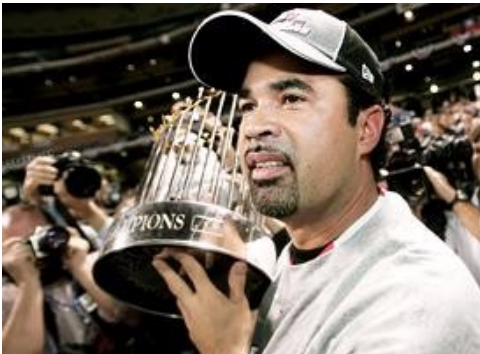


MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 23rd, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

This week's edition of MLB Weekly – always for you the fans – will be an extended version with my All-Star picks! Why an extended version you ask? Next week I'm off to Chicago and won't return till the following week, leaving me without a column for 14 days. No worry, though we'll be back in our usual Friday spot, on July 7th, with a mid-season report. That too will be an extended edition of MLB Weekly as we analyze what all 30 teams have done up to the midway point and what may be ahead. Oh yea... I'm also going to Chicago to straighten Ozzie Guillen out, which is where we'll begin.

Ozzie's World: And We're All Just Living In It

Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig has punished Chicago White Sox Manager Ozzie Guillen with a fine on Thursday and ordered him to... get this one... sensitivity training for using a slur in a tirade earlier this week. In addition, Guillen was also suspended a game for sending out recently acquired reliever Dave Riske to intentional hit St. Louis' Chris Duncan (son of pitching coach Dave Duncan) in Tuesday's win over the Cardinals.



Ozzie Guillen should be glad he isn't the Manager of that other team in Chicago, which is 28-43 and 14 games out of first.

Guillen went off this week on Chicago Sun-Times sports columnist Jay Mariotti, who wrote a critical piece about how Guillen dealt with rookie pitcher Sean Tracey failing to beam a batter (at Guillen's request). The man who brought the city its first World Series title in 88 years attacked Mariotti by using inappropriate language and calling him a derogatory term that rhymes with rag [you figure it out...].

Hey Oz man, settle down. It's not like your team is crumbling before your very eyes a la the Atlanta Braves, who with their loss on Tuesday night, dropped eight straight for the first time since 1989. The White Sox pounded the Cardinals a combined 33-11 on Tuesday and Wednesday. In fact, heading into the series finale with St. Louis, the Sox had scored 65 runs over the past six games. Their much improved offense is led by the power four-some of Jim Thome, Paul Konerko, Jermaine Dye and Joe Crede. Those four batters have hit 74 of the team's 105 homers – tops in the big league's.

Chicago has exceeded my expectations to this point in the season, the Jim Thome/Aaron Rowand trade has turned out to be a huge success for them, the bullpen hasn't been terrible like some might have predicted, and the starting pitching picked up where it left off last year. Guillen is the type of Manager who short-term, will seize the challenge and do well. Over a long period of time though, he wears on you and becomes more bothersome than helpful. Chicago could find out the hard way.

Clemens & Pujols Return:

One is returning to the mound for the first time since last October when his team was swept in the World Series. The other – back after going on the DL on June 4th. At the time, he - being Red Birds first baseman Albert Pujols - led the Majors in home runs with 25, an unprecedented total through just 53 games played. Now he shares the lead with Philadelphia's Ryan Howard, also a first baseman in the National League.

While Astros pitcher Roger Clemens was out, Houston posted a 37-35 record and entered Thursday's play six games out of the division lead and 1.5 behind the current wild card leader, the Cincinnati Reds. While Pujols was out, the Cardinals maintained their first place positioning in the NL Central division. Suffering from a strained abdominal muscle that was supposed to keep him on the shelf up to six weeks, Pujols returned in less than three weeks time. Even earlier this week, St. Louis Manager Tony La Russa said he expected Pujols back by Monday at the latest. The earliest came on Thursday night as the Cards faced the White Sox.

Meanwhile, the 'Rocket' had his first Major League start of 2006 after three minor league starts (AAA, AA and A..... enough A's for you?). Houston is hoping And if these two teams meet in the playoffs again, which is not that far fetched to tell you the truth, it would mark the third consecutive year doing so. What do they both have in common? Each qualifies as the biggest name on their team. To make do without them and be able to get them back in good shape means a lot.

AMERICAN LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Joe Mauer (Minnesota Twins): The Majors' best hitter from a batting average standpoint absolutely has to go to the All-Star game. Not really a natural catcher, Mauer nearly has as many doubles (19) as he does strikeouts (26) and adds some speed with seven stolen bases. At the age of only 23, he's blossoming before our eyes.

