

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 29th, 2007
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Lot to get to this week in this edition of MLB Weekly before we head to July and get ready for Independence Day. Sunday on TBS the rosters for both the National League and American League All-Star teams will be revealed. We'll make our selections for the starters, but before that, let's review a couple of milestones achieved on the diamond Thursday.....

Milestone Men:

This week Houston's Craig Biggio and Toronto's Frank Thomas achieved baseball immortality. Well, not quite, but they each reached milestones as Biggio - became only the sport's 27th player to get 3000 hits for a career, while Thomas became the 21st player to hit 500 home runs.

Known as the 'Big Hurt,' Thomas won back-to-back MVP awards in the 1990's with the Chicago White Sox. Only 22 players have a .300 batting average, .400 on-base percentage and .500 slugging percentage – each of which are in the Hall-of-Fame now or worthy of getting there eventually. He's in that category. Few were as lethal with the bat in their hands during the 90's as Thomas was. His power was astounding and it made him a feared slugger to the point where kids were buying shoes named after him.

Biggio has his place in history, too. Nobody has been hit by more pitches. Hes the ultimate sacrifice guy, whether it's with bunts, taking a bullet from a pitcher or going with the sac fly. His willingness is something that sets him apart from other guys, including playing the catcher position when he first came up. The 658 doubles by Biggio are the most of player at his position – second base – that currently reside in the HOF. For practically the entire decade of the 1990's, he was the gold standard for second basemen in the National League.

The significance of the feat to Thomas? "This means a lot to me because I did it the right way," he said. Whether it was a shot intentionally or unintentionally to guys such as Mark McGwire, Rafael Palmeiro and perhaps Barry Bonds, we'll never know. But what we do know is that despite his defensive deficiencies and injuries, he conducted himself with class when the White Sox won a World Series a couple years ago without him having a role. For Biggio, he doesn't yet have a Championship ring to show for his career and was probably considered the second best player on his team – behind Jeff Bagwell – during his prime days with the Astros. That being said, his longevity, durability, consistency and unselfishness deserve him a spot alongside the Big Hurt in my opinion. And both guys will be on a bunch of ballots for Cooperstown years down the road.

AMERICAN LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Pudge Rodriguez (Detroit Tigers): Joe Mauer is going to be the logical choice at this position for many years to come – and consecutively. In fact, he was the batting title winner last year. Mauer is not having quite as good of a season, hitting .303 to go alongside three homers and 26RBI. Pudge and Mike Piazza were the staples behind the plate during the 1990's and Rodriguez isn't ready to surrender his place. Although he's got only one extra base hit in the last nine games, Pudge is batting .280 on the year with seven dingers and 42RBI, plus has 19 doubles. In the event that neither Mauer nor Rodriguez get the nod as starting catcher, which is quite possible, then look for either Jorge Posada of the Yankees or Victor Martinez from the Tribe. Martinez' argument is a good one with a BA over .300, OPS just above .900 and as much power as anyone at this position in the Majors.

First Baseman - David Ortiz (Boston Red Sox): For the second year in a row, no DH enables Big Papi to be the AL's first baseman for the All-Star game. His case is pretty clear - he's going to approach 40+ homers and over 100RBI yet again, and should have over 100 walks for a third consecutive season. Without him, Boston still may be in first place in the AL East, but their lead wouldn't be double-figures over the Yankees and company. There are plenty of other good first basemen in this league on an annual basis with 2007 being no exception. Cleveland's Travis Hafner, another DH type, and reigning MVP Justin Morneau from the Twins each have good shots of being named on as backups.

Second Baseman - Dustin Pedroia (Boston Red Sox): Here's my shocker, taking Pedroia over both Placido Polanco from the Detroit Tigers and the Yankees' Robinson Cano. Reason I didn't go with Cano was simple – in big at-bat situations, say with runners in scoring position where he's hitting only .205 (and is 4-for-30 in the scenario with two outs) – he hasn't gotten the job done. Not only is Pedroia hitting .322, but he also is batting .326 with five doubles and 19RBI when runners are in scoring position. What about Polanco? His .327 batting average is better, as are his runs scored total and RISP numbers (31-for-76 with 33RBI). Plus, he's the only starting second baseman in the AL without an error. Pedroia is a rookie this year, and after a terrible April where he was hitting under .200, he's been a major asset both offensively as well as defensively flashing the leather. Now, Baltimore has to have a representative, so Brian Roberts could get some starting consideration unless they opt to take pitcher Erik Bedard or Melvin Mora.

Third Baseman - Alex Rodriguez (New York Yankees): Enjoying a career-year statistically on a Yankees team that is surprisingly under .500, A-Rod would be a no-brainer to take home his second MVP award in three seasons while donning the pinstripes. Instead, he's just a lock to earn the starting spot at third base for now. He'll have 80RBI by the All-Star break, maybe even 30 home runs and his batting average is about 30 points over .300 for the guy leading the Majors in homers. The real race for who his backup will

be is on; it's between Mike Lowell of the Red Sox and Eric Chavez from the A's. Adrian Beltre of Seattle also will be in the fray for a spot.

