

**MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007**  
**BY MATTHEW HATFIELD**

**T**he Major League Baseball trading deadline is right around the corner. While waiver moves can still be made following July 31<sup>st</sup>, several contenders can better their chances for the postseason with a trade – whether it be bolstering the rotation, bullpen, lineup or bench. Next week we'll take a closer look at the possible moves that could be made, but for now... here is what's on deck.....

**Cubs, Cubs, Cubs – Here Come The Cubs:**

Don't look now Milwaukee Brewers and the rest of the National League, but here come the Chicago Cubs. Milwaukee's NL Central division lead has shrunk to under four games and the Cubs have bought in to what Manager Lou Piniella is all about – and by doing that it has put them in a prime playoff hunt. This is a Chicago team that struggled to start the season, where Sweet Lou voiced his displeasure after a couple of press conferences and had a tirade; pitcher Carlos Zambrano got into it with former catcher Michael Barrett; and none of the major off-season moves that the team made were paying off through the first two months of the season. They even went ten straight games without a home run recently, marking the team's longest homer-less drought since 1988.

Jacque Jones' production is way down from last year when he hit 27 home runs, and Derrek Lee has hardly hit for any power at all. Of course, pitchers Mark Prior and Kerry Wood haven't factored into the equation this season either. Alfonso Soriano's slow start also hurt him from being selected as a starter for the All-Star game. Still, they're starting to turn the corner Monday night's win over the San Francisco Giants was a good indication of just that as they rallied from a 3-2 deficit in the eighth inning. Usually the Cubs are the team letting the opponent make a comeback, as was the case on April 13 when they blew a 5-0 lead to the Cincinnati Reds going into the fifth inning, or the time when the bullpen gave up nine runs over two innings against Philadelphia and blew a lead in an 11-7 loss that concluded a three-game losing streak. Five times over the final 14 games of May, the Cubs either scored one run or none. Since the start of June it has happened only twice and they're averaging almost five runs per game.

Not long after Piniella had his trade/ejection, the Cubs took off and went from well under .500 to another mini win streak away from being more than ten games over .500. Soriano got hot (.336BA, 11HR, 18RBI during June), Zambrano pitched vastly better too and Ted Lilly is showing he's worth the money the team paid him over the winter to bring him in from Toronto. Others that have contributed include third baseman Aramis Ramirez, an always steady force at the plate with 16 home runs – tied for the most on the team with Soriano. Ramirez could very well finish the season with less than 10 errors, which would be a first for him in a full season. Ryan Theriot has mostly split time between second baseman and shortstop and done well, stealing 15 bases and halfway to

150 hits on the season. Then you have the acquisition of Jason Kendall and arrival on the scene of relief pitcher Carlos Marmol.

On Monday Chicago acquired a good, veteran offensive catcher they needed when they got rid of Barrett. Kendall brings them a solid bat and catcher who excelled for years in the NL with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He handles pitchers extremely well, and while saying that his power is limited would be an understatement, few catchers in recent history have had the uncanny ability to throw out base stealers as well as steal a handful over the course of a season.

Despite being hit with his first loss of the season on Tuesday against San Francisco, Marmol now appears to be one of the most reliable relievers in the National League. His sinker pitch might be the best the sport has to offer, plus he's got nine times as many strikeouts (45) as runs allowed (5).

Nobody in the NL has clearly asserted themselves as the team to beat to reach the World Series, so the Cubbies may be one strong bat away – say someone in the mold of Ken Griffey Jr. or Mark Teixeira – from easing the pain they suffered back in 2003 when Florida prevented them from winning the pennant.



**With the recent injury to pitcher Ben Sheets (shown above) and the Cubs closing in on Milwaukee, the Brewers might have to make a move before the trading deadline for another pitcher.** (Photo Courtesy of Gene J. Puskar/Associated Press)

### **Bonds Continues Chase; Giants Not In One:**

Barry Bonds blasted a pair of home runs on Thursday afternoon against the Cubs, recording the 71<sup>st</sup> multi-homer game of his career. By also doing so, he inched another step closer to 'Hammering Hank' – Henry Aaron. Bonds, with 753 career homers, is two away from tying Aaron. Prior to July 19<sup>th</sup>, he was mired in a horrible slump where he hit .107, drove in only four and hit only one dinger on the month.

Regardless of what Bonds says, he would like no better than to tie the record in Milwaukee, the same place that Commissioner Bud Selig hails from and where Aaron spent the first 12 and final two seasons of his illustrious baseball career. Then he can go

home to San Francisco and the friendly confines of Pac-Bell Park, smack #756 in McCovey Cove and be celebrated. Truth be told, the Giants just want to get on with it, get it over with and play baseball without this looming over their heads.