First Baseman - David Ortiz (Boston Red Sox): It's real unfortunate there won't be a DH for the All-Star game since Jim Thome and Paul Konerko of the White Sox have been just as good with the bat as Ortiz. What gives Big Papi the edge in my opinion (and I know – this has nothing to do with 2006) is his postseason performance in the past, coming through in the clutch. The 64 runs batted in by Ortiz are hard to overlook.

Second Baseman - Jose Lopez (Mariners): It's not a deep crop of second baseman in the AL and last year the obvious choice was Baltimore's Brian Roberts. You could make a solid case for Robinson Cano of the Yankees, but Lopez is the better default candidate. He's hit nine homers, has 53RBI, is batting right around .280 and does an adequate job defensively.

Third Baseman - Alex Rodriguez (New York Yankees): Even though he is in a 'slump,' the stats put up by A-Rod are outrageous every year. His .281 batting average, 15 homers and 51 runs batted in are kind of light, especially when compared to Texas' Hank Blalock (.294BA, 10HR, 51RBI) – also playing on a team battling for first place. Oakland's Eric Chavez quietly flies under the radar every year, gets hot usually around August (this year it was April) and it's my hope he gets a bench spot.

Shortstop - Derek Jeter (New York Yankees): Both Michael Young from the Rangers and Miguel Tejada of Baltimore would probably get the nod as the starting shortstop in the NL. Not only does Jeter's popularity help him out enormously in the fan voting, but the respect he has from people all around the sports. He's known to come through when the game is on the line and one could argue this season has been one of his finest (.340BA, 46RBI, 48 runs, 14 stolen bases) first halves ever.

Outfielders - Ichiro Suzuki (Mariners), Jermaine Dye (White Sox), Vernon Wells (Blue Jays): Annually, outfielders Manny Ramirez and Vlad Guerrero are power hitting, RBI machines. Stunningly. Ramirez isn't in the top 40 in RBI [so he'll come off the bench on my team this year] and Guerrero gets edged out by Vernon Wells in the pure numbers category. Ichiro went on a 20-game hit streak, Dye is on par to have the best season of his career, and Detroit's Magglio Ordoñez could fill out a reserve spot.

NATIONAL LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Johnny Estrada (Arizona Diamondbacks): With the exception of ten fewer RBI – Chicago's Michael Barrett has similar numbers to Estrada. Thing is that incident where Barrett got suspended doesn't really put him into the All-Star game. This is such a weak position in the NL that the only other guy with a legit argument may be Paul Lo Duca and he's had better seasons before.

First Baseman - Albert Pujols (St. Louis Cardinals): Is there any question? Well, actually, there might be since Pujols missed 15 games in June and the Cardinals went 8-7 without him. Ah... that helps his case for MVP, showing just how valuable he is to that lineup. There are players – Nomar Garciaparra of the Dodgers and Ryan Howard from the Phillies in particular – that boast an argument to be considered. That's just it though – considered. Neither them, nor any of the other first baseman in the league, have better numbers (.308BA, 25HR, 65RBI) **AND** a bigger impact on their club than Pujols.

Second Baseman - Brandon Phillips (Cincinnati Reds): Florida rookie Dan Uggla deserves consideration, but he's not quite the best second baseman in the league. That usually goes to Jeff Kent (Dodgers), but this year it goes to either Philly's Chase Utley, Jose Vidro of the Nationals or Phillips. Utley gives you the offensive numbers, while Vidro has been a solid defensive player for years. We'll lean with Phillips since he is the closest thing to the complete package: pop, speed and an occasionally flashy mit.

Third Baseman - David Wright (New York Mets): Face of the franchise. That's what you are when you're only 23 years old, batting .335 with 15 home runs, 56RBI and have scored 46 runs for the best team record wise in the National League. Wright had his third multi-homer game of the season on Thursday and just nudges out St. Louis' Scott Rolen for the third base starting spot. But it's a very, very close, tough call.

Shortstop - Jose Reyes (New York Mets): Like Wright, Reyes is one of the young faces of the franchise for the future for the Mets. He's going to be right there once again at the end of the season in triple and stolen bases among baseball's leaders. And as we're starting to see more consistently, his hitting is really improving. Edgar Renteria and David Eckstein make more sense to some people; not me.

Outfielders - Alfonso Soriano (Nationals), Carlos Lee (Brewers) and Miguel Cabrera (Marlins): Okay, this is a terrible defensive outfield. In an All-Star game, that doesn't mean too much. In Soriano, an MVP nominee, Lee (.273BA, 23HR, 59RBI) and Cabrera (.341BA, 10HR, 46RBI) they have three tough hitters to get out. Where are Andrew Jones and Jim Edmonds? Edmonds has a .265 batting average and Jones isn't quite hitting like he was at the midway point a year ago. They can come off the bench and give you defense when needed.