Shortstop - Derek Jeter (New York Yankees): Yes, we're going with a pair of Yankees and a pair of Red Sox in the infield. How's that going to look on double play combos? Jeter is having another solid season for the Bronx Bombers, leading them as the only player with over 100 hits, 20+doubles and a batting average approaching .340. The only area where Jeter has been the slightest bit shaky has been in the field, where he's committed an uncharacteristic 12 errors prior to the All-Star break.

Outfielders - Magglio Ordoñez (Tigers), Ichiro Suzuki (Mariners) and Vladimir Guerrero (Angels) - The emergence of Ordoñez could make someone a major snub from starting in the AL outfield. Six times Ichiro has been named to the squad – five as a starter. Boston's Manny Ramirez has started in eight straight All-Star games, dating back to his final year with the Cleveland Indians. He's had a string of nine consecutive seasons of 100RBI or more, which could be in jeopardy, as might his streak of being named an AL outfielder starter as he sits over 23,000 votes behind Ichiro in the latest fan voting.

NATIONAL LEAGUE STARTERS:

Catcher - Russell Martin (Los Angeles Dodgers) - The best catcher for the Dodgers since Paul Lo Duca – and maybe even Mike Piazza – Martin is both developing into one of the game's top players at his position both offensively as well as defensively. Last year my surprise midway pick was Johnny Estrada, then of the Diamondbacks and now with Milwaukee. He doesn't quite have the credentials to be voted ahead – or deserve to start this game – in front of the likes of Lo Duca, Martin, Atlanta's Brian McCann or maybe even vet Bengie Molina (.283BA, 39RBI) from the Giants.

First Baseman - Prince Fielder (Milwaukee Brewers): In only his second full season at the big league level, Fielder, son of Cecil, is lighting it up. His offense has been absolutely electric, leading the NL in home runs with 27 while helping the Brew crew to a first place record up to this point in the Central Division. Usually, this spot has belonged to Albert Pujols of St. Louis ever since he entered the league. This season, however, the reigning World Series Champs are under .500 and Pujols has 11 fewer blasts than Fielder working against him. Ryan Howard of Philadelphia is another player that will be in the discussion for the next 5-10 years, and might have a decent argument to start if it wasn't for a slow start for both him individually as well as his team. This is such a crowded position that a strong, solid hitter like Adrian Gonzalez from the Padres might not make it with players such as Derrek Lee from the Cubs, Pujols and Howard in his way.

Second Baseman - Chase Utley (Philadelphia Phillies): Part of a terrific young infield in Philly that also features Howard, a candidate for 40+ homers any given year, and Jimmy Rollins at shortstop, Utley is a pretty easy choice. His best competition is Jeff Kent

of the Dodgers, who's well past his prime, and maybe Rickie Weeks from Milwaukee. But the Brewers are unlikely to get three infielders in this game, too, so it's more likely the aforementioned Fielder and SS J.J. Hardy get selected before Weeks does.

Third Baseman - David Wright (New York Mets): The competition isn't as fierce as it has been in the past. Chipper Jones isn't having a monster year in Atlanta; Miguel Cabrera of the Marlins and Chicago's Aramis Ramirez have had better seasons too; and Scott Rolen from St. Louis no longer is the same player he once was. After a slow start, Wright got on track during May and June. He's not having a really stellar season or performing as well as he did in 2006, though that's irrelevant. It's irrelevant because he's been just good enough to earn the starting spot at a position he wins kind of by default.

Shortstop - Jose Reyes (New York Mets): Hardy is a very close second, believe it or not. Hanley Ramirez from Florida is no slouch either; the defending NL Rookie of the Year has seven more homers than Reyes, but 16 fewer stolen bases (22 – which still is a lot for most players in an entire season). Both Hardy and Reyes are going to make the team as they've been the exciting, energy players for their respective teams, giving them a spark at the top of the order. Now the question becomes does Rollins from Philly make it? Also, can Ramirez sneak in and will Edgar Renteria of Atlanta go, too? I say no to both Renteria and Ramirez, but yes to Rollins.

Outfielders - Ken Griffey Jr. (Reds), Alfonso Soriano (Cubs) and Matt Holliday (Rockies) - In past years when he's been injured, Griffey got the fan vote, much to the chagrin of other outfield candidates who were worthier of starting in the game. Griffey has turned the clock back about 5-10 years, though, and is having a terrific campaign on a horrible club. Now the question becomes will guys like Carlos Beltran from the Mets and Barry Bonds of the game's hometown Giants get in on reputation/fan voting? To me, Griffey and Soriano have to go and start – barring a last-minute injury to one of them. The third spot is really tough to pick and I took Holliday, based on what he has meant for a Colorado team that has seen both the highs and lows through the first half of the season. As far as backups go, Eric Byrnes from the Diamondbacks is a must because of his hustle and his ability to provide power or speed.

