

## MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006

### BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

**W**elcome back! We're just past the midway point of the 2006 Major League Baseball season and glad to re-join you after last week's departure. In our previous edition, my All-Star picks for the NL and AL were revealed. Today it is time for a mid-season report on every team across the diamond and what may be ahead.....

#### **National League East:**

**New York Mets:** At 51-34, the Mets hold the NL's best record and are not only the safest pick to make the playoffs, but also represent the senior circuit in the World Series. Outfielder Carlos Beltran (24HR's), 3B David Wright (68RBI) and SS Jose Reyes (37SB, 12 triples) are all viable candidates for NL MVP, while new 1B Carlos Delgado has added 22 blasts and 47-year-old reserve Julio Franco is batting .299 in 77 at-bats. During the off-season they addressed the bullpen with Billy Wagner and Duaner Sanchez, a pleasant 5-0 so far. In the rotation, the top two are fine; lefty Tom Glavine shares the ML lead in wins with 11 and Pedro Martinez goes to the DL with 111K's. Now it's up to GM Omar Minaya to go out and solidify the pitching staff for postseason play, either by acquiring Livan Hernandez or calling up minor leaguer Mike Pelfrey. **To win it all, you must beat the AL and the Mets are 6-9 vs. those clubs.**

**Philadelphia Phillies:** While the Phillies did go on a 13-1 stretch to bring them a few games within the Mets around the middle of May, they haven't quite had the feel of a playoff team. After all, their 9-18 record during the month of June really set them back as they now sit eight games under .500. One thing we did find out is that Ryan Howard is indeed a home run cranking machine. He's two away from pounding out 30, and in that ballpark, he'll soon get to 50; if not this year then soon. GM Pat Gillick may need to build this team around him and two others – All-Star 2B Chase Utley and gritty CF Aaron Rowand. The team's ERA is , and to top things off, starter Brett Myers has his own personal issues. Count on Bobby Abreu being on the trade block. As for Manager Charlie Manuel, he could very well be gone after this season's conclusion.

**Atlanta Braves:** Believe it or not, as poorly as the Atlanta Braves have played, they could get on a roll and challenge for the NL Wild Card spot. I know, I know – right now that seems like a stretch even for a team like them. Say what you want, they've clearly missed pitching coach Leo Mazzone, now in Baltimore. Reliever Oscar Villarreal (7-1, 4.05ERA) has been their winningest pitcher thus far as John Smoltz and Tim Hudson – both with over 115 innings thrown – are a combined 11-13 with a 179-72K/BB ratio. No other pitcher has gone 80 innings; the next closest is Jorge Sosa (2-10 with a 5.31ERA), whose recently been relegated to a bullpen that has blown 18 save opps [that matches Texas and KC for most]. Offensively, they're getting the production they need out of Andruw & Chipper Jones, Edgar Renetira and Jeff Francoeur; not 2B Marcus Giles.

**Florida Marlins:** First-year Manager Joe Girardi didn't bail on his ball club when times got tough, and the players didn't bail on him. Sure, the 36-46 record is nothing to be proud of or celebrate, though they are under the right direction and leadership with limited spending/payroll. Albeit 5-7 with a 3.96ERA, lefty Dontrelle 'D-Train' Willis is the most coveted pitcher on the market before the trading deadline. Florida may keep him, which in my mind would be wise, but if they don't, the Mets, Yankees, Diamondbacks among others will likely go after him. Miguel Cabrera, maybe the league's most underrated quality hitter, rookie All-Star 2B Dan Uggla and Mike Jacobs headline a young offense that'll fill its holes over time with experience. And when the year is done, Florida's best kept secret could be Josh Johnson (7-4) notching 15 victories.

**Washington Nationals:** Last year this time the Washington Nationals were in first place; the nation's capitol filled with almost as much buzz about the baseball team as politics. A defining moment for the Nationals in the first half of this '05 season may have come on April 22<sup>nd</sup> when they lost to Atlanta 3-1, in large part because they left 15 men on base. Worst of all for Manager Frank Robinson, he might see his two most outstanding hitters in Alfonso Soriano and Jose Guillen change teams. Both are on the block and the question is will only one go, just Livan Hernandez or a combination? The big bright spot in D.C. is third baseman Ryan Zimmerman, who is from the same area as David Wright and produces somewhat similar numbers. Zimmerman is the first rookie to have a pair of walk-off homers since 2002 [both Eric Hinske and Carlos Pena].

