

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 28th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

The 2006 Major League Baseball trading deadline will have come and gone by the time Monday is over. All the 'hottest' and 'latest' trading rumors/news with my thoughts and analysis are here....

Slumping White Sox? Defending Champs At The Center Of Trade Discussions

Once far ahead of everyone else in the Wild Card standings, the Chicago White Sox have slipped – all the way out of the playoffs for now. Chicago goes into their weekend series at Baltimore having lost 12 of their last 15 games. You have to go all the way back to four-home series with the Orioles early in the month to find consecutive wins by this club. The starting pitching is simply faltering a bit. It did this last season too, except the only difference was they were playing in front of everyone else in the AL Central with a big lead. That team with the cushion now is Detroit.

Off to riveting starts last year, pitchers Jon Garland and Mark Buehrle put it on cruise control down the stretch. Garland went 3-7 from August until the end of the regular season, while Buehrle went 6-7 from July until the season's conclusion. Now Buehrle has as many losses as wins, Freddy Garcia and Javier Vazquez may soon be able to say the same thing, and the only starter with an ERA under 4.70 is Jose Contreras, who has lost his last three starts after starting the season an incredible 9-0. Minnesota has gone from breathing down their throats to sweeping them on Wednesday night to even them in the standings at 59-41.

Why is everyone hating on the White Sox you ask? They play .500 ball the remainder of the way and they'll win 90 games. Thing is this year, in a jam-packed American League, 90W's might not get you into the postseason. GM Kenny Williams loves to make a big splash; likewise for GM's in Oakland (Billy Beane) and Washington (Jim Bowden, former GM of the Reds). The name that would be a major splash: Alfonso Soriano. Involved in the trade that sent Alex Rodriguez from Texas to New York, Soriano belted home run #32 on the season in the Nationals' win over the San Francisco Giants on Thursday. My key questions if you get him are where do you play him (infield or outfield?) and what do you have to give up? If I'm Washington I do not do a deal unless Brandon McCarthy comes in return. In spite of his offensive prowess, Soriano is a flawed fielder to say the least. His bat would come in handy for any team, sure, I won't deny that thinking. But Chicago is in more need of acquiring a reliever, preferably one who can pitch in the 8th inning before closer Bobby Jenks.

Detroit goes to the flame-throwing Joel Zumaya before giving Todd Jones the ball in the ninth; Minnesota has Juan Rincon setting up Joe Nathan. Even the A's and Angels, battling it out in the AL West, have solid bullpen pieces for the most part. They recently added Mike McDougal from Kansas City. If he turns out to be the answer then they will

have saved a lot. The guy they should try to go after is Tom Gordon from Philadelphia. Give the Phillies McCarthy, a starter they can build with for the future, and maybe another mid-level prospect or two. Even though he had his struggles often with the Yankees vs. the Red Sox, Gordon is a tested vet who would be an upgrade over what they have now.

So if not Soriano, what about Carlos Lee from Milwaukee? Remember, before they got Scott Podsednik (29SB, but having his problems defensively) in a trade with Milwaukee, they had Lee and Frank Thomas and were a power team that struggled. It was that identity change, going from blast ball to 'small ball' [or as Ozzie said "smart ball"], that hurt them. In short, Chicago **still leads the Major Leagues in home runs with 153** and could use other things before bringing in another destructive stick for their lineup.

Soriano The Missing Piece In Minnesota?

At the rate they're going, there is no piece missing. Minnesota was 25-33 on June 7th. Since then they have gone a ridiculous **34-8** entering Thursday night's tilt with the division-leading Tigers. Everyone is marveling at the 1-2 lefty combination of former AL Cy Young winner Johan Santana and Francisco Liriano – on pace to win one himself some day. And we're all impressed by them for good reason. Together, the duo is 24-7 with a strikeout-to-walk ratio of, get this, **283-57!** Brad Radke, who not long ago declared this will be his final season, and Carlos Silva (always keeping the walk total extremely low) are more than decent starters to have in the #3 and #4 holes. Reliever Juan Rincon ranks third in the AL in holds and has an ERA of 1.95. Since the start of '05, Rincon – with a record of 3-0 – has allowed only three home runs in 122 games. Unlike some closers [see Jorge Julio and Armando Benitez], he doesn't give up that bomb late in the game that'll bite you. And speaking of closers, Joe Nathan quietly has saved 21 of 22 games, is 6-0 with a 1.47ERA, and has a 63-6K/BB ratio, yet unfairly gets recognized less than Toronto's B.J. Ryan, Boston's Jonathan Papelbon and the Yankees' Mariano Rivera.

