

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 8th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Interleague play resumes this weekend and two weeks ago the Junior Circuit (a.k.a. the American League) got the better of the National League, going 24-18. The NL may actually have a shot to get closer since in half of the 14 series' their teams have the better record. In fact, the NL has eight teams with 30 victories or more thus far, which is more than the AL. But the best record baseball still belongs to an AL, the Boston Red Sox, who couldn't have asked for a better start from one of their veteran leaders on Thursday afternoon to avoid a sweep.....

Nearly Flawless:

With his team needing a good outing in the worst of ways, right-hander Curt Schilling goes out on a Thursday afternoon in Oakland, California and pitched a one-hit, complete game shutout. A's outfielder Shannon Stewart, an ex-member of the Twins and Blue Jays, broke up the no-hitter in the ninth inning with two outs on a sharply hit single. Schilling had never thrown a no-hitter – or perfect game for that matter – in his career.

The Red Sox, who got on the scoreboard with a David Ortiz home run in the first inning, became the first team in 61 years to win a 1-0 game with a home run in the first inning. Almost as amazing, Ortiz didn't realize Schilling was throwing a no-hitter until the ninth inning. Word has it that when Stewart got the hit off him, the Yankees were in the clubhouse watching and started cheering.

Speaking of the Bronx Bombers, you can't mention them or the Red Sox without the other it seems. Put the Yankees' beginning to start winning into the equation, having won two of three over the weekend at Fenway – and would've swept them had they held on to a lead last Saturday afternoon – and this performance by Schilling is magnified in my opinion.

Hot Arms:

Cleveland's C.C. Sabathia – Front-runner for the American League Cy Young? It might be Sabathia. His 9-1 record is tops in the AL and earlier this week he threw a complete game shutout against the Kansas City Royals. It's a career-year for him and he's been using overpowering stuff to whiff by hitters of all kinds. Sabathia's role will only get bigger if he gets the Tribe to the postseason for the first time since 2001.

Philadelphia's Cole Hamels – Going into Thursday night, Hamels, who came on late in the 2006 campaign to earn a spot in the rotation heading into 2007, was 3rd in Major League Baseball in both wins as well as strikeouts. He's been equally effective at home as on the road with a 4-1 mark in each setting. Hamels has become the franchise's face of the rotation for years to come.

LA Dodgers' Randy Wolf – A former member of the Phillies, Wolf is having a successful season so far out on the west coast. Wolf was superb in May and gave his team a boost with a 3-0 record and 1.48ERA, helping LA head into June with the NL West's top record.

Interleague Matchups:

Angels @ Cardinals - The 2002 World Series Champions take on the 2006 World Series Champions at Busch Stadium in a series that is much more important for the reigning Champs. Kip Wells (2-10) for St. Louis takes on Bartolo Colon (5-2) in the series opener. Anaheim could conceivably have the best record in the sport when this series is over. The Angels are outscoring opponents in the first inning by an incredible margin, plus the team's starting pitchers lead the Majors in wins with 34. So the starting rotation is doing a great job, and if the offense clicks own the stretch, then they definitely are capable of getting back to the World Series for the first time since 2002. On the St. Louis scope, Albert Pujols is starting to pick it back up, but their pitching is up in shambles in a way. Word has it that they signed former Angels reliever Troy Percival, who's been out of baseball since 2005, to a minor league contract on Friday. Of course, without a healthy ace in Chris Carpenter, it has only made things worse. Look for the Angels to take a minimum of two games, if they don't get the sweep.

Red Sox @ Diamondbacks - Both teams are streaking. In fact, had Arizona won last night and San Diego lost, the Diamondbacks would've owned the best record in the National League facing the American League's top club. Instead, it'll be a great series nonetheless with the only unfortunate part being Curt Schilling doesn't get to face his former team that he helped to a title when he was World Series co-MVP with Randy Johnson back in 2001. A Johnson vs. Schilling matchup on the weekend would've been especially intriguing to watch. Instead, we get Dice-K opposing Big Unit and nobody will complain about that one. Josh Beckett, baseball's only undefeated starter at 8-0, takes the rubber against Doug Davis in Friday night's opener. Beckett is aiming to be the sixth pitcher in Red Sox history to start a season 9-0. All indications are he will get there unless the Diamondbacks' bats come alive. After that we get Dice-K opposing Big Unit and nobody will complain about that one. Johnson seems back in his comfort zone since re-joining the club after a brief two-year stint in New York. Arizona is hoping they can hit Matsuzaka and it'll get their limited offense going. But the Diamondbacks, who have won a ML-best 17 games by just one run, usually don't face the likes of David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez on a daily basis in the National League, so it could be tough to limit the damage when the Red Sox put together one of those big run innings. Boston should win two with Arizona taking the middle match.

Mets @ Tigers - Willie Randolph's Mets are reeling a little bit, due to injuries and Aaron Heilman and Scott Schoenweis struggling mightily in the bullpen. They were swept at home by the Philadelphia Phillies and that's not sitting well with them or anybody up in the Big Apple... except Yankees fans of course. For Detroit, their pitching is doing the

job with a couple of their relievers banged up and on the shelf. Starter Justin Verlander pitched seven scoreless innings earlier this week and the Tigers will really be strong in the rotation when Kenny Rogers returns. New York is relying on Jose Reyes, Carlos Delgado, David Wright and Carlos Beltran to provide much of the offensive punch and electricity with the outfield being banged up and bruised. Saturday's pitching matchup ought to be decent to say the least as the rejuvenated Odalis Perez, who with pitching coach Rick Peterson is turning his career back around after the team got him from Pittsburgh last season, against Jeremy Bonderman (5-0). On Sunday, Mets southpaw Tom Glavine trots out to the hill and continues his pursuit of 300 career wins.

