

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, June 9th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

What have we learned through... oh... about 60 games of this 2006 Major League Baseball season? Well, for one, no division lead is safe. The largest belongs to the New York Mets, who sit just 4.5 games ahead of the Philadelphia Phillies and are the safest bet to win the NL East – snapping Atlanta’s run of 14 consecutive division titles. Like the Mets, current division leaders Cincinnati, Arizona, Detroit and Texas all failed to make the playoffs last year. How’d they do in 2004? Each had a sub-.500 record with the best belonging to the Rangers at 79-83. The Tigers were 71-91; Diamondbacks 77-85; Reds 73-89. The lone division leader at the moment that reached the playoffs last year? Who else – the New York Yankees, who are only 2.5 in front of third place Toronto. That gives us an indication of just what kind of race they may be for with both their arch nemesis the Red Sox and the Blue Jays.....

Jason Grimsley: Who???

A lot of you might be asking ‘who is this Jason Grimsley cat?’ Let me fill you in on his historic-ly... average... career. In 1985 he was selected by the Philadelphia Phillies in the 10th round of the baseball draft. After leaving the Phillies, he spent three seasons as a member of the Cleveland Indians then started 20 games for the California Angels. We’ll just say starting wasn’t his ‘cup of tea’ as he posted a career-worst 6.84ERA and it turned him into a reliever... for good... permanently we’re talking. In 1999 he re-surfaced again, this time with the World Champion New York Yankees. As far as his performance... sometimes lack there of... on the field, he will probably be best remembered for his 1999 World Series appearance in Gm. 3 vs. the Atlanta Braves. New York trailed in that game, but when Manager Joe Torre went to Grimsley, he was able to hold the fort up by pitching splendid [at least for a guy some of us haven’t even heard of]. Grimsley got two of his four career saves as a member of the Yankees.

From 2001-2004, Grimsley spent his playing days with the Kansas City Royals, a team that hasn’t sniffed the playoffs in years. His record was 10-21 there and midway through ’04 he joined the Baltimore Orioles. There he did decent work in middle relief, leading the Arizona Diamondbacks to go get him this year. Count ‘em: seven teams in a 15-year-career that hasn’t exactly amounted to a whole lot. Nevertheless, Grimsley made headlines this week for... you guessed it... that eight-letter word that has reared its ugly head in professional baseball. S-T-E-R-O-I-D-S.

On Tuesday, Grimsley’s home was searched by federal agents [‘the feds’] following the admission that he used not only steroids, but also human growth hormone (HGH) and amphetamines. A day later the D-Backs released and there’s a chance that was the final stop of his career. Of course, Grimsley, now 38, also has confessed in the past that he crawled through the bowels of Comiskey Park to replace the corked bate of then teammate Albert Belle. Asked to wear a wire in the Bonds probe, Grimsley refused

but reportedly has given approximately ten names of players he suspects have used steroids. It'll be very interesting to see the aftermath of those names he gave when that information later comes out.

Schmidt & Soriano: Two Names To Watch Before The Trading Deadline

Gary Sheffield's injury that'll require left wrist surgery and keep him out till September puts the Yankees in a dilemma. Now with two of their premier outfielder out - Hideki Matsui being the other one - do they stay put with the trio of Melky Cabrera, Johnny Damon and Bernie Williams? Or do they try and acquire somebody? That somebody could be Alfonso Soriano, a former second baseman with the Texas Rangers and Yanks that now is thriving in his new left field role for the Washington Nationals. For any team – not just the Yankees – he along with Philadelphia's Bobby Abreu could be the two best available outfielders around the trading deadline. Let's examine Soriano.

His numbers are staggering: he's knocked 30+ doubles in five straight seasons, stole 30+ bases in four of the last five seasons, scored 100+ runs in three of the last four years and is 15 homers shy of 200 for his career. Keep in mind the Dominican is only 30 years old and doesn't have the injury history of say someone like Ken Griffey Jr. His .310 batting average jumps to .338 with runners aboard and nobody has more homers in the last thirty days than Soriano (13). Don't rule him out to be a difference maker in a pennant chase if the Nats are willing to part ways with him, which they might given the right group of prospects in return.



