

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 6th, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

MIDSEASON REPORT:

National League East:

New York Mets: No Pedro Martinez, no problem. Without Pedro for any of the first half of the baseball season, the 'Amazins have kept on trucking regardless and sit atop the NL East for a second straight year. And they'll probably finish up there. From top to bottom, their lineup is filled with solid, All-Star caliber players, yet they're fourth in their division in the run department. Still, the young shortstop and third base combo of Jose Reyes and David Wright not only will be fun to watch in New York for many years, but it's one of the top left side of the infields in all of baseball. Reyes is the best speed merchant in the sport, leading the bigs again with 43 stolen bases while also ranking up there in hits (106), runs scored (60) and triples (9). The Carlos' – Beltran and Delgado – are two perennial stars they can't get going consistently this year. Guys like John Maine, with team-highs in victories (10) and strikeouts (93); Jorge Sosa and Oliver Perez have stepped up to assist veteran lefty Tom Glavine in the rotation. Closer Billy Wagner has rebounded well from a rough finish to last year as he's got a microscopic ERA of 1.69 and 16-17 on saves to keep together a bullpen that's had some tough middle relief performances from Scott Schoeneweis and Aaron Heilman. All in all, despite some skidding in early June that saw lose six straight series' to begin the month, the Mets are right there and will be in the World Series hunt – especially if they can acquire Roy Oswalt before the trading deadline.

Atlanta Braves: So the streak of 14 consecutive division titles got snapped last year. Big deal. The Braves are back and competitive once more, staying within striking distance of the NL Wild Card and divisional race. Manager Bobby Cox, who earlier this season set the record for all-time ejections, is pleased to know that his team has a better record against division opponents than anyone else in the NL East. What he's not pleased about was how they performed during Interleague play – dropping 11 of 15 and sometimes coming in putrid fashion (such as being shutout a combined five times by the Twins, Red Sox and Tigers). When the Braves have had Chipper Jones in their lineup and hitting well, they've done well. It's really that simple; he still in many ways is the offensive pulse of the team. Since his public spat with veteran pitcher and future Hall-of-Famer John Smoltz, things have kind of cooled off, except Smoltz is out for the All-Star Game with shoulder discomfort and won't be back until July 18th. Another Jones – Andruw – doesn't seem to be hitting as well. He's yet to find his groove at all with an awful batting average of .199; this for a guy that has connected on 92 home runs over the past two seasons. At this time a season ago, the Braves' bullpen had blown 18 saves, tied for the most in the bigs with Kansas City and Texas. Right now they have only seven, and it's a good thing considering how much they invested during the off-season to improve the bullpen. That simply is the difference in this team a year later.

Philadelphia Phillies: After beginning the season 3-10, Philadelphia finds itself very much alive and in the mix for a playoff berth, something they haven't had since 1993. One of the positives the Phillies take out of the first half of this baseball season would be the fact that Cole Hamels has developed into the franchise's face of the rotation for years to come. Hamels leads all NL pitchers with ten victories. Sooner or later though, he's going to need support from a mediocre, undependable that uses three different guys – Antonio Alfonseca, Brett Myers and Tom Gordon – as its closer. That trio is 17-23 on save opportunities. Also, their other four starting pitchers all have ERA's of 4.25 or higher. Philly's fielding can be very spotty at times, their pitching other than Hamels certainly is suspect (as shown when they gave up 17 runs to the KC Royals on a Sunday in early June) and this team is not balanced; their strength hitting wise comes on the left-side of the plate. Sure, they've got three super strong hitters in first baseman Ryan Howard, second baseman Chase Utley (32HR last year) and shortstop Jimmy Rollins. Thanks to them and a few select others, they're on pace to lead the league in runs scored. But if things keep going the way they are – up and down like a roller coasting with the pitching – then they will be sitting at home when the postseason arrives... and Charlie Manuel more than likely won't be the Manager when the 2008 campaign begins.

Florida Marlins: Southpaw and ace Dontrelle Willis made the following statement in the middle of May. "We're just not showing up." Quite honestly, that doesn't have the feel of a team about to embark and exciting, fun in the sun summer and conclude their journey with a special October to remember. That's just me, though. Incredibly enough, an organization that spends very little money at all through free-agency during the offseason, with a pitifully low attendance too, has won two World Series titles in the past ten years. How's that sitting with the Chicago Cubs? Anyhow, don't look for another when the 2007 campaign is over. Florida's in a major funk and now realizing they should've never let Joe Girardi, who got a young bunch to greatly overachieve last season, go. Miguel Cabrera continues to put up monster numbers -- .321 batting average, 17 homers, 58RBI and over 100 hits. Same goes for Dan Uggla in the doubles (32) department as well as Hanley Ramirez in the stolen bases (25) and hits (108) categories. Problem is they don't have enough to surround those three offensively and likewise for Willis on the mound. Florida has too many free-swingers and the numbers indicate that as they not only lead Major League Baseball in strikeouts with 715, but the next closest team sits about 50 behind them. Fielding wise, the Marlins aren't much better, also leading the sport in another category that don't make fans proud – errors (71).

