

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 27th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

We're quickly approaching the 2007 Major League Baseball trading deadline, and as we near it, I think now is a good time to breakdown some possible moves, team needs and what could transpire between now and the deadline. Let's start with a move that happened earlier this week involving a pair of NL playoff contending clubs.....

Brewers Instantly Better With Addition Of Reliever:

Scott Linebrink was traded by San Diego to Milwaukee on Wednesday in exchange for three minor league players. This is a highly underrated, great move for the Brewers if they can get the type of effective Linebrink we saw the past couple years in San Diego. As recent as two years ago, Linebrink was an absolutely dominant middle reliever in an era where there really aren't any. He went 8-1 in 73.2 innings pitched with an ERA of 1.83 while batters hit only .209 off of him. Over 75+ innings last season, Linebrink went 7-4, again struck out 45 or more batters than he walked and had an ERA of 3.57.

Twice in his last three outings, Linebrink blew a save opportunity for the Padres, so given their great bullpen and proven veteran closer – Trevor Hoffman – they were able to part ways with him. After all, on August 4th, he will turn 31 years old and he's probably seen his best baseball. That being said, what kind of message does it send to a Padres team competing for a playoff spot and third straight division title? Linebrink has struggled some on the road this season, given up as many home runs this year as he did all of last year and is a free agent following the '07 campaign.

But for Milwaukee, this has the potential to be a steal and season-saving move as it could give them enough 'umph' to hold off the fast-charging Chicago Cubs in the NL Central. That's because with him and Derrick Turnbow bridging the gap in the seventh as well as eight inning before getting to closer Francisco Cordero in the ninth, Milwaukee solidifies its pen.

Trade Talk:

Here are the top storylines in my opinion approaching the deadline...

Topic #1 - What will the Boston Red Sox, the team with the sport's best record, do? You have to imagine they will do something. At 62-40 and 7.5 games ahead of the Yankees, they are in good position to make the postseason. But they know full well to get to the World Series it won't be easy as they found out in 2004 when they had to rally from a 3-0 deficit to the Yanks in the ALCS. Boston has had its eye on Texas first baseman Mark Teixeira, which would make their offense significantly better if you ask me. It gives them more flexibility with their infield – particularly using guys like Kevin Youkilis and Mike Lowell – and Teixeira can't be walked with guys like Manny Ramirez and David

Ortiz likely hitting in front of him. Getting him would be huge. They already have a very good bullpen and maybe the best in the sport. That said, if Boston added some like Houston's Brad Lidge, it gives them a great 7-8-9 inning trio alongside Jonathan Papelbon. I think the more reasonable and applicable move is bringing in Teixeira and I give them about a 30% chance of landing him as the other two teams neck-and-neck with Boston in the running are Atlanta and the Angels for his services.

Topic #2 - Do the New York Mets get Roy Oswalt as predicted by this site before the season? Unfortunately, no. Since last year I've been calling for the Mets to land Oswalt, but recently I've had a change of heart on it happening. Maybe I became a more rational person overnight, I don't know. Fact is he has a pretty good contract with the Astros and you don't get rid of a potential Hall-of-Fame starting pitcher. Houston's finding out they have enough problems in their rotation with Jason Jennings yet to pan out like they had hoped, having lost both Andy Pettitte and Roger Clemens to New York over the winter/spring, and Craig Biggio expected to retire following the season. Plus, do the Astros want to lose another big piece to their puzzle to the Mets? Carlos Beltran left following a huge postseason in 2004 with the club and has been a household name in the Big Apple. They don't want similar results for Oswalt – including a Cy Young or World Series ring down the road – donning another uniform.

So who do the Mets get? Ronnie Belliard seems like a good fit to fill out their infield at second base, and worst case, be a utility guy used much the same as Jose Valentin or Chris Woodward in the past. As is the case for several teams, the Mets are trying to find another piece for their bullpen to setup Billy Wagner in the ninth. In case Pedro Martinez doesn't return and at close to 100% for the postseason, they would definitely like to have Mark Buehrle from the White Sox there to support a starting staff with a couple aging vets (Tom Glavine and Orlando Hernandez) and unproven youngsters (John Maine). That's about 50/50 that it happens at best. One thing I feel safe about predicting is that Omar Minaya will not let the trade deadline pass without making a move.

Topic #3 - Are the Rangers this year's Pittsburgh Pirates (a.k.a. sellers)? Yes. Teixeira is bound to be moved, whether it's to the Yankees (longshot), Angels or Braves. The Dodgers and Red Sox also have shown interest in Teixeira, and he'd particularly be a big help to an LA team that fired its hitting coach – Eddie Murray – earlier in the season. Atlanta in the NL could be the front-runner to bring him in, and after bolstering their bullpen in the off-season and having fine starting pitching for the most part, they will covet another quality bat. Mike Scioscia's Angels need a power hitter; one more to hit with Vlad Guerrero back-to-back equals missing ingredient. The club actually went three weeks without producing a home run. It may require them giving up Casey Kotchman to acquire Teixeira. Paul Konerko with the White Sox is another name that's been mentioned as has veteran Reggie Sanders from Kansas City.

