

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 21st, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Blistering hot! It has been just that throughout the entire country as we're right in the thick of the dog days of summer baseball. We're also approaching the trading deadline, which will be our prime focus in next week's *Baseball Weekly*. As for now, try to cool off with a new Top Ten and this.....

Hillenbrand Out Of Toronto:

Few teams get rid of a perennial .300 hitter, especially when they are in a tight playoff race. However, the Toronto Blue Jays are one team that has, cutting loose corner infielder/DH Shea Hillenbrand. By placing him on assignment, GM J.P. Ricciardi and company have ten days to either trade him, release him or send him straight down to the minor league level. Trading him makes the most sense in my opinion because you're able to get something in return rather than putting him – a cancer in the clubhouse at this point – down in the minor league level or releasing him (*what good does that do? Nothing back in return*). So what went wrong?

It all started earlier this week when Hillenbrand claimed Manager John Gibbons challenged him to a fight. How come? Hillenbrand reportedly wrote on a clubhouse bulletin board, “play for yourself,” as well as “ship sinking.” A former member of the Arizona Diamondbacks and Boston Red Sox, Hillenbrand adopted a baby girl over the weekend on the west coast and was upset that he was out of the starting lineup when he returned. Sounds like this was something Hillenbrand could've done over the All-Star break or off-season. At the very least, he should've requested permission for time off from the team for a few days. Not the case.

Gibbons doesn't deny that he challenged him to a fight, saying “he had a chance yesterday to defend himself in front of his coaches and teammates.” Now the most important questions: where does Hillenbrand land and where do the Jays go from here? Well, Toronto apparently put it behind them on Thursday night, rallying from an early deficit against Mike Mussina and the Yankees to take the lead and win in extra innings on a Vernon Wells walk-off homer. What made that game rare was the fact both closers – B.J. Ryan for Toronto and Mariano Rivera of New York – gave up runs late in this game. That seldom ever happens. If Toronto had a little more pitching I'd feel much better about their Wild Card hopes. Or having a healthy A.J. Burnett and Gustavo Chacin would do the trick. How they do head-to-head vs. the Yankees and Red Sox [note: they have 19 games remaining vs. them, including one on Friday] will tell the tale. And in my opinion, they should stay with them the entire way, probably finishing a few games short.

One of the prime teams that should be interested in Hillenbrand include the Angels, who are chasing the A's hard for that AL West title. The Angels are interested in a number of players – a couple of which were believed to be Orioles shortstop Miguel

Tejada and Nationals outfielder Alfonso Soriano. That being said, I see Hillenbrand ending up in a National League uniform – maybe the Dodgers or Padres have room for him. Toronto is expressing light interest in Devil Rays middle infielder Julio Lugo so maybe they can work out a deal.

Wild, Wild West:

Baseball's National League West division just continues to get stranger by the second. Three of the teams, none of which lead the division currently, sit three games within the NL Wild Card. You can take that one of a couple of ways – mainly that the NL isn't as strong as it has been in years past. Precisely.

Right now the Padres are at the top, but as was the case last year, haven't seized total control by any means. Manager Bruce Bochy needed to get rid of Phil Nevin last year, and while they don't have anyone they want to give up, they do want a third baseman desperately to complete that infield. The guy they want? Boston's Mike Lowell. Problem there is Lowell has been a key part to the Red Sox league-best fielding. Adrian Gonzalez at first, Josh Barfield at second and shortstop Khalil Greene all have given them positive stuff; even catcher Mike Piazza (14HR) too. Not the case for Brian Giles, who has hit only six home runs all season long; this for a guy who hit 35+ in four straight seasons with the Pittsburgh Pirates. They're hoping he turns it around. Pitching wise they're fine, although we can't say if an arm for the rotation becomes available they will ignore a possible deal.