Washington Nationals: You know, I've got to admit, for a team that I penciled in about five real, legit Major League players on their roster at the beginning of the season, the Nationals are not playing that horrible. At least not as bad as I imagined them playing... of course that doesn't really temper things when you're almost 20 games below .500 and may be by the time the All-Star break gets here. Only one player – third baseman Ryan Zimmerman – has double-digit home runs at this time, and even he got off to a slow start. Just one guy – Felipe Lopez (11SB) – has double-figure stolen bases, and he's not getting on base nearly enough with a batting average below .240. And finally, of their four starting pitchers with double-digit starts, not one has more wins than losses. The

closest guy is Micah Bowie, who's 4-3 with a 4.39ERA in eight starts; he and Shawn Hill are going to have to lead them in the rotation in the second half. Although closer Chad Cordero has pitched at an All-Star quality level, the rest of the bullpen for the Nats rates out at average or below. The 15 saves the team has blown are the most in the NL East and second worst in all of baseball.

National League Central:

Milwaukee Brewers: Aside from the Yankees' early season struggles, the surprise of the baseball season to this point is Milwaukee. Ned Yost is the front-runner in a lot of people's minds for the Manager of the Year award and rightfully so as this team has transformed itself from a bunch of misfits to a cohesive group with a promising young infield and pitching that matches pretty much anyone in the league. Prince Fielder tops the charts in the NL in home runs and he's at first base. As far as the pitching goes, Jeff Suppan was the solid pickup they wanted him to be; Chris Capuano is a steady #2 starter and Ben Sheets is doing his part. A finally healthy and effective Sheets has been one of the key differences without question. Their bullpen is doing a much better job for the most part, too. Cordero (27/30 Saves), Fielder and J.J. Hardy were three other All-Star selections for Milwaukee in addition to Sheets, the longest tenure Brewer other than Geoff Jenkins. This team is still pretty spotty defensively, as shown in Monday's loss to Pittsburgh when they committed a season-high four errors. The Brewers are also the only first place team in the sport with a losing record on the road (18-24 away from Miller Park). In other words, there are things to correct and work on... but they're correctable.

Chicago Cubs: Don't look now, but the Chicago Cubs are hanging around in the NL Central. Early on it was not pretty as Manager Lou Piniella had a couple blow-ups. Since that point though, Chicago – even without once highly thought of young pitching commodities Mark Prior and Kerry Wood – finds itself in great position to make a postseason run. Their top two acquisitions from the off-season, Alfonso Soriano and pitcher Ted Lilly, have done well. Soriano got off to a quiet start then really heated up with the warmer weather in June. The rest of the batting order has to very solid hitters in Aramis Ramirez and Derrek Lee, both corner infielders, to support him. As far as the pitching goes, Carlos Zambrano had a spat with former catcher Michael Barrett. Barrett got shipped to San Diego and Zambrano remains a workhorse at the front of the rotation. Interestingly enough, the Cubs have done better away from Wrigley (20-21 at home; 23-20 on road) than there, which is unusual. But Piniella's bunch is getting hot at just the right time and closing in on the Brewers. They're still my pick to win the NL Central when it's all said and done. However, if they do get to the postseason, their bullpen might be too big of a concern for them to advance as evidenced by the fact they're 1-6 in extra inning affairs. Not to mention, they've blown their fair share of leads already this year.

St. Louis Cardinals: Tony La Russa's ball club really got off to a dreadful start. Things only worsened with the death of relief pitcher Josh Hancock. Injuries haven't helped either. Few reigning World Series Champion squads go into the All-Star break with a sub-.500 record. Predicted to win the NL Central, the Cards haven't sniffed the

division lead. So in many ways, the Red Birds have been trying to tread water for the first part of the season. It's really surprising for this team though, given their recent stranglehold on the division. Albert Pujols has had four straight seasons of 40 homers or more, but that streak may come to an end in 2007. Third baseman Scott Rolen and center fielder Jim Edmonds have long performed at an All-Star level, but both are hitting under .270 with only 11 home runs combined. Base running isn't a specialty for this club. La Russa's Cardinals are dead last in stolen bases with 24, so when guys do get on it's tough for them to make a rally because they lack the necessary base stealers to be real aggressive. Where the Cards are hurting most is in the rotation as nobody on the starting staff holds an ERA under 4.50, plus ace Chris Carpenter has only one start. Kip Wells (3-11, 5.92ERA) and Anthony Reyes (0-10, 6.40ERA) have pitched awful. While closer Jason Iiringhausen is pitching much better and consistently than he did a year ago, and Troy Pecival appears to be turning out to be a nice pickup, the middle relief can't be counted on that often. All things considered, they are still in the thick of things if they can put together a nice hot streak towards the end of July and beginning of August. My guess is – and the numbers point to it – that a strong finish will be unlikely for St. Louis.