PITCHERS:

AL Starting Pitcher - Jose Contreras (White Sox): You can't go wrong with an undefeated pitcher. The Yankees probably wish right now they didn't give up on him. His 7-0 record is the best in baseball, the 2.96ERA is steady good and Contreras has allowed only 67 hits in 85 innings pitched. Enough said.

Rest of the Rotation - Scott Kazmir (Devil Rays), Johan Santana (Twins), Roy Halladay (Blue Jays), Curt Schilling (Red Sox) and Mike Mussina (Yankees): Anybody – besides the unbeaten Contreras – legitimately had a better year to this point than Kazmir? On a team with a losing record, he's 9-4, holds an ERA of 3.21 and his strikeout/walk ratio is 100-35. Schilling and Mussina are a couple of vets capable of winning 15 to 20 games this year. Halladay is in great position to challenge Contreras for the Cy Young away with an 8-2 record, a 1.03WHIP as well as an ERA under 3.00. Rogers' ten wins gives him the most in the AL, but I favor the more dependable in a big spot Santana.

Closers - B.J. Ryan (Blue Jays) and Jonathan Papelbon (Red Sox): Both of these guys have ERA's under 1.00. That in itself is impressive enough as closers in a hard-hitting American League to get to the All-Star game. Papelbon has allowed just a single run in 35.2 innings and has saved 23 of 24 save tries. Ryan is equally unhittable, allowing two runs through 37 innings and saving 20 of 21 games. Todd Jones from the Tigers and, as always, Mariano Rivera from the Yankees should join them.

NL Starting Pitcher - Pedro Martinez (Mets) - No, it hasn't been Pedro's best season statistically, but he deserves to start this All-Star game as much as the next guy. His 110 strikeout total leads the entire Majors, and with a 7-3 record to go alongside a 3.01ERA, he's done extremely work for the first place Mets.

Rest of the Rotation - Chris Carpenter (Cardinals), Tom Glavine (Mets), Bronson Arroyo (Reds), Brandon Webb (Diamondbacks) and Jason Schmidt (Giants) - The two major snubs on this list are Carlos Zambrano of the Cubs and Los Angeles' Brad Penny. Based on recent performances, Webb shouldn't be one of next five after the start since he's struggled a bit as of late. However, the body of work by him, Glavine and Arroyo is worth taking. Carpenter and Glavine have legit shots to start this game. In the two seasons leading up to '06, Carpenter went 36-10. Now he's 6-3 with a league low 2.46ERA and a 75-25K/BB ratio in 84 innings pitched. Glavine has a ML-high ten victories and is well on pace to beat last year's 13 win tally and 71 strikeouts.

Closers - Trevor Hoffman (Padres) and Tom Gordon (Phillies): Gordon is having no problems going from the AL to the NL. He's 2-2 with a 1.47ERA and has only blown one save try in 21 attempts. His 40-9K/BB ratio is pleasing, too. Hoffman will go down as one of the most effective closers of all-time. With a 1.33ERA, Hoffman has a 23-4K/BB ratio and is 18 of 19 in save opportunities. Houston's Brad Lidge, Jason Isringhausen from the Cardinals and Milwaukee's Derrick Turnbow have good shots to the make the roster as well.

Interleague: Stuff To Watch

Cincinnati @ Cleveland - Ohio bragging rights are on the line as the Indians, sitting 15 games out of first place and seven under .500, face the current NL Wild Card leader in the Reds (39-34). I'd expect a good amount of runs to be scored in this series, but whichever team's bullpen can come through in the clutch should hold the upper hand.

Florida @ NY Yankees - A re-match of the 2003 World Series when the Marlins won Gm. 6, behind the pitching of Josh Beckett, at Yankee Stadium to take the title. Sunday is the game to watch as Dontrelle Willis [*a future southpaw in pinstripes?*] opposes Mike Mussina.

Philadelphia @ Boston - Passionate sports towns go head-to-head in this series. You talk about the Celtics and Patriots from the Boston/New England area, the Eagles,

Sixers and Flyers from Philly – those fans in those towns are simply passionate. The thing the Red Sox have going for them is a 17-5 combo record from Schilling and Beckett.

St. Louis @ Detroit - Could we be looking at a possible World Series preview? We might be as each game features two starting pitchers with winning records. That's pretty rare now-a-days. Plus, it's always meaningful when two division leaders collide.

Washington @ Baltimore - This could be a developing rivalry between clubs near one another in that D.C./metro area. John Patterson returns off the DL for the Nats.

NY Mets @ Toronto - May this be a World Series preview? If I had to pick today – *yes!* Even though the Jays are three games out of first place [*and would likely need to win the division just to make the playoffs*], they do have 40 wins in baseball's toughest division. The Mets, meanwhile, have an NL-high 45 wins in a division where the other four teams are under .500.