In addition to share the team lead in homers with 16, versatile Giants third baseman Pedro Feliz has 103 base hits and 65RBI to counter his 69 strikeouts – more than double anyone else on the team. He's the x-factor for San Fran. (Photo Courtesy of Rick Scuterri of US Presswire)

San Francisco, which will be home to the 2007 All-Star Game, doesn't appear that they are going to give up Jason Schmidt or the division crown just yet. From an overall talent perspective, it's easy to believe the Giants should make the playoffs. Having that said, they have a combination that can prove disastrous down the stretch: old players in the lineup; young pitching. Defensively, they lack a bunch of athletes and the speed on the

base pads isn't really there either, considering they have the third lowest stolen base total in the National League.

Arizona is home to the guy who I feel is going to win the NL Cy Young award hands down – barring a total collapse. On Thursday night, pitcher Brandon Webb showed once again why he is the favorite and best candidate for the honor, going eight strong innings and maintaining a spot in the Top 5 in the Majors for starters' ERA. He got off a few jams with four double play balls and continues to throw the best sinker pitch in the sport. His breaking ball gets hitters out and for the second straight year, Webb will likely finish with less than 60 walks issued. With the way he is pitching now (117/25K/BB ratio) - he might not get to 50. As far as the D-Backs go, they are like the Braves in that they need pitching, any kind of pitching. Rookie outfielder Carlos Quentin made his Major League debut last night and since he hit a home run, it makes us further wonder whether the team will deal Shawn Green or Luis Gonzalez to get younger.

Home: San Francisco (27-23) & LA (28-18) with winning records
Road: Arizona (24-22) & San Diego (25-17) with winning records

Like the Padres need Giles to step up, the slumping Rockies need a strong month of August from first baseman Todd Helton. Batting .291 with 11 homers and 47 RBI, Helton is capable of much more. This is a guy who had six consecutive seasons of 30+ homers and has five 100+RBI years before the age of 33. He's now a guy that is hitting well under .200 when behind in the count 0-and-2. A team Helton has a batting average of less than .200 against this season is the LA Dodgers, who are plummeting as well off series losses to the Cardinals and Diamondbacks on the road. At times it seems Nomar Garciaparra is the lone legit hitter in their batting order. LA's pitching, which sent Brad Penny to the All-Star game where he started, is slowing down a little. That said, they should be fine there. For LA to make the playoffs, they are going to have to see a dramatic improvement in their offense. For that to happen, one, maybe two more, bats will be required in my opinion.

Braves & Angels: Two Teams To Watch This Second Half

They've both got postseason experience. They've both won a World Series in the last 11 years. They've both also got well respected Managers: Mike Scioscia for the Halos and Bobby Cox for Atlanta. Both of those guys lost one of their bench coaches: Joe Maddon leaving Anaheim for Tampa Bay; Leo Mazzone departing as the Braves' pitching coach to take the same job in Baltimore. Lastly, both of these teams are 8-2 in their last ten games and have pitchers with postseason experience (John Lackey, Bartolo Colon and young closer Francisco Rodriguez for the Angels; John Smoltz and Tim Hudson for the Braves).

If they can ever solve their defensive problems (*who thought we'd be saying THAT about the Angels*) then they should give Oakland a fight till the end of the season since the A's offense doesn't quite match theirs. On offense, they know they'll get production out

of Vlad Guerrero and Chone Figgins, who has 37 stolen bases currently. Anaheim might be willing to trade second baseman Adam Kennedy, a rumor that has been going around for quite a few weeks now. In the rotation, the Angels are banking on youngsters Ervin Santana, who is 11-3, and Jered Weaver (6-0, 1.12ERA). Speaking of Weaver, Jered's brother Jeff, who was sent from the Angels to the Cardinals, got lit up by Atlanta's red hot offense earlier in the week. Atlanta went 6-21 in June, a franchise worst. The team's batting average was a not-even mediocre .244. Chipper isn't the only guy swinging a hot bat either. They are getting it from all over as the team scored 38 runs last weekend in a sweep of San Diego at Petco Park. Former Braves pitcher Greg Maddux has a wealth of postseason pitching experience. Would he be willing to come back to Atlanta?

The similarities and possibilities are endless...