Pittsburgh Pirates: Jim Tracy came to Pittsburgh, a town once rich in baseball tradition and success with names like Willie Stargell and Roberto Clemente, hoping to end a long standing playoff drought. In fact, their streak of 14 seasons without a winning record is the longest drought in baseball shared with the Brewers. Thus far it's been more than a work in progress; it's root canal painful. The Pirates had the look early of a possible sleeper in a division that's up for grabs, wide open if you will. In order to win the division or sneak in, they were going to need an ordinary lineup to be extraordinary and produce more runs than we've been accustomed to seeing them manufacture. Home runs don't just sell tickets; they often times can win games. Right now every other team in the NL Central has more homers than the Pirates. Offensively speaking, Jason Bay, Xavier Nady and Adam LaRoche need to do more with the bat. With Zach Duke having a down year up to this point, starters Tom Gorzelanny (9-4, 3.10ERA) and Ian Snell (7-5, 2.93ERA, 93K) have carried the Pirates well from the mound. Though somewhat steady over the past few seasons, reliever Solomon Torres is not dependable out of the bullpen and has six blown saves in 18 tries with an ERA of 5.14. Pittsburgh can hang its hat on a strong second half from a year ago when they went 37-35 over their final 72 games and posted a 15-4 mark in one-run games.

Houston Astros: The Astros have gone from having the NL's elite pitching staff and reaching the World Series in 2005, to boasting just one truly reliable pitcher – and he's probably going to be on the trading block in time. Roy Oswalt would be a great missing piece for a contending team, but if the Astros are to give him up they better get some quality prospects in return to help begin the re-building process for the future. While the team isn't making a major playoff push at least yet, Carlos Lee is doing his part for them to be a contender. Lee should either lead the league in RBI or be right near the top of that category when the season is done. Hunter Pence qualifies for the most pleasantly surprising hitter in the division for the first half as he's got a batting average over .340 and should end up with anywhere between 30-40 doubles. Houston paid high

dollars for Jason Jennings, formerly of Colorado, to be one of their top starting pitchers to replace Andy Pettitte and Roger Clemens. They've been rewarded with only one win from Jennings heading into the break. In the bullpen, things have been up and down and reliever Brad Lidge (0/3 on saves) never fully recovered from his playoff implosion a couple years ago. Dan Wheeler hasn't quite adjusted to his new role as closer. Houston can't seem to finish off games a lot of times; they've blown an NL-Central high 15 saves. A matter of fact, that's more blown saves than actual saves (14) for Phil Garner's Astros. Speaking of Garner, the magic number may be 90. Ninety losses and he'll be out as skipper in my opinion.

Cincinnati Reds: Hard times. The Reds have clearly been down on hard times. Cincy fired its Manager and it'll have an effect because now they will be moving some players. It was Pittsburgh the last few years; now it the Reds' turn. Two of their very best hitters, Adam Dunn and Ken Griffey Jr., are going to be on the trading block. Dunn (23HR) and Griffey (22HR) together have pounded out 45 home runs. A healthy Griffey, who has the most homers in the NL since May if you don't count Prince Fielder, can't even fix the Reds' woes, proving even further that when he was hurt for a few years he wasn't their only problem. Brandon Phillips also has rather quietly given them 16 dingers. Hitting isn't the team's main problem, though. Other than a complete game shutout courtesy of Kyle Lohse on May 28 – and he's 4-10 with a 4.45ERA going into tonight – the starting pitching has struggled mightily. Ace Aaron Harang is the exception so far as he's 9-2 with a 3.67ERA and ranks near the top of the bigs in strikeouts with 112. Through six starts, Homer Bailey has more walks than K's and an ERA of almost 7.00. The young phenom pitcher has taken his lumps the last couple outings, a la the promising Tim Lincecum of the Giants. And then the Reds have been reluctant to hand the ball to their relief pitching. Or should we say what relief pitching? It's non-existent.

National League West:

San Diego Padres: Could it be three straight playoff trips for the Padres? Aside from their 1998 World Series appearance, this franchise is not used to the type of success they've been having the past couple of years. San Diego is the only team in the bigs with two starters that have ERA's under 2.20. Jake Peavy of course happens to be one of them; he has been well known for quite a while now and appears to be one of the leading contenders for the Cy Young award. But Chris Young might be the game's most under appreciated quality pitcher. A 6-foot-10 Princeton graduate, Young has height and intelligence going for him as well as an 8-3 record with a 2.00ERA and 99 strikeouts in 103.2 innings. Bud Black, a former pitching coach with the Angels under Mike Scioscia, couldn't be happier with the way his hurlers have performed. Only the Padres have yet to give up 300 runs on the season and it might stay that way heading into the All-Star break. In the bullpen they are mighty fine as long as all-time saves leader Trevor Hoffman is there in the ninth inning to shut the door tight. Pitching undoubtedly is the bread and butter of the Padres. But they've also gotten some timely hitting, too, most notably from Adrian Gonzalez (14HR, 52RBI, 23 doubles), Mike Cameron (10HR, 39RBI, 21 doubles) and Khalil Greene (14HR, 48RBI, 21 doubles). While all three have over 20 doubles apiece,

what's a major concern for the Padres is the fact that **nobody on the team with a minimum of 20 at-bats holds a batting average above .270! Must find a slugger!**