Word has it Sammy Sosa will either be released or traded very soon. Sosa (15HR, 69RBI) surely can give someone a little extra pop in their lineup, whether it be as a DH or even coming off the bench. Whoever picks him up – just don't use him in the field where he is a liability at times. Texas surprisingly is coming off of a four-game series sweep of the Seattle Mariners. Kenny Lofton is someone else that the club wouldn't mind parting ways with and the valuable yet aging veteran could return to Cleveland where he spent nine seasons of his career. Lofton has a batting average above .300 with the Rangers and has swiped 21 bases, so he'd be a welcomed addition and a guy that would team well with the Indians' up and coming, budding All-Star leadoff man – Grady Sizemore.

Topic #4 - Will a team like the Yankees look to add a few players from teams clearly out of the playoff race? Sure. New York always has the most and best resources to pull off trades and make a big splash signing. Believe it or not, I don't think the Yankees will make a ton of noise before the deadline though. A few weeks ago, some actually thought they might get rid of players and be 'sellers'. Trust me, the Yanks aren't going to be sellers as long as George Steinbrenner is the owner of that team and has oxygen in his body. Another right side of the infield piece and eighth inning pitcher – unless they call up promising youngster Joba Chamberlain (combined 6-2 with A Tampa and AA Trenton; great K/BB ratio too) – are what they're targeting. Eric Gagne of Texas and Lidge in Houston are the two relievers with the most successful history saving games as closers. Both would fit in as the eighth inning to setup Mariano Rivera and be definite upgrades over the likes of Luis Vizcaino and Kyle Farnsworth.

The Washington Nationals are another team who could ship out three or four players. Washington has gotten some pretty good pitching performances as of late and it would be wise of them to hold onto closer Chad Cordero, an All-Star and one of the NL's save leaders just a couple short seasons ago. Also in the AL West, the Oakland A's are starting to slip and it doesn't seem like Mike Piazza will make it past this year still on that team. The Yankees may have interest for him in a DH role and occasionally catching to spell Jorge Posada. Detroit probably doesn't need him as a DH and the A's are unlikely to move him to a team within their division (for example the Angels), so the Yanks have a shot to get him if they want him. Oakland will lure Nick Swisher and Joe Kennedy, too. Kennedy could be a fifth starter someone plugs in their rotation or be an early reliever used in the sixth inning, while it's not far fetched Swisher quietly becomes a difference maker for someone in the NL.

AL Central clubs Kansas City and Chicago have players on the market. Sanders of the Royals, and Konerko and Buehrle from the White Sox have been mentioned earlier. KC also will dangle out their reliever Octavio Dotel, a possible pickup for the Yanks, and infielder Mark Grudzielanek. Jermaine Dye was superb swinging the bat last year and is beginning to hit better for the White Sox after a slow start. San Diego has some interest in him and desperately need another bat to get to the postseason. From Tampa Bay, Ty Wigginton can be used at first base, second, third or in a DH role if needed. Both the Yankees and Padres might consider him.

Dotel and Piazza have NY roots and are the likeliest guys that could be had. That, of course, is provided Brian Cashman and co. are willing to give up the right prospect or two.

Topic #5 - Has Ken Griffey Jr. seen his final days in Cincinnati? I'd say there's a 60% chance he will get moved before the deadline. Atlanta is a potential spot for him as he could be comfortable there, train in Orlando not far from there, and have an opportunity for a playoff run – something he won't get in Cincinnati anytime soon. With Chipper Jones (.344) leading the NL in batting average and Andruw Jones able to play center while Griffey holds down one of the other two outfield spots, it stabilizes their lineup. Another Cincinnati player, pitcher Bronson Arroyo, would be a steal for someone if he gets traded. He can be used as a key starter down the stretch and for a playoff team hold down either a starting or relief role adequately.

Lou Piniella has injected energy and life into the Cubs lately as they are alive going into August with playoff aspirations for the first time since 2004. They've not only got to make a counter move to what the Brewers did by bringing in Linebrink, but also better those postseason and World Series chances. They must seize this opportunity and if they somehow could get Griffey or a Swisher, it would show the team how eager the front office is to win now.