PITCHERS:

AL Starting Pitcher - Justin Verlander (Tigers): Depending on whether or not Detroit Manager Jim Leyland, who's also managing this game, wants to use Verlander will likely determine whether the Old Dominion product goes as a starter or reserve.

Rest of the Rotation - Johan Santana (Twins), Dan Haren (A's), Josh Beckett (Red Sox), C.C. Sabathia (Indians), John Lackey (Angels) and Erik Bedard (Orioles): Haren definitely is in line to start, considering his 1.78ERA is easily the best in the American League and he has a sick WHIP under 1.00. The wins and strikeouts are

there, too, on an A's team that got rid of Barry Zito – the third wheel in their great rotation trio that once included Tim Hudson and Mark Mulder.

Closers - J.J. Putz (Mariners), Jonathan Papelbon (Red Sox): No Mariano Rivera? Maybe not. His save total is stunningly low at this point in the season and the Yankees are a little ways away from contending for a Wild Card spot; practically out of the mix for an AL East division title – barring a major collapse by the Red Sox. We know Hideki Okajima (2-0 and an ERA under 1.00) is going to take one of the relief spots on the squad as should Angels closer Francisco Rodriguez. Papelbon, Okajima, has been stellar again and Putz from Seattle really is the unsung hero of a Mariners team very much alive in the hunt for the division title in the AL West.

NL Starting Pitcher - Jake Peavy (Padres): Last year my choice for the NL starting pitcher was Pedro Martinez of the Mets, who hasn't taken the hill for a single start in 2007. For me, it's fairly easy who to take on the NL squad this time and that's Peavy. On the season he's 9-2 with a 2.14ERA. Some could argue that winner of his matchup Saturday with Los Angeles' Brady Penny (10-1, 2.04ERA) could determine the starter. Peavy is a hard-thrower and a bulldog. In a few months he may be getting his first ever Cy Young award and leading San Diego to a deep playoff run that might include their

Rest of the Rotation - Brad Penny (Dodgers), Ben Sheets (Brewers), Cole Hamels (Phillies), Chris Young (Padres) and John Smoltz (Braves) - Hamels is steady with a 9-3 record, 3.80ERA, 111 strikeouts (2nd in the league) and is a key reason why the Phillies are still very much alive in the chase for the NL East division title or a Wild Card spot. Smoltz clearly isn't having his best season (respectable though with a 8-4 record and ERA under 3.20), but he's been the glue of the Braves for quite some time now and deserves another trip to the All-Star festivities as he inches closer to the end of his career. Surprisingly, Sheets has been healthy and red hot as of late for Milwaukee. Young gets a little overshadowed by Peavy, but don't be fooled, his numbers are great too.

Closers - Takashi Saito (Dodgers), Trevor Hoffman (Padres) and Francisco Cordero (Brewers) - The other closer spot was a close call. Could we go Jose Valverde from Arizona, who's enjoying a much better season than in 2006, or Chad Cordero from Washington, who's looking more like the guy from 2005 than the one that was hot/cold last year? Either is a decent choice. But Hoffman is the key piece in the best bullpen west of Boston. Brian Fuentes of Colorado might get in, however, I would pass on him after his miserable week of implosion.

HOT:

Cubs slugger Alfonso Soriano - During the month of June, Soriano blasted 11 home runs – more than any other player in the Majors. His hot streak coincides with the Cubs', who have won six in a row, including 16 of their last 24. Chicago is starting

to distance themselves from the rest of their division with the exception of a Milwaukee team they're slowly moving in on.

Mariners closer J.J. Putz - For a Seattle team that rides a five-game winning streak into Friday, Putz is slamming the door exceptionally well. On the season he's a perfect 22-for-22 on save chances and has a microscopic 0.99ERA to back it up.

AL Central - The five teams in this division mopped up on the rest of the American League this week. All five put together have won 11 in a row, including four-game win streaks by the sub-.500 Royals and White Sox. Meanwhile, Detroit, Cleveland and Minnesota will all realistically threaten for 90+ wins.

NOT:

Dodgers infielder Nomar Garciaparra - Although LA took three of four from the Diamondbacks this week in Arizona to move into a tie with San Diego for first in the NL West, Garciaparra is in a rut. He's 0-for-14 over the past seven days.

Nationals pitcher Mike Bacsik - This southpaw is 1-5 on the year with a 5.08ERA and has already given up nine home runs in less than 45 innings of work. Control and location could be problems for him, given his ordinary 15-13K/BB ratio.

Colorado Rockies - How do you follow up a successful series sweep of the Yankees? By losing seven straight. Just when we get excited and start to think the Rockies are finally a contender for the playoffs, they slip back to the back of the pack.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

With the All-Star game on the horizon, this week's trivia centers around that – who was named the MVP of the 2006 mid-Summer Classic?

Last Week's Answer: Mike Mussina (20)