Los Angeles Dodgers: All signs point to the Dodgers having a solid second half and making the playoffs for a second year in a row as long as they stay healthy. That to me was the main concern heading into the 2007 campaign for Grady Little and crew. There's a little bit of age/injury history on the squad with guys like Nomar Garciaparra, Jeff Kent, Luis Gonzalez (.294BA, 10HR, 41RBI), Mike Lieberthal and Jason Schmidt, who's made just six starts with win to show for it so far. However, the mixture with some youth makes for decent chemistry. The Dodgers are 18-9 games decided by one run – best in the NL. Juan Pierre has turned out to be everything they had hoped for, providing speed at the top of the order with 33 stolen bases (2nd most in the NL and Majors). They're even getting some surprising stolen base numbers from All-Star starting catcher Russell Martin, who far and away leads all players at that position in bags swiped with 16. Brady Penny started last year's All-Star game then hit rock bottom after that during the second half. Penny has rebounded well and returned to form, putting himself in the running for the Cy Young award. Randy Wolf, another former NL East pitcher, had a great month of May to complement Penny. In the bullpen, Takashi Saito certainly is turning into one of the elite closers in baseball and that's good news since they've been yearning for one ever since Eric Gagne got hurt and left for Texas.

Arizona Diamondbacks: Some thought the D-Backs were a year away from seriously contending for a division crown. Instead, they held the best record in the NL at one point during the first half and sit in good shape – despite a rough last week or so – in the NL West hunt and Wild Card chase. Any time you have Brandon Webb, the league's reigning Cy Young winner, as the ace of your pitching staff, it's a plus. Right now the disappointment for Arizona to cope with is the struggles of Doug Davis recently, a guy they got from Milwaukee that already has 10 losses and experiencing major control problems that have contributed to him walking batters left and right (59BB). Orlando Hernandez has been touched up for quite a few home runs (16), too. The bullpen was much maligned the past few seasons, and even lacked a decent closer when they won the World Series back in 2001. Jose Valverde has been a lights out closer, saving 26 of his 29 chances and pitching much better than anticipated going into the season. Overall offensively, there are some guys like Carlos Quentin, Stephen Drew and Chris Snyder who could raise their batting average a few points. Eric Byrnes and Orlando Hudson are two players keeping them afloat with the bat. Hudson (.297BA, 19 doubles, 46RBI), easily the most underrated second baseman in baseball in spite of his All-Star selection, is great flashing the leather as well. Byrnes might be the most complete player left off the NL All-Star team. He's got a .367 batting average to go with 109 hits, 13 homers and 15 stolen bases. Arizona also got a lift from Mark Reynolds when Chad Tracy went down to injury. They've been relatively injury free as a team, with the exception of Randy Johnson. It's no real surprise the aging Big Unit, who is doing pretty well with a 4-3 record, 3.81ERA and 72-13K/BB ratio in 10 appearances,

Colorado Rockies: Anyone able to get a real pulse on the Rockies? Sometimes they're good and convince you that they can compete with anyone; and sometimes they're not and remind you how much Coors Field hurts their pitching. Colorado recently became the first team in Major League history to sweep both the Yankees and Mets in the same season. Clint Hurdle's ball club outscored the Yankees 13-5 in Coors, using great pitching to slow down the American League's highest paid – and usually most productive – offense. They then figured out a way to dominate the other NY team. It resulted in the Rockies hitting .409 and outscoring the Mets 34-12. Now if only they can avoid the moments sandwiched in between those sweeps, such as when they lost eight in a row and nine of ten on road trips to Toronto, Houston and Wrigley Field in Chicago. Colorado's blown 18 saves are more than anyone else in baseball. How do they make up for it? With good performances from guys like outfielder Matt Holiday, that's how. Holiday's numbers have been terrific as perhaps the game's best opposite field hitter has a .352 batting average, 14 home runs and 68 RBI. Not to mention he's cranked out 30 doubles. Garrett Atkins is starting to get things turned around following his slow start. Brad Hawpe and Todd Helton, a former All-Star game fixture, also add pop to the lineup. In the pitching department, Jeff Francis (8-5, 3.87 ERA, 80K) is hoping to get more help from fellow starters Aaron Cook and Josh Fogg as well as relievers Brian Fuentes (20/26 saves), LaTroy Hawkins and Jorge Julio. This team has the look of what they are now – a .500 ball club, so I'd expect nothing more or nothing less than about 77-82 wins on the button.