Topic #6 - Does someone in the NL West make a major move? Major move, doubtful. Little, subtle – probably a good chance. San Francisco is hoping to get rid of some older veterans that don't figure into their future plans. They include names such as Dave Roberts, Matt Morris, Ryan Klesko and Randy Winn – all of whom have some kind of value. Roberts can be used as a pinch runner, a fill-in bat that does decent defensively in the field. Morris is capable of being a #3 or #4 starter for some team in the postseason. Klesko is nothing more than a pinch hit power hitter that's a gamble, but maybe pays off with a few homers down the stretch. Winn might have the best opportunity of being an everyday starting player of the four.

Currently, the Dodgers sit atop the division. Brad Penny, the team's ace pitcher, recently became the first Dodgers player to start 13-1 since 1966 and is perfect in NL play. Until they Randy Wolf, who hasn't made a start since July 3rd, back they will Javier Vazquez and Jose Contreras from the White aren't terrible options. Having that said, getting another bat is their top priority. As much as the Dodgers want another hitter, the Padres need one twice as bad. Swisher and Dye have been rumored. Dye not only brings power, but with the Padres' pitching – in spite of losing Linebrink – he'll have a shot to win games with one swing of the bat.

Will the Diamondbacks stand pat at the deadline? They're warming up there in the desert and figure to be a player in the both the division and Wild Card race until the very

end. Some, myself included, thought this young bunch would be a year away from serious contending in the NL, but as often is the case in sports, youngsters can peek early. They've got some veteran starting pitching, another arm in the bullpen to complement closer Jose Valverde (who's pitching great) certainly wouldn't hurt and a veteran hitter to solidify their offense is something that could decide whether they go to the playoffs this year or not. Reggie Sanders was on the D-Backs team that won the 2001 World Series and bringing him back might be an option as well as someone like Dmitri Young from Washington.

Colorado is still in the hunt and could surprise people and stay there heading into September. First baseman Todd Helton ranks as the Rockies' all-time leader in career games played, hits, home runs, RBI, runs scored and on-base percentage. It would be absolutely foolish now to part ways with him as they have a decent shot of making a push to finish above .500. However, don't look for the Rockies to be active in the period before the deadline as they are probably a year away from threatening for the playoffs to the point where they can rent a high-priced bat or arm for a few months.



Are Bobby Cox and the Atlanta Braves on the verge of acquiring Mark Teixeira from the Texas Rangers?
(Photo Courtesy of Mike Zarilli/WireImage.com)

Cooperstown Here We Come:

This weekend Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn will be inducted into the Baseball Hall-of-Fame. Both withstood the test of time during their playing days and had exceptional careers, handling themselves with class and dignity the entire time as well. In an era in sports where there are a lot of bad apples and steroid suspicion among other things, these two were individuals to look up to as true role models. Few ever have said anything bad about either Gwynn or Ripken. What impresses me most is that each spent their entire career playing for one team. With the trading deadline upon us, it's a tribute to both that they stayed on one team without complaining or bickering and not winning a World Series. Something to keep in mind when they are enshrined on Sunday.....

HOT:

Arizona Diamondbacks - My thinking was that the D-Backs were about to hit a slide and fall out of the NL West and Wild Card race. Instead, just when it looked like Arizona was slipping they have won six in a row, capped by Eric Byrnes' three-run walk-off homer Thursday, to get with 1½ games of the Dodgers in their division.

White Sox SP Javier Vazquez - Could he be on the market? Vazquez is somewhat well traveled, having pitched in Montreal, Arizona and with the Yankees prior to his stop in Chicago. Over his past eight starts, Vazquez is 5-0 and tossed back-to-back complete games at the start of July.

Giants SP Tim Lincecum - Over his last six starts, the young San Francisco hurler is 4-0 with a 1.34ERA. Lincecum is one of the bright spots for the future for a Giants franchise that may/may not have Barry Bonds following this season.

NOT:

Minnesota Twins - By being swept by Toronto, the Twins really had their playoff hopes damaged. Toronto scored more runs in one inning than Minnesota did the entire series. This team's offense just isn't good enough to put together a deep postseason run and their lack of spending is catching up with them now.

Reds outfielder Ken Griffey Jr. - Though he's having a very productive season with 25 home runs, was in a bit of slump before going yard in Thursday's win over Milwaukee. Prior to that game, he was just 2-for-26 in the previous six.

Pittsburgh Pirates - As a group, the Pirates have fallen to the bottom of the NL Central with 11 losses over their past 14 games. Only the Tampa Bay Devil Rays have a worse record in all of Major League Baseball at the moment.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

After starting the season 5-0, Brewers pitcher Chris Capuano has not fared too well since as Milwaukee is winless in his last 11 starts.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Alex Rodriguez recently recorded his tenth consecutive 100+RBI season. Only three players in Major League Baseball history have more – can you name them?

Last Week's Answer: Ken Griffey Jr.