TOP TEN: HATFIELD SPORTS RANKINGS

- 1. Detroit** - Jim Leyland has the best group of pitchers in all of baseball and Craig Monroe's grand slam vs. the White Sox earlier in the week may have been a big step towards winning the division as well as earning home field advantage throughout.
- 2. NY Yankees** - Suffered a setback this week when it was announced that Octavio Dotel is on the shelf for the year. Probably ditto for starter Carl Pavano too. That said, the Yankees will look for bullpen help, get it and postseason baseball will feature them.
- 3. Boston** - With SP Tim Wakefield going to the DL, are the Red Sox in trouble? Their pitching seems to be a bit as Josh Beckett is giving up home run left and right, though Curt Schilling earned win #12 on the season Thursday night. Plus, Boston has the league's best defense so that aspect won't prevent them from going deep into October.
- 4. Chicago White Sox** - Don't look now Chicago, the Twins are closer to you than you are the Tigers. Ozzie Guillen's team needs a setup man and Philadelphia's Tom Gordon or Jose Valverde from the Diamondbacks might do the trick.
- 5. Oakland** - Now is the time for the A's (who won three of four in Boston off the All-Star break) to flex their muscles, going to Detroit to play a Tigers team with the best record in the sport. Oakland took two of three from them a couple weeks back.
- 6. NY Mets** - What you don't like about the Mets for the postseason is they will not have played a meaningless game in what seems forever. While they do have some veterans who can overcome that, they are young and who knows what they'll get from Pedro.
- 7. Minnesota** - There's not a better team in all of Major League Baseball at home than the Twins. Manager Ron Gardnehire couldn't be more thrilled with his team's 37-11 mark in their building. Now management has to make that subtle move to show the players they feel they can contend for a playoff spot. It'll be good encouragement, trust me.

8. St. Louis - We thought the Cardinals were crumbling then all of the sudden they re-extend their division lead again. No one is real sure whether or not the Cardinals are going to be players here before the trading deadline. One thing is certain: Albert Pujols isn't going anywhere.

9. Toronto - What surprises me a little bit about the Blue Jays is their success in one-run games. They are 10-3 – better than anyone else in their division or the league for that matter.

10. LA Angels of Anaheim - It was either them or the division leader in the NL West. That makes me wonder... would the Angels win that division? I'll take Guerrero over Bonds and that pitching staff... so the answer is yes.

HOT:

Braves catcher Brian McCann - Selected to the All-Star game in just his second season in the big leagues, McCann has found his stroke, coming up with at least one hit in 14 of his last 16 games. He's already got 20RBI this month. Equally hot is teammate Chipper Jones, who's riding a 19-game hitting streak.

Angels pitcher John Lackey - Until Wednesday's loss to the Indians, Lackey had not allowed a run in 24.2 innings for the month of July, had won his previous four starts and was a key reason why the Angels have climbed back in the AL West race.

Giants outfielder Barry Bonds - Wait a minute... when there's even the slightest of chances you could be going to prison, how are you 'hot'??? Easy. Even though the ongoing federal investigation against him will continue, Bonds wasn't indicted this week as some thought he would be and he hit a homer in Thursday's 9-3 win.

NOT:

Brewers catcher Damian Miller - Miller began the month with four multi-hit performances in his first five games. Since then he's gone 0-for-15. Miller last hit a homer on June 2nd and has driven in 16 runs after driving in 12 during April alone.

Colorado Rockies - With a 1-9 record over the last ten games, the Rockies have gone from four games over .500 to four games under .500. Thankfully for Colorado, they begin a ten-game home stand starting on Monday vs. St. Louis.

Chicago White Sox - Now all the newspapers across the country have to print the Wild Card standings, where the Twins, Yankees and Blue Jays are all within six games of them.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Chipper Jones' streak of 14 consecutive games with an extra base tied a Major League record. Someone hasn't had an extra base hit streak that long in 79 years when Pittsburgh's Paul Waner set the record. Rogers Hornsby and Tip O'Neill also went 13 straight games with an extra base hit.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

On Sunday, Yankees closer Mariano Rivera picked up his 400th career save, becoming only the fourth player all-time to do so. Can you name the other three?

Last Week's Answer: 2003 Florida Marlins