San Francisco Giants: For a club that went out and spent a boatload of money to ink Barry Zito to a seven-year contract and still is committed to another Barry – named Bonds – the Giants haven't fared too well in the first half of the season. And while they have a first-year Manager, though an experienced one in Bruce Bochy formerly of the Padres, to be in last place in this division is really inexcusable in my opinion. San Fran's starting staff of Zito, young up and comers Matt Cain and Tim Lincecum, veteran Matt Morris and Noah Lowry matches anyone in the NL West. The Giants are tied for the ML-lead in complete games thrown by their starting pitchers with five. A little misleading? No, the rotation is good, but it's been mostly out of necessity due to Bochy's little confidence in a bullpen that would make even the bold and daring squirm during an eighth-inning, one-run game situation. Armando Benitez is now out of their hair and the team begins its search for the closer of the future if it can find one. Besides the shaky relief pitching, the biggest problem is that this team has quite a bit of age... and not just with Bonds. Omar Vizquez, while still a top-notch fielder, is no spring chicken. Some of the other prominent names in their batting order include Randy Winn, Bengie Molina, Ray Durham, Ryan Klesko, Pedro Feliz, Rich Aurilia, Dave Roberts and Edgardo Alfonzo. All are over the age of 30 – and Bonds is over 40.

American League East:

Boston Red Sox: Fenway faithful couldn't have envisioned a much better start. Not only are the Red Sox comfortably in front of the Yankees and everyone else in the American League East, but they also have put behind last year's rough finish and should

definitely make the postseason barring a major collapse. Instead of doing it with a dangerous lineup that's potent from top to bottom, Boston is winning more because of pitching. As a team, the Red Sox have blown only three saves. Their bullpen with Jonathan Papelbon at the back and setup man Hideki Okajima (ERA under 0.90) in the eighth matches any combination in all of baseball. Josh Beckett is pitching like a real ace in the rotation and Daisuke Matsuzaka is halfway home to a 20-win rookie campaign. Knuckleball pitcher Tim Wakefield will quietly threaten for 15 victories or more again, while Curt Schilling remains a gamer, big-game pitcher and someone you want to take the mound in the postseason. Despite a season statline for Schilling (6-4, 4.20ERA, 71-19K/BB ratio) that's nothing extraordinary, he did nearly throw the first no-hitter of his career earlier this year. As far as the offense goes, it's a group that's very patient and disciplined at the plate. Manny Ramirez and David Ortiz are obviously the big boppers in the batting order, both capable of producing a ton of homers and RBI. Others have stepped up at times though, including new second baseman Dustin Pedroia, who has been solid both with the glove and bat; Kevin Youkilis; and All-Star third baseman Mike Lowell. Youkilis (.329BA, 44RBI) can be the x-factor as we near October; he went on a 23-game hitting streak earlier in the season.

Toronto Blue Jays: Some say John Gibbons' job is on the line while others declare that a few injuries here and there coupled with the fact that the Jays have to compete against Boston and the Yankees saves him from getting ousted at the end of this season. Let's face it; the playoffs are a longshot at best. Toronto can't seem to get an effective, healthy A.J. Burnett for a full season as he's been the AL version of Ben Sheets (without a trip to the All-Star game this year). Add to the mix that they are without closer B.J. Ryan for the remainder of 2007 and making a run at a Wild Card spot becomes increasingly harder. And whenever ace and annual Cy Young candidate Roy Halladay (10-3, 68-19K/BB ratio) is forced to miss a start, it compounds matters even more. Power is not the issue. Toronto went out and got Frank Thomas in the off-season, and along with Vernon Wells, Alex Rios, Troy Glaus and Matt Stairs, is one of five players on the team in double-figures in home runs. Lyle Overbay has to be due to bust out for a sound second half, too. Where the Jays struggle is when they need to be aggressive on the base pads. With 27 stolen bases, the Blue Jays have the fewest in the American League. No individual has more than three as Wells leads the way in that category. They open the second half of the season on an eight-game road trip in New York and Boston that ought to tell us an awful lot of their chances for a winning record.

New York Yankees: George Steinbrenner's Bronx Bombers are in an unusual position, unfamiliar territory. They find themselves more than ten games behind the Boston Red Sox in the American League East race and will have to fight and claw its way to a Wild Card berth. Is it really a distinct possibility? Sure it is. As long as they have those deep pockets to dig into and go spending, the Yanks are going to be in the thick of things until the end. Right now three players are really carrying the load from a hitting perspective – Alex Rodriguez, Derek Jeter and Jorge Posada. Others such as Bobby Abreu, Robinson Cano and Johnny Damon have yet to find their stroke. A-Rod (ML-highs of 28 homers and 80RBI) is putting up monster numbers offensively and really

having a better year than most would've imagined. Jeter has actually struggled some defensively, but it's kind of forgotten about because Joe Torre's team wasn't expect to be really good in the field. The return of Roger Clemens hasn't done a whole lot at least yet, and Andy Pettitte seldom gets the run support he needs to pile up around 15 victories. Amazingly enough, Chien-Ming Wang (9-4) is the only Yankees pitcher with five wins or more going into the break. What separates a lot of the elite and good teams from the mediocre and bad is the bullpen. Closer Mariano Rivera deserves a spot in Cooperstown one day, but this particular season hasn't gotten a ton of work. Leading up to him, the middle relief with guys like Kyle Farnsworth bridging the gap, are spotty and not that dependable. Someone is going to have to emerge there or else it'll take the Yankees having offensive explosions every so often to get on a hot streak and back in the playoffs.