Chicago Cubs @ Minnesota - One team has won nine of its last ten; the other has lost seven of its last nine. Johan Santana trots out to the mound on Friday night, while the Cubs' Mark Prior attempts to bounce back in his second start of the season on Saturday. As a side note, Chicago outfielder Jacque Jones faces his former team.

Houston @ Chicago White Sox - A World Series re-match from last year, the Astros throw out lefty Andy Pettitte opposite unbeaten Jose Contreras. Houston has the task of quieting baseball's hottest offense and that'll be no easy on the road where they're 12-18 on the season (Chicago 27-10 at home – best in the AL).

Texas @ Colorado - Offense, offense and more offense. Surprisingly to me, both of these teams are two games or less out of first place and do it more with the lumber than the glove. Improved pitching though, as Texas has allowed only 70 homers and the 54 home runs allowed by Colorado rank as the least in all of baseball.

LA Angels of Anaheim @ Arizona - Hard to think the Diamondbacks won it all in 2001 and the Angels captured a World Championship themselves the very next year in 2002. Both need this series in the worst of ways – each in last place at the moment.

Oakland @ San Francisco - Battle on the bay. San Fran gets a break. No, they can't DH Barry Bonds, however, they will be able to use Jason Schmidt on Friday and Matt Cain on Sunday while avoiding Barry Zito (8-3) for this entire series.

Pittsburgh @ LA Dodgers - The reeling Bucs, managed by Jim Tracy, go into LA to face a team sensing first place in its division. Tracy managed the Dodgers before taking the Pittsburgh job – perhaps a regret at this point (they've dropped eight straight).

Seattle @ San Diego - Ichiro and Mike Piazza. There's your star power.

Milwaukee @ Kansas City - KC's four-game win streak can't last forever.

Idle Thought Of The Week:

Is it me or has Barry Bonds disappeared from the face of the planet since passing Babe Ruth for second place on the all-time home run list? Out the window went his reality show '*Bonds on Bonds*', ESPNEWS no longer has that little box in the lower right corner telling you what he's done at the plate, and talk radio presently is much more infatuated with Ozzie Guillen and Roger Clemens' return. Its been almost a full month since he blasted #715 off Colorado's Byung-Hyun Kim. Do you even know where his home run total stands now? 718 – he's hit three since he hit the memorable [*or not so memorable depending on who you are*] homer on May 28th. Hey, I do remember it was a Saturday when he hit it... but that's about it for the soon-to-be 42-year-old Giants left field. By the way, his birthday is on July 24th... in case you cared about that either.

HOT:

Toronto closer B.J. Ryan - Having blown only one save all year long, Ryan is on a tear this month. He's successfully saved all eight of his chances in June, allowing just three walks and four hits. In fact, his ERA is an incredible 0.49 on the year.

Twins starting pitcher Francisco Liriano - In his past three wins, Liriano has gone at least seven innings each time out, allowed only four total runs, walked five batters and struck out 24. The 22-year-old Dominican is 7-1 with an ERA of 2.17.

Kansas City Royals & Tampa Bay Devil Rays - Who would've ever thought it would be possible to see the Royals (15 runs on Thursday) on a four-game winning streak and the Devil Rays on a three-game winning streak simultaneously? Not me.

NOT:

Arizona Diamondbacks - Bob Melvin's club is really struggling and they've yet to recover from the Jason Grimsley story. Arizona is 2-15 over their last 17 games and those two wins were decided by one-run (5-4 vs. Pittsburgh; 2-1 vs. San Francisco)

Cardinals pitcher Mark Mulder - Signed in '04 to be a potential ace of the staff, Mulder hasn't recovered from last year's postseason as he is 6-5 with a 6.09ERA and currently on the DL. On Tuesday he allowed ten hits and nine runs. Trade rumors are also starting to swirl with Mulder's name involved in them.

Atlanta Braves & Pittsburgh Pirates - Jim Tracy's team dropped their eighth in a row and were swept by the Royals on Thursday. The good news: they're not the Braves. Atlanta has lost ten, count 'em, ten in a row.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

We've got two. Hurray! Let's throw a parade! Seriously, the A's were able to sweep the Dodgers for the first time since 1999, winning their 10th game in a row on Sunday afternoon (had won 15 of their last 17 at the time).

Baltimore's Adam Loewn that very same day became the first pitcher ever to face a Cy Young pitcher in his first four career Major League starts.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

On Wednesday, shortstop Jose Reyes became just the 9th Mets player ever to hit for the cycle. Unfortunately for the Mets, it marked the first time they've lost when one of their own accomplished the feat. Can you name the last Mets player before Reyes to hit for the cycle?

Last Week's Answer: 1994