Underrated Series: Mariners @ Padres - Few will flock to their TV sets for this one, but it's a deceptive series in my opinion. Justin Germano (4-0) for the Padres opposes Miguel Batista on Friday night. In 31 innings pitched, Germano incredibly has walked only two batters. After years and years as a pitching coach with Mike Scioscia and the Anaheim Angels, Bud Black is making a great impression in his first year as a big league Manager. Seattle is sitting pretty well, too, and can be five games over .500 if they win this series.

Friday's Pitching Duel: A's @ Giants - 24-year-old Chad Gaudin (6-1, 2.41ERA, 48K and 3HR allowed in 71IP) quietly is pitching like one of the best young hurlers in the American League. Hard-throwing peanut Tim Linceum probably isn't going to land a spot on the NL All-Star team just yet, but should on several occasions down the road for the San Francisco Giants. The winner of this series likely will emerge as a summer contender inside their respective division. Meanwhile, the loser might want to get ready to prepare for a .500 type record at best.

Re-Match? Astros @ White Sox - This marks a re-match of the 2005 World Series that the White Sox won. Both teams are in miserable slumps and headed in the wrong direction.

Rocket's Re-Launch: Pirates @ Yankees - Roger Clemens makes his season debut and return to the Yankees on Saturday afternoon against Pittsburgh. Tonight it'll be Tom (6-3, 2.53ERA) vs. Andy Pettitte, a matchup of left-handers. The Yankees will settle for no less than a sweep and may need it to start threatening the Red Sox in the division race in the AL East.

Hot-Shot Debuts In Battle For Ohio: Indians @ Reds - Homer Bailey, considered by many to be the top pitching prospect in the Minors, makes his ML debut tonight for the Cincinnati Reds against the Cleveland Indians, the team atop the AL Central. Expected to make that big jump last year, the Tribe were disappointing and finished with a sub-.500 record. Now they are in position to go deeper into the season as a playoff contender, and maybe, just maybe, make some noise. Travis Hafner, Grady Sizemore, Victor Martinez and the rest of the Indians lineup will make life tough on the Reds this series as the possibility of Cincinnati being swept at home is a strong one.

Series I Could Care Less About: Devil Rays @ Marlins - Two teams in Florida that are absolutely... well... is there any other way to say it? Awful. Sure each has some good players like Dontrelle Willis, Dan Uggla and Miguel Cabrera for the Marlins; Scott Kazmir and B.J. Upton for the Devil Rays. But both are very limited in spending, winning (although it's definitely worth pointing out the Marlins have miraculously won two World Series in the last ten years) and get small crowds compared to the bigger market teams in the sport. Florida is 3-0 in IL play; Tampa comes in at 0-3.

HOT:

San Diego Padres - Now atop of the NL West, the Padres also have the best record on the Senior Circuit and are winners of five straight. Only the Indians and Angels have better home records in all of baseball than their 20-9 mark at Petco.

A's pitcher Dan Haren - Went 3-0 in the month of May and did a nice job in a no decision his last time out, pitching 7.2 innings, allowing only four hits and two runs while striking out nine vs. Boston. Haren currently has the lowest ERA for any starter in all of baseball at 1.70. He can punch his ticket to the All-Star game.

Devil Rays outfielder Carl Crawford - Few are more exciting – and hardly any – are as fast as Crawford is. Over the last seven days he's 11-for-27, including 3-for-5 on Thursday night, and has driven in eight runs. He's on pace to hit over .300 for a third straight season and over .280 for a fifth.

NOT:

New York Mets - Hot for most of the season with the NL's best record, the Mets no longer have the top winning percentage in their league off being swept at home by division rival Philadelphia. In two of the games they blew a lead.

Marlins catcher Miguel Olivo - Last year he quietly hit .263 with 16 homers and 58RBI in 127 games. Not too shabby, considering the season before he hit only .151. It looks like he's reverting back to 2005 form as he's mired in a 1-of-16 slump.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

There have been seven different five-run rallies this season, marking the most in Major League Baseball since 1900. It speaks volumes to the shape bullpens are in nowadays.

MILESTONE OF THE WEEK:

On Wednesday night against the Los Angeles Dodgers, San Diego's Trevor Hoffman recorded his 500th career save. Last season Hoffman passed Lee Smith for first place on the all-time saves list.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Roberto Clemente and Willie Mays share the record for the most Gold Gloves by an outfielder with 12. Al Kaline also has 10. Atlanta's Andruw Jones goes for his tenth this season. Currently, Jones is second among active outfielders in the category. Who's first?

Last Week's Answer: Dan Plesac (133), Rollie Fingers (97) and Bob Wickman and Mike Fetters (79 apiece)



Padres closer Trevor Hoffman picked up his 500th career save on Wednesday night – the most ever in Major League Baseball history. (Associated Press Photo)