Baltimore Orioles: When the Orioles gave Manager Sam Perlozzo the ax a couple weeks back, few thought it would result in them getting it back together. It actually got them going for a few games and some life was restored... but that didn't last long. Believe it or not, Baltimore is pretty decent in a few areas. Their batting order has some pop. Melvin Mora and Brian Roberts are both having superb seasons, but don't get much attention because of the way the rest of the team has struggled. Nick Markakis appears on pace for a 100-RBI season, Aubrey Huff recently hit for the cycle and the team hasn't suffered a great deal without shortstop Miguel Tejada. Erik Bedard, who wasn't selected to the All-Star team though leads all of Major League Baseball in strikeouts with 134, is highly underrated in the grand scheme of things. Even starter Daniel Cabrera passes the test as the best 10-loss pitcher in the bigs at the moment. Nonetheless, it's doubtful it'll be enough for them to finish any higher than fourth. The O's might even be destined for a finish in the cellar. Make no mistake about it though, Baltimore certainly is capable of playing the role of spoiler and they need a promising finish to carry into 2008.

Tampa Bay Devil Rays: Not the way to go into the All-Star break. Tampa brings an 11-game losing streak entering Friday night. Their pitching, and bullpen in particular, has let them down time after time this year. In early June they gave up six runs to the Blue Jays in the ninth inning, losing 12-11. Games like those can be crippling for any team – good or bad. In that same game, the D-Rays left 23 men on base. Having all that said, the D-Rays have found a nice speedster to pair with perennial All-Star Carl Crawford and that's infielder B.J. Upton. Crawford and Upton, one of only two Tampa Bay starters hitting over .300, have combined for 37 doubles and 36 stolen bases. Carlos Pena quietly has hit a team-high 20 home runs after not sticking in Texas, Detroit, Oakland or Boston. Scott Kazmir obviously is the club's most gifted pitcher, but James Shields might be their MVP if it weren't for all the home runs (19) he's given up in the first half. Bombs allowed withstanding, Shields is 7-4 with a 3.82ERA and has 116-19K/BB ratio to go alongside Kazmir's 115 strikeouts. Veteran Al Reyes has been in the big leagues since 1995 and currently is 17-18 on save opportunities for Tampa Bay. Is he the long-term solution to their closer problems? Probably not. If they are able to find that person then 75 wins aren't out of the question.

American League Central:

Cleveland Indians: It was supposed to be 2006 that the Indians made their emergence as a contender for a division title and the World Series. Things didn't quite pan out last season and now the Tribe find themselves in a great neck-and-neck race with the Tigers atop the AL Central. At home at Jacobs Field, Cleveland is 31-12 – the best home record in the sport. They're getting it done with a solid lineup, pretty good starting pitching and a bullpen that has yet to break down like the '06 pen. Anchoring the lineup are Travis Hafner (14HR, 54RBI), Victor Martinez and Casey Blake, who earlier in the season put together a 24-game hitting streak. Grady Sizemore strikes out a good deal, but you'd be hard pressed to come up with a better leadoff man as he's got 24 stolen bases and could finish with 30 home runs. Fielding up the middle will be this team's key down the stretch. Second baseman Josh Barfield and shortstop Jhonny Peralta have combined for 24 errors going into the break. Starting pitcher C.C. Sabathia, the Majors' lone 12-game winner, does everything you want out of a southpaw ace. He's having the best season of his career and they're hoping it carries over to the playoffs. After going 1-10 a season ago, Fausto Carmona is developing into a possible 15-game winner and ranks as the biggest difference in the rotation for Cleveland. Additionally, Paul Byrd has a 53-6K/BB ratio. Joe Borowski hasn't been too shabby as the ninth inning stopper, but the question remains do the Tribe trust him in a big-spot, game on the line in October? Picking up another veteran reliever, such as say Eric Gagne from the Rangers, may do them a lot of good.

Detroit Tigers: Detroit made its mark last year with pitching, and while the Tigers still have some good, reliable arms, they are doing it more with hitting this season. Jim Leyland's squad leads the American League in runs scored with 494. Magglio Ordoñez is tearing the cover off the baseball with a ML-best .370 batting average. At second base, Placido Polanco will be starting in the All-Star game as he's been flawless defensively and very productive with the bat in his hands, too. Pudge Rodriguez behind the plate continues to be one of the game's elite catchers. Curtis Granderson is kind of their table setter and x-factor with 15 triples (also an ML-high). In the rotation, the Tigers have gotten it done without the services of veteran lefty Kenny Rogers. Reigning AL Rookie of the Year Justin Verlander, who earlier in the season threw a no-hitter, proved last season was no fluke and that he's for real as one of the game's rising young starting pitchers. He, along with Jeremy Bonderman and Nate Robertson, give them good starters to throw out there for the postseason, and with the emergence of 22-year-old Andrew Miller, they were able to send Mike Maroth to St. Louis. The bullpen has been banged up, particularly missing flame-throwing reliever Joel Zumaya and Fernando Rodney. Without them the Tigers have blown 14 saves, tied for the most in the division with the White Sox. Once they get everybody healthy and rolling, the Tigers could be a real threat to return to the World Series for a second consecutive year.

