised, possibly without power-hitting outfielder Gary Sheffield for months. Boston can't settle for anything less than two wins minimum in their four-game series at Yankee Stadium. Note: three of these games are ESPN or ESPN2 televised matchups.

As far as the Cubs go, there have been some trade rumors whirling around in the windy city – all primarily focusing on pitchers Mark Prior, Kerry Wood and Greg Maddux. I personally would rate Wood as a more trade-able commodity than Prior, while Maddux, being a veteran that could help a team on the west coast (say the Dodgers or Angels), seems like an excellent fit as a #3 starter on a playoff contending club. Also, don't forget about Manager Dusty Banker, who might be on the hot seat if the Cubs don't get it going. They recently acquired first baseman Phil Nevin from the Rangers to man that position until Derrek Lee is healthy again and these next 26 games or so until they play the White Sox are going to be critical. And maybe when they face the White Sox next time catcher Michael Barrett won't slug A.J. Pierzynski. Houston also knows they need to put together a nice win streak as they plan on welcoming Roger Clemens (signed on for 20+ million to finish the regular season) back around June 22nd. Hey Roger, feel free to throw \$20,000 of it this way!

HOT:

Pittsburgh Pirates second baseman Jose Castillo - Not often do you see a Pirates player bat over .300, but Castillo is doing it as he's 10-for-20 with five homers and 15 RBI since last Friday. Pittsburgh as a team has won four in a row, including a sweep of the Brewers where Castillo scored the game-winning run on Thursday.

Cleveland Indians pitcher C.C. Sabathia - If you recall last week's MLB Weekly, it was noted Sabathia needed to come up big against the Tigers and White Sox for Cleveland to get back in the race. Well, he has as he's now 5-1 with a 1.71 ERA and a 41-9K/BB ratio. Cleveland couldn't have taken 3 of 4 from Chicago without him.

Baltimore Orioles outfielder Corey Patterson - The former Cubs leadoff man who had his share of problems last year is now thriving in his new role with the O's. Patterson already has 25 stolen bases – six more than he had all of last year – and is batting .291. Not to mention, he's committed just one error thus far.

NOT:

San Francisco Giants outfielder Randy Winn - Now here's a guy who could really use Moises Alou back in the lineup. Lost in the Giants' crowded outfield, Winn hit for the cycle last August, and lately, hasn't hit anything. He's currently in an 0-for-15 slump and has seen his BA drop from .315 on April 30th to .265 on May 30th.

Milwaukee Brewers - Losers of five straight, the Brew crew are really struggling offensively. Despite being tied for second in the Majors in home runs, the Brewers have more strikeouts (412) than anyone else in baseball, plus their 48 errors in the field are more than any other team except the Cincinnati Reds.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Arizona Diamondbacks pitcher Brandon Webb pitched back-to-back complete game shutouts last month and ran his scoreless innings streak to 25 on Wednesday night. Believe it or not, there were two pitchers last year that had a pair of complete game shutouts consecutively. Florida's Dontrelle Willis and Chicago White Sox pitcher Jon Garland both accomplished the feat in 2005.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

What happened on this date - June 2nd - 71 years ago today? Hint: in honor of Barry Bonds becoming 2nd on the all-time home run list.

Last Week's Answer: Tommy John