Offensively, Minnesota doesn't really scare you. Yes, they have a closer named Joe Mauer leading the Majors in batting average at .375. Justin Morneau kind of gets lost in the shuffle, batting .313 with 27 dingers and 84RBI. Other than those two, who else is having a real monster year? Soriano brings instant offense to a team that has great pitching – probably second only to Detroit in all of baseball – and immediately increase their postseason chances. In my opinion, that type of addition could very well catapult them into the playoffs. Because of their low budget payroll history, it would seem the Twins don't acquire him. What they will need then is a bat they can bring off their bench and be valuable during the months of August and September in late inning situations.

Mariners Make Minor Move:

The Seattle Mariners acquired first baseman/outfielder Ben Broussard from Cleveland. It's a minor move that the M's are hoping will boost the team's morale, boost their spirits and get them believing they can stay in this AL West hunt till the very end. Will it? Probably not. Seattle's pitching is too fragile, both in the rotation and the

bullpen. And compared to other lineups in the American League, theirs is not as reliable on an every-day basis.



Outfielder Bobby

Abreu's next stop may be in New York.

Trade Deadline Predictions.... Most Sure To Go Wrong:

Prediction #1: Mets & Yankees will add pitching and may make multiple deals – Could we have another Subway Series six years after the last one? It's not out of the realm of possibility. Mets GM Omar Minaya and Yankees GM Brian Cashman aren't ready to sit still and let the trade deadline go by without doing something. On the flip side, a major move (i.e. Yanks getting Soriano, Abreu or Zito; Mets getting Zito, Abreu or Wills) doesn't add up completely. Minaya and co. have to make a decision, do we keep Mike Pelfrey or the surging John Maine? With Pedro Martinez, Tom Glavine and Orlando Hernandez probably taking up the other three spots in the rotation for a postseason series, the fourth will come down to one of those two, unless they get a significant starter. The guy the Mets should be going after isn't Barry Zito, nor Dontrelle Wills. It's Carlos Zambrano. Question remains would Chicago be crazy enough to let him go? Doubtful. When things are finished, it won't surprise me at all to see them end up having Washington innings eater Livan Hernandez, Orlando's half brother.

As far as the Yankees go, farm prospect Phillip Hughes isn't going anywhere, or so we think. Their checklist goes like this: bullpen help, outfield, fifth starter. That top of the rotation featuring Mike Mussina, Randy Johnson and Chien Ming-Wang doesn't look so bad after all. Even though the Yankees are expecting Hideki Matsui and Gary Sheffield to re-join center fielder Johnny Damon in the outfield before the season's completion, they can't rule out getting a force like Bobby Abreu. There has to be some kind of deal the Yanks can package [say Melky Cabrera and a minor league?]. If you ask me 48-72 hours before the trading deadline Abreu's most likely destination, I'd say New York, playing for the Yankees and former Manager now bench coach Larry Bowa.

Prediction #2: Cardinals should acquire a Phillies outfielder, likely Burrell – As Mike Francesa of WFAN in New York put it, Burrell looks like a Cardinal. He'd be

an ideal fit to play beside Jim Edmonds and would bring more power as well as less whining as the last high-profile outfielder they got from Philadelphia, J.D. Drew. Abreu is the better overall talent and could land there too, but I lean with Burrell in a St. Louis uniform by the time Monday's deadline hits.

Prediction #3: Angels will get either Tejada or Soriano – Miguel Tejada is done at shortstop and recently ESPN's Tim Kurkjian noted a move to third base would be good for him. His range is shot. However, the bat isn't. A return to Oakland for Tejada seems highly unlikely, but when it is all said and done, I expect the Angels to come out of the trading deadline with either him or Soriano.

Prediction #4: Pirates will be deadline sellers – Pittsburgh has plenty of pitching to offer teams. In the rotation, any one of their starters – such as Oliver Perez, Zach Duke and Kip Wells – could be gone. Duke I would hold on to since I like his potential. In the bullpen they have three arms – in addition to so-so arms Ryan Vogelsong and Damaso Marte – being 'rumored' about deals. They are Roberto Hernandez, Salomon Torres, and lefty closer Mike Gonzalez (**16 of 16 in saves**). Gonzalez is the one I'd recommend they hang onto because, like Duke, he still has room to grow. On offense nobody is safe, except outfielder Jason Bay. Expect either Sean Casey or Jeromy Burnitz to be gone after Monday; possibly both.

Prediction #5: Arizona trades an outfielder for pitching – Hopefully it isn't Luis Gonzalez, a fan favorite for years and best remembered for his game-winning RBI single off Yankees closer Mariano Rivera in Gm. 7 of the 2001 World Series. Problem is long-established veterans Gonzalez and Shawn Green could be on their way out the door playing in a crowded Diamondbacks outfield that also includes young hotshot Carlos Quentin, who on Tuesday hit his third homer of the season. Arizona wants to go to a 'youth movement' after winning a World Championship five years ago with strictly vets. They have youngster Stephen Drew at shortstop, are getting Relievers aren't easy to come by so if one isn't available, deal some kind of offensive piece and a prospect for another starting pitcher who could factor into a possible playoff run. Roberto Hernandez from the Pirates is probably the best relief option out there and the Giants are also reportedly expressing interest in him with Benitez blowing his sixth save of the season earlier in the week. It's unlikely to get a Linebrink of Ray King from Colorado since those are guys within the division; deals like those seldom happen.