Think about it, the Giants as a franchise haven't been to the postseason since 2003 when they won 100 games and were eliminated by Florida (*those Marlins seem to give a lot of people heartache, don't they? Cubs, Giants, Indians, Yankees, et.*) in the first round of the National League playoffs. Even though this San Francisco team has a lot of age on it, they should be better than the worst team in the NL. Okay, I'll admit it was a foolish pick on my part to predict them to win the NL West. But come on? Barry Zito got mega bucks to headline a rotation that made up for the loss of Jason Schmidt to rival Los Angeles with youngsters Tim Lincecum, Noah Lowry, Matt Cain and veteran Matt Morris. San Fran rid themselves of Armando Benitez, and soon Bonds will either go elsewhere too or retire. Several other veterans could be on the trading block.

And how about Manager Bruce Bochy? He guided the San Diego Padres to a World Series appearance in 1998 before being swept by the New York Yankees, survived some tough years there, got the Pads to the playoffs in each of the past two seasons and decided to leave for what he thought was a better situation. Bet he wishes he was back in San Diego because not only are the Padres well within reach of a third consecutive postseason trip, but a potential candidate to represent the NL in the World Series.

As for the Giants, well, don't look for them there anytime soon.

#### **News & Notes:**

\*\*\* Want to know who has quietly been a major part of the Brewers' success offensively speaking? Ryan Braun. Many baseball fans probably haven't even heard of him yet, and yet the rookie has a .339 batting average, 14 home runs and 38RBI since his call-up in late May. He leads all rookies in batting average and homers. Amazingly, those are better numbers than the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez since Braun was promoted to the Majors. The NL Rookie of the Year award appears to be coming down to him and Hunter Pence of the Houston Astros. Braun attended the same High School as John Elway.

\*\*\* Minnesota just put Michael Cuddyer on the disabled list and that's not good news for an offense that absolutely needs him in the lineup. His production is indispensable, and without him, the Twins could fall further behind Detroit and Cleveland as we approach the trading deadline. At that point, don't be surprised to see Minnesota considering moving somebody, possibly Torii Hunter.

\*\*\* Who leads the National League in hitting? Believe it or not, it's Dmitri Young, as he sports an NL-best .341 batting average, which if he's able to keep it above .310 it will turn out to be a career-high as well. Young hasn't hit over .300 since 2001 when he was in Cincinnati. Though it will be tough for him to get the fourth 20+ home run season of his career, he's given the Washington Nationals a lot more than they

bargained for considering he played only 48 games and hit .250 last season with the Detroit Tigers. A lot of people, myself included, figured the Nats were a lock to finish with the worst record in the NL, but if they don't then credit him for keeping them from that dubious distinction. Injury prone in the past, Young has played for four different clubs. This year the buyers have nothing to beware of as he's healthy and performing.

\*\*\* You decide: more interesting – ESPN's new show on the 1970's Yankees about Billy Martin, George Steinbrenner and Reggie Jackson entitled 'The Bronx Is Burning' or the Philadelphia Phillies losing their 10,000<sup>th</sup> game all-time? I'll take the Phillies. Just like the Cubs, America gravitates towards a lovable loser. No one in pro sports has done that better than the Phillies.

### **HOT:**

**Detroit Tigers - Jim Leyland's ball club has won four in a row, including 11 of 14 in July. Detroit now also holds the best record in Major League Baseball, having overtaken the Cleveland Indians in the AL Central for the time being.**

**Yankees OF Hideki Matsui - On a 14-game hitting streak, Matsui has been a key part of the Yanks' recent hot streak that has them slowly creeping back up on some teams in the AL Wild Card race.**

**Cubs reliever Carlos Marmol - Marmol picked up his sixth hold of the season on Thursday and has a 1.35ERA. His emergence in the Chicago bullpen has given plenty of Cubs fans optimism and hope that they have someone to turn to in the late innings that can hold, and possibly down the road, develop into a money closer.**

**Braves OF Andruw Jones - Struggling for the first few months of the season, Jones has snapped out of it lately by going 8-for-26 with three homers and 10RBI in the last week.**

### **NOT:**

**Giants infielder Rich Aurilia - A Brooklyn native, Aurilia is in a bad funk and in jeopardy of hitting under .240 for the first time in his career since 1996. After hitting a home run on July 4<sup>th</sup>, Aurilia is 4-for-27 over the past nine games.**

**Yankees OF/DH Johnny Damon - He's 9-for-57 without a single home run in the month of July. Damon is now more of a defensive liability than he probably ever was a strength, so when he's not hitting he becomes far less useful.**

### **TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:**

**Who is the only multiple time winner of the Home Run Derby?**

*Last Week's Answer: Royce Clayton, Leo Cardenas, Greg Vaughn and Roger Maris*