

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 14th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

We're in the second half of the baseball season. The flurry of movement before Major League Baseball's July 31st trading deadline has already begun. Three significant series of signings/deals happened this week. Our thoughts on that, plus the All-Star game, a Barry Bonds update and more.....

Nationals & Reds Make 8-Player Swap:

An eight-player swap between Cincinnati and Washington on Thursday is due to impact the NL playoff race. One week after Cincinnati added steady Eddie Guardado, a one-time closer with Minnesota and Seattle, the Reds went looking for more help for their wobbly bullpen. In the deal, they brought in relief pitchers Ryan Majewski and Bill Bray alongside two minor leaguers, and shortstop Royce Clayton. Washington added outfielder Austin Kearns, shortstop Felipe Lopez (23SB) and reliever Ryan Wagner.

In total, the Nationals get three players who are all 26 years old or younger, giving them the flexibility now to make another deal. Alfonso Soriano and Jose Guillen are two names, both of whom occupy two-thirds of the team's outfield, that come right to mind. Kearns is the major component of this latest deal as he's batting .274 with 16 homers, 50 runs batted in and 21 doubles. What prompted such a move by Cincinnati? Their 1-8 record heading into the All-Star break. That said, the Reds (45-44 at the break) sat only four games back of St. Louis and this deal doesn't benefit them a whole lot in my opinion. It's not like they picked up Nats closer Chad Cordero, who I would've demanded to get if ridding myself the valuable bats of both Kearns and Lopez. How helpful will Royce Clayton be to the Reds on offense? Certainly less helpful than Kearns and Lopez were. The guy [Clayton we're talking about there] is batting less than .270, has yet to homer this season and has just 27RBI on the campaign.

Majewski should help the Reds bullpen, but was the deal worth it? Not in my book. You also have to wonder with the Nats will Kearns be on the move again? It's very possible a team like the Los Angeles Dodgers may tempt them with a couple of prospects so that they can bolster their own lineup. One thing I'm sure of: Jim Bowden and the D.C. club – they're not finished wheeling and dealing.



Outfielder Austin Kearns has a new home. (fanball).

Yankees Pick Up Ponson:

Sidney Ponson goes to the New York Yankees, more or less a move done to keep him away from the Boston Red Sox or other potential AL playoff threats. Clearly worried about the depth of its pitching staff, the Yanks did this move to make Ponson either their #4 or #5 starter behind Mike Mussina, Chien Ming-Wang and Randy Johnson. Shawn Chacon and Aaron Small have given them practically nothing, and although Ponson isn't exactly a stud hurler, he can help rest New York's bullpen. They obviously want closer Mariano Rivera well rested for the postseason if they make it, while Scott Proctor and Kyle Farnsworth have both thrown in 45 games. Both Small and Chacon, effective during last year's mid-season to stretch run, have ERA's over 6.50 and if the club can get something decent out of Jaret Wright, then they can maybe assemble a well enough five-man rotation to win yet another division title.

Astros Deal For Huff:

In exchange for a pair of minor leaguers, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays shipped off slugger Aubrey Huff to the Houston Astros. Huff, who last season smashed 22 balls out of the park, is capable of playing three or four different positions in the field. No matter where he lines up, he brings his bat to the park. Huff is batting .286 with 15 doubles and could very well thrive against National League pitching. It also shouldn't hurt him playing alongside Lance Berkman, Morgan Ensberg and Preston Wilson in this lineup: three players who all can go deep at any time. While some will say how deep Roger Clemens can go into his starts is the key the remainder of the way for Houston, it's just as important their offense doesn't go dry. From my viewpoint, he slightly increases their playoff hopes, particularly in the Wild Card category.

All-Star Game: AL's Dominance Over NL Continues

On Monday we got a glimpse of two of baseball's premiere young talents in the Home Run Derby with Philadelphia's Ryan Howard and Mets third baseman David Wright, who put on a show despite falling to Howard in the final round. Then on Tuesday we saw a surprisingly low scoring All-Star game in which the American League won... again. Houston Manager Phil Garner doesn't seem to manage the game with as much

importance on it as the imaginative Ozzie Guillen of the defending World Champion Chicago White Sox.