Minnesota Twins: What do we know about the Twins? Year after year under Ron Gardenhire, they've hustled, pitched well and come through for timely hits (and they're hitting for contact a lot more than power). In the field, they are about as good as anyone around. The 39 errors committed by Minnesota are the fewest among all

American League teams. So is it going to take Cleveland and Detroit going through a slump or the Twins getting red hot for the postseason dream to become a reality? Truth be told, probably a combination of both. Their bullpen can be relied on with Joe Nathan at the back of the pen in the ninth and Pat Neshak (3-1, 1.70ERA in 42 games) Juan Rincon, Dennys Reyes and Jesse Crain bridging the gap. Minnesota also has some base steals with Nick Punto and Jason Bartlett, and a big second half from Michael Cuddyer like the one we saw a year ago could really get them going. But the biggest key will be the performance of starters 2-4. Carlos Silva, Boof Bonser (95K) and Ramon Ortiz altogether are 14-20, which won't cut it for a playoff team. At the end of the year though, they will be right there with the Tigers and Indians we predict because they found a way last season and players like former Cy Young award winner Johan Santana, reigning AL MVP Justin Morneau, defending batting Champ Joe Mauer and annual Gold Glove recipient Torii are too good for this not to be a three-team race.

Chicago White Sox: GM Kenny Williams has some big decisions to make between now and the trading deadline. Whatever he decides, it'll have an impact – negatively, positively or a mix of both – for the team's future. Two seasons removed from a World Championship, the White Sox are in jeopardy of missing the postseason for a second consecutive season and suffering their first losing record since 1999. Early indications are Manager Ozzie Guillen will be back, but you never know with someone of Ozzie's flair, fire and short fuse. Outfielder Jermaine Dye, who was the 2005 World Series MVP, \came into Thursday night mired in an 0-for-12 slump and hitting just under .220 for the season after belting a career-high 44 home runs with a .315 batting average in 2006. That kind of sums up Chicago's batting and lineup in general; they've been anemic. The 345 runs scored by the White Sox so far are now only the fewest in their division, but also the entire AL. Having Scott Podsednik for a total of less than 20 games in the first half has turned out to hurt them more than expected. We're seeing how valuable he really is as the Sox lack anybody with more than eight stolen bases. More times than not, they've relied on the power of Paul Konreko and Jim Thome. While those two have combined for 32 home runs, neither has a batting average above .280. **Nobody on this entire team is hitting .285 or better!** Mark Buehrle might be on the trading block along with Dye. After tossing a no-hitter and the White Sox took a slide, his value increased significantly, especially for contending NL squads. Jose Contreras would be another interesting get for a contender, but he's got a greater chance to be a 15-game loser than winner.

Kansas City Royals: Same old Kansas City Royals. This club is in danger of suffering a fourth straight season of 100 losses or more and will definitely have its 12th losing season in 13 years. The major addition the Royals made over the winter was luring pitcher Gil Meche, formerly of the Seattle Mariners, to KC. Meche got a huge contract, but so far seems to be pitching like he's worth it [or part of it] as he was selected to the All-Star team and should challenge for the fourth double-figure victory season of his career. The problem is Meche and Brian Bannister are the lone starters with ERA's under 5.00 for the Royals. In the bullpen they've used six different guys for saves, including starter and one time ace Zack Greinke (4-4, 4.63ERA). Sad to say, pitching isn't the only

problem they've got; they are struggling to hit consistently as well. Other than outfielders Reggie Sanders and Joey Gathright, who have combined to play a total of 38 games, there's nobody else with a batting average over .300. Catcher John Buck is the one guy the Royals have slugging over .500 and he clearly is their best power hitter. On about five or six other teams in the American League, such as the Yankees, Red Sox, Tigers and Twins, Buck would be a backup or forced to DH. Despite a .232 batting average, Alex Gordon leads the team in stolen bases, hit by pitches (12) and has a bright future ahead of him. Also, outfielders David DeJesus and Mark Teahen are beginning to come along. Now it becomes a matter of building from there.

American League West:

Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim: Anybody want to play Mike Scioscia's Angels in the postseason? Even the Tigers and Red Sox would have their hands full – and the Yankees know what they are all about having lost to them twice in the first round of the playoffs since Anaheim won a World Series in 2002. What gets it done for the Angels? Their aggressive nature and small ball approach that Scoscia pushes. The Angels lead the American League in stolen bases with 77 – 19 of them belonging to Chone Figgins while three others are in double-figures. Also, this guy named Vladimir Guerrero... he's pretty darn good and probably the most under appreciated elite hitter in the sport. His 74 RBI are the most of anyone in baseball not named Alex Rodriguez. Before it's all said and done, he'll likely drive in 100+ runs for a ninth time in ten seasons while picking up his fourth consecutive Silver Slugger award. Acquiring one more quality bat prior to the trading deadline could be the final piece to the puzzle for this already solid ball club. Pitching wise, they can't ask for much more, especially from John Lackey, who has 11 wins. Lackey is one of three starters for the Angels to have eclipsed the 100-inning plateau already. The other two are Ervin Santana and Kelvim Escobar, who's quietly getting it done with a 10-3 record, a pair of complete games and ERA of 3.19. Jered Weaver and Bartolo Colon, each with six victories, have been solid too, giving them a couple more nice options to turn to for the postseason. Francisco Rodriguez (24-26 on saves), otherwise known as K-Rod, is living up to that nickname with a strikeout total of 50 on less than 37 innings pitched thus far. Reliever and setup man Scott Shields will probably get to 90+ innings yet again, and at this moment holds an ERA under 2.00. The Angels are **still my pick to win the World Series**. After all, nobody posted a better record during Interleague play than them and the Tigers, who were both 14-4.