San Francisco's Jason Schmidt, a 6-foot-5 right-hander, could be a hot name around the July 31st trading deadline. (AP/Ben Margot)

Giants pitcher Jason Schmidt had a big outing earlier this week when he fanned 16 batters and struck out the side in the ninth inning on Tuesday. The complete game performance was the third of the season for Schmidt, who had none in 29 starts a season ago. In fact, Schmidt (6-2 with a 2.53ERA) set a team record with his 16K performance, which doesn't reach legendary status, but hey, still is very good. I'd be willing to say the number of pitchers who have more K's in a game than that this year you can count on one hand. Schmidt has a 77-26K/BB ratio and a WHIP of 1.01 – both extremely good signs that he's back to his old form. So teams that could use a marquee starting pitcher

(Philadelphia, either New York team, the Angels, etc.) better be looking long and hard at the San Francisco hurler that is 6-0 over his last eight starts.

Notes:

*** The Cincinnati Reds have re-claimed first in the NL Central. Ken Griffey Jr. hit a huge walk-off three-run homer off Cardinals closer Jason Isringhausen on Monday night. On Wednesday night, the Reds using Todd Coffey as their new closer, Cincy completed a sweep of St. Louis on the road. It marked their 7th win a row and now the streak is at eight for a team that has gotten surprisingly good starting pitching and continue to get good play from Brandon Phillips, Felipe Lopez and Ryan Freel. With Milwaukee and Houston struggling, and the Cubs seemingly always dealing with some kind of problem (often times an injury), expect the Reds to hang around all year long.

And they are in first ahead of St. Louis because first baseman Albert Pujols went on the DL at the start of the week with a strained abdominal muscle. Pujols is out up to six weeks and the Cards will sorely miss his bat. It means guys like Yadier Molina, Juan Encarnacion and David Eckstein must pick up the slack around Jim Edmonds and Scott Rolen – the two All-Stars left in the order.

*** Jered Weaver is now 3-0 for the Angels, who are warming up in the frigid AL West. Why is it so frigid? Because nobody in that division, even the leader at the time - the Texas Rangers - look like a Championship contending team. Both the Angels and A's were supposed to be and may be, but they'll each need a hot summer to get there.

*** When it's all said and done in the AL East, the Baltimore Orioles and Tampa Bay Devil Rays will probably be fighting one another for 4th place in the division. Baltimore has lacked the pitching for quite awhile. Their star player is shortstop Miguel Tejada, though outfielder Corey Patterson – who the Cubs so badly wanted to get rid of – has done wonders for the O's. Patterson stole a base in his ninth consecutive game on Monday and that is the longest streak since Ricky Henderson's in 1986. His 26 stolen bags are tops in the majors – even better than the Mets' Jose Reyes, Tampa Bay's Carl Crawford and Scott Podsednik of the White Sox. Now that's moving fast!

HOT:

Mariners outfielder Ichiro Suzuki - Suddenly, the man who holds the Major League record for base hits (262) in a single season is near the top of the batting average race. Only Minnesota's Joe Mauer (.379BA) has a higher average than Ichiro's .362. In the month of June, the M's right fielder has 19 hits in seven games.

Mets starting right-hander Orlando Hernandez - Leaving the Diamondbacks may have been the best medicine for the 36-year-old Cuban. His ERA was at 7.04

after his third start of the season; now it's down to 4.05 following a complete game performance vs. his old Arizona team, where he allowed just three hits and a run.

Nationals left fielder Alfonso Soriano - That position change has really affected him, huh? Soriano is 10-for-22 with four blasts and eight runs driven in over the past seven days. Ranking second in the bigs in homers (23) Soriano may be closing the gap between him and Albert Pujols for NL MVP, and who would've thought that?

NOT:

Arizona Diamondbacks - How often do we see a first place team hold the longest current losing streak in Major League Baseball? Well, we're looking at one in these Diamondbacks, who lead the Dodgers by a game in the NL West despite dropping four straight. Arizona is an even 17-13 at home as well as on the road.

Red Sox second baseman Mark Loretta - Loretta is 2-for-18 since last week without an RBI. His .341 on-base percentage also is the lowest of his career since 1996, his second season as a member of the Milwaukee Brewers.

Astros outfielder Jason Lane - Only two hits in his last 26 at-bats for Lane. This year Lane, with a .190BA has fewer base knocks (32) than strikeouts (38). On a positive note, his defense has been solid as he's yet to commit an error.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Cincinnati's sweep earlier in the week at St. Louis marked their first there since 1998.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Who holds the Atlanta Braves team record for career extra-base hits?

Last Week's Answer: Babe Ruth retired as a player at the age 40.