Example: why no Scott Rolen (St. Louis) in at third at the end instead of the hitting specialist, sometimes defensive liability without a true position, Miguel Cabrera? You've got to make the necessary subs and changes at the end of this game just like you would in a regular season game that impacts the standings/playoff race. This game now has meaning: the winner gets home field advantage in the World Series. Apparently Garner, often considered a nice guy/Mr. Softie, didn't get the memo [loud enough]. That might be why the Mets, Cardinals or even his Astros lose in the World Series to the AL because they have to play a possible Gm. 7 on the road instead of at home. Also, San Diego closer Trevor Hoffman gave up a single, double and triple all in succession to blow a save chance in the top of the ninth with two outs. That will make people think twice before voting Hoffman NL Cy Young in a down year for pitchers on the senior circuit. It reminded me quite a bit of Eric Gagne from the Los Angeles Dodgers when he gave up that home run to Texas third baseman Hank Blalock. This time it was Texas middle infielder Michael Young delivering the key hit and taking home MVP honors.

The AL is just dominating the NL in everything. In the World Series, the last two National League clubs to win it were the Arizona Diamondbacks (2001) and Florida Marlins (1997 and 2003). Think about that – in the last ten years they are the only two clubs to bring home a Championship. Meanwhile in the AL, the Yankees had their string of titles, the Angels won in 2002, the Boston Red Sox in 2004 and most recently the Chicago White Sox in 2005. In Interleague play, the AL has crushed the NL. Let's look at the numbers, shall we? The American League East is 55-35 vs. the NL and the AL Central has a 63-27 record against them. If it weren't for the AL West going an even 36-36, the NL would really be struggling. In total, the AL has gone 154-98 against the 'other' league. It used to be that the AL was that 'other' league. Now the 'senior circuit' is 56 games under in Interleague competition.

9-0-1 in the last ten All-Star games. That is the American League's record. Just when the NL had a chance to restore some confidence, put a little pizzazz and swagger into it, they let it slip away in the final innings. They'll get another chance in the World Series and right now that prime candidate is looking more and more like Willie Randolph's New York Mets.

Bonds Update:

Noticeably absent from mid-summer classic, San Francisco outfielder Barry Bonds may see jail time down the road if charged and convicted of perjury. This is really affecting a Giants team in a pennant race. All they ever hear about is Bonds. All they are ever asked about is Bonds. Someone recently asked me what I thought about Bonds and steroids? I told them I have mixed feelings on the whole issue. The guy has suffered quite a bit through the whole situation. Do I feel sorry for him? No. However, I do feel sad for the sport of baseball. It suffers because they can't properly pay respect and honor one

of their best players of all-time. I'll go on record now saying that it'll extremely surprise me if Bonds is playing in a Giants uniform for 2007!

HOT:

Angels leadoff man Chone Figgins - A versatile player that can play in the infield or outfield, Figgins leads the American League in stolen bases with 33. He brings that speed aspect to the table for them. His two errors in 53 games isn't bad either.

Minnesota pitchers - We know the dynamic duo of Johan Santana (ML-high 138K) and Francisco Liriano (10-2, ML-best 2.12ERA) fans batters of all kinds. The guy forgotten about is closer Joe Nathan, who is 5-0 with a 1.75ERA and extraordinary 52-5K/BB ratio. If Minnesota makes a playoff push, they'll thank their pitching.

Texas batters - The trio of Mark Teixeira, Brad Wilkerson and Mark DeRosa went 9-for-12 with 5HR's and 14RBI in their 15-1 blanking of Baltimore on Thursday. Texas' offense has scored 463 runs – 37 more than anyone else in the division.

NOT:

Red Sox catcher Jason Varitek - Missing from the All-Star game, Varitek is in a bit of a slump and has not had his usual season at the dish. Varitek is batting .236 and until Thursday's multi-hit game in a loss to Oakland, was 3-for-35 his last 35AB's.

Reds infielder Brandon Phillips - A 2nd round pick by the Montreal Expos in 1999, Phillips is hitless (0-for-13) in his past three games. He's 1-for-22 over the last five and last drove in a run on June 28th vs. Kansas City.

Pirates starting pitcher Kip Wells - On the season, Wells has made four starts (all made since June 20th), is 0-4 and holds an ERA of 12.42. He's got more walks (10) than strikeouts (7) and he could be on the trading block very soon.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Only four times since 1900 has a last place team in a division swept a first place team in that same division.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

When was the last time the team without home field advantage in the World Series won the Championship?

Last Week's Answer: Cleveland Indians