Seattle Mariners: Becoming the first Manager in baseball history to re-sign during a winning streak of eight games or longer, Mike Hargrove probably closed the book on his final managerial chapter. And why? Why now? Seattle hadn't been playing that good since 2001 when they lost to the Yankees in the ALCS and won over 100 games. My opinion is that you don't bail midway in the season on the team; wait until after the season is done. As for the current edition of the Mariners without Hargrove, they are playing very well and classify as my biggest surprise of the pleasant variety (of the negative it would be the Yankees). Of course, the Indians being where they are might be a bit of a surprise to some, but not as big as the M's competing for a Wild Card spot with

little pitching to speak of once you get past Felix Hernandez. On offense, Ichiro Suzuki is a hit machine... we established that a few years ago when he came into the league. He's so scary that he may have more stolen bases than strikeouts! But the keys to their success in my mind will simply be Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson. Seattle shelled a lot of money for the two corner infielders a couple off-seasons ago and now it's time for them to deliver them a playoff appearance. Another free agent pickup, Jeff Weaver from St. Louis, hasn't quite been what they had hoped for as he has a 2-6 record. They've been able to offset it so far with Jarrod Washburn and Miguel Batista winning eight games apiece; question is how long can those two keep it up? At the back of the pen, J.J. Putz (0.88ERA – **no blown saves in 24 attempts**) can pass for the MVP of this team with Ichiro. Putz depicts the major surprising closer pitching flawlessly heading into the All-Star break. How well he holds up and performs during the second half will be absolutely critical to the M's success. This team might be only one or two players away from making a serious charge at a Wild Card spot.

Oakland Athletics: Somehow, some way the A's now removed from the days of Barry Zito, Mark Mulder and Tim Hudson anchoring their pitching staff – Oakland is three games over .500. Plus, let's throw in that this team, with a new Manager in Bob Geren [remember both Ken Macha and Art Howe were let go after 90+ win seasons/division titles], has given up the second fewest amount of runs in the American League. Dan Haren (10-3, 2.30ERA) will maybe start the All-Star game and along with Chad Gaudin and Joe Blanton forms a nice trio at the front end of the rotation. Relievers Jay Marshall, Alan Embree and Kiko Calero all have pitched in 31 games or more heading into the break and that's not a good sign for the bullpen. None of them has an ERA under 4.00 or fewer hits than innings pitched. From a hitting perspective, this bunch is terrible and was that way last year when they did have Frank Thomas and won the division title. Shannon Stewart qualifies as one of the most underrated players in baseball as he's the A's only .300 hitter, leads the team in hits with over 90 and also leads them in stolen bases. Oakland will need to get Mike Piazza healthy in the second half and get a spark from Milton Bradley so that they don't have to rely on their pitching and defense to win as many games and can get a few wins from their hitting. Guys like Bobby Crosby and Eric Chavez are capable of much more, too.

Texas Rangers: Ron Washington's first season as Manager of the Texas Rangers is going about as expected. Texas continues to lack the necessary pitching to compete for a winning record. Starting pitchers Kameron Loe, Kevin Millwood, Vicente Padilla and Dominican Republic native Robinson Tejeda all have losing records, have allowed over 100 hits and holds ERA's above 5.30. Even Brandon McCarthy, who has the most upside among their starters and was acquired from the White Sox, can't seem to go beyond the sixth inning. Only Tampa Bay has a shakier pitching situation when you combine starting staff and bullpen... and at least they have Scott Kazmir to build with for the future. Reigning All-Star Game MVP Michael Young and third baseman Hank Blalock are two of the hitters who lead the Rangers, but neither has really put up monster numbers. Ian Kinsler and Brad Wilkerson each have pumped out 14 home runs apiece, but neither is hitting .245. A two-time Gold Glove winner and talented switch hitter, Mark Teixeira

could be on the move and the Yankees might be one of the prime suitors for him. For Texas, it's going to be about what can they do prior to and following the trading deadline. After that point, they evaluate what kind of progress they made.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Boston's Julio Lugo hit .084 for the month of June, making him only the fifth player to hit under .100 in a month since 1959 with a minimum of 75 at-bats. Can you name the other four?

Last Week's Answer: Michael Young (Texas Rangers)