Other Notes:

..... That being said [deals within the division don't normally happen], look for Toronto to make a serious play for Tampa Bay's Julio Lugo. From a defensive standpoint, it's safe to the Blue Jays have missed Orlando Hudson, a Gold Glove second baseman when he was in Toronto. Shortstop Russ Adams is batting just .226 and he and Aaron Hill have combined for about 26 errors in middle of that infield. Lugo isn't a major run producer, though hits a sound .300 and shouldn't hurt them any more defensively.

..... The Rangers welcomed back Adam Eaton Tuesday to their starting staff. Eaton was acquired from San Diego during the course of the off-season. Texas, in wake of a rough week for Manager Buck Showalter and the Rangers in general off some bad results vs. the Yankees, can't win this division without bolstering its bullpen. What makes sense? How about dealing one of their bats to Houston, a team wanting offense, for one of their relievers? Just don't expect Brad Lidge to be on the move.

..... San Diego is aching for a third baseman. There are a lot out there they'd like to have. For example, David Wright (Mets), Scott Rolen (Cardinals), Troy Glaus (Blue Jays), Eric Chavez (A's) and even the often criticized, never seemingly glorified Alex Rodriguez from the Yankees. The Padres recently released Vinny Castilla, indicating just how fed up they are with the play at the position. Boston's Mike Lowell is the guy they're targeting, but would the Red Sox be willing to give up someone who is a key reason why they lead the American League in fielding? Also, if so, at what price? Ryan Klesko could be on the market. Manager Bruce Bochy has to be thinking his team is one legit third baseman away, with better finishes from pitcher Jake Peavy and outfielder Brian Giles, from getting to the postseason a second straight year – and this time getting a win.

..... Through Wednesday, Padres reliever Scott Linebrink led the NL in holds with 21 and several teams, such as the Yankees to name one, have inquired about him. Linebrink has made a name for himself as one of the few dependable middle relievers in the game. Question is can he continue it on in the AL? He's a much safer get in the NL, where the lineups aren't as strong from top to bottom and fail to feature a DH. Atlanta is still probably pondering the idea of sending the versatile Wilson Betemit to a San Diego team in desperate need of third base help in exchange for Linebrink. An experienced back-end of the bullpen consisting of Linebrink and the recently acquired Bob Wickman would be a lot better than what they had, which is why they've blown an NL-high 20 saves. By adding another quality pitcher or two, the Braves would also be a Wild Card contender.

HOT:

Yankees reliever Scott Proctor - Eighth in the AL in holds, Proctor has been smoking people since the All-Star break. Until Wednesday's blown save vs. Texas, he had hone nine straight innings over seven games without allowing a single run to score. Of his 60 strikeouts on the season, one-third have come in July alone.

Padres hitters Mike Cameron and Mike Piazza - The Mike's and former members of the New York Mets are doing quite well as of late in their new home. Entering Thursday, Piazza has 20 hits in his last 14 games and 15 homers on the season. Cameron (17SB), also with 15 homers, has 25 hits over the past 18 games.

Phillies second baseman Chase Utley - The All-Star extended his hitting streak to 27 games in Thursday's 5-2 win over Arizona. Double play partner Jimmy Rollins brought a 36-game hitting streak into this season and saw it end at 38 in April.

NOT:

Los Angeles Dodgers - They lost their eighth game in a row on Wednesday, appearing to be a team at a crossroads right now. At 47-55, the Dodgers have sunk to the bottom of their division and 4.5 games behind the 2nd place team, Arizona.

White Sox lefty Mark Buehrle - Entering the month of July, Buehrle was 9-4 with a 3.22ERA. This month he's 0-5, allowing no fewer than five runs in any start and giving up eight home runs. Buehrle's ERA for the month checks in at 11.48.

Cardinals shortstop David Eckstein - Short stuff is what they should call him. The 5-foot-7 Eckstein is 3-for-28 in his last six games leading up to Thursday. Fortunately for him, the Cardinals are 5-1 as a team in the last six.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Boston Red Sox outfielder Manny Ramirez has now hit 25+home runs in 12 straight seasons. Only Barry Bonds, Babe Ruth and Willie Mays have gone more consecutive years hitting a minimum of 25 homers.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Over the last two years, which Major League starting pitcher has allowed two runs or less in 33 of his last 39 starts? Hint - this particular individual has a record of 15-12 in those starts.

Last Week's Answer: Lee Smith, Trevor Hoffman & John Franco