#### **National League Central:**

**St. Louis Cardinals:** Tony LaRussa and company have breezed by foes the past two years en route to an NL Central division title. Well, steam rolling others won't be the case this year as they'll have meaningful games in September to play with the Brewers, Reds and Astros – all within three games. They've lost 13 of 16, including nine of their last ten road games. What's been their downfall during this stretch? Awful pitching. Izzy has been a disaster closing out big games, blowing six save chances, and the postseason concern is still there. Jason Marquis' ten wins are deceiving, Chris Carpenter is good again, but Mark Mulder has taken a step back. It'll take major improvement from the pitching in the second half for St. Louis to win the division by double-digits for a third straight year. Plus, other bats around the sport's best hitter, Albert Pujols, and Scott Rolen will need to step up. They may make a play for Alfonso Soriano.

**Cincinnati Reds:** No NL surprised us more in the first half than Cincy, which squeezed out nine wins from former Red Sox pitcher and current Reds All-Star Bronson Arroyo, and nine more via Aaron Harang (team-high 112K's). Cincy's forte is hitting and their three main power hitters – Adam Dunn (27HR, 99K), Austin Kearns and Ken Griffey Jr. (18HR) – have all been healthy as well as productive through the course of this season. Brandon Phillips, Ryan Freel and Felipe Lopez bring the hustle the table, combining for 57 stolen bases. On Thursday, the Reds acquired reliever Eddie Guardado from Seattle. That in my opinion will turn out to be a stellar pickup if Guardado reverts to his steady

everyday Eddie form from his All-Star days in Minnesota. **Since nobody else in the division is over .500 on the road, Cincy's 24-20 road mark and ability to win away from home gives them a shot to try out-hitting opponents down the stretch.**

**Milwaukee Brewers:** Have won a Major League-best 19 one-run games this season. What does that tell you? They got a flair for the dramatic. Rickie Weeks (64R) brings them great energy in the middle of the infield. Out of the bullpen, Derrick Turnbow is 23 of 29 saves tries, while Bill Hall and Prince Fielder together have nailed 33 dingers. Milwaukee cannot afford to let 70-RBI man Carlos Lee go when they have a golden opportunity to sneak in the playoffs as either a Wild Card or division winner. Long-term, I see them locking up pitcher Chris Capuano (1.18WHIP), who's on pace for a second straight 18-win year. Having a healthy Ben Sheets (4 starts) is a must. This team is on the cusp of really breaking through and changing the playoff picture. Now if Ned Yost can just get them to improve their fielding (ML-worst 73 errors and last in field percentage).

**Houston Astros:** The first half problems for the Astros were never more clear than on June 25<sup>th</sup>, a game they actually won. Houston had a healthy lead against a White Sox team they were swept by in the World Series until closer Brad Lidge had another meltdown, giving up a grand slam to send things into extra innings. Houston does have Roger Clemens, Andy Pettitte and Roy Oswalt in their rotation. In other words, to completely remove them from the playoff hunt would be foolish of me, mainly because they've played in back-to-back NLCS'. Consider this: that veteran pitching trio is 14-16, and although the Astros outscored foes 30-9 during their recent four-game win streak, the offense probably isn't explosive enough to carry them. NL RBI leader Lance Berkman did catch fire in June and he along with Morgan Enberg and Preston Wilson (78K) are keys.

**Chicago Cubs:** Besides being 11 games under .500 at Wrigley Field, the Cubs get bit the hardest in one-run games where they are 6-14. Entering Friday's play, the 336 runs they have scored is by far the lowest in baseball as the next closest team – Oakland – sits at 374. That's why they are absolutely elated to have first baseman Derrek Lee, who missed part of the first half with an injury, back in the lineup. Not looking so good is pitcher Mark Prior, now 0-6 in his last six starts. Bullpen wise, Ryan Dempster isn't the closer answer for long. Is it time for the Cubs to break up part of this team, especially in the rotation? Prior, Kerry Wood, Greg Maddux and Carlos Zambrano all feasibly could be in another uniform before the season finishes. And it won't stun me the least bit if we see Manager Dusty Baker out west somewhere next year [like Arizona??].

**Pittsburgh Pirates:** Tell me if this makes sense. The Tigers have 57 wins and two players going to the All-Star game, and the Pirates have 58 losses and two players joining them at the All-Star game. What's wrong with this picture??? Plenty. Instead of earning no worse than a split in New York against the NL's best team, the Pirates bullpen couldn't hold a lead on Independence Day and therefore the Bucs drop three of four to the first place Mets. That kind of year for first-year Manager Jim Tracy? You betcha. On a

positive note, Canadian OF Jason Bay is slowly becoming a household name here [not quite Willie Stargell, but you get the picture], Freddy Sanchez is hitting .395 with runners in scoring position and Mike Gonzalez is 12/12 on saves. The negative: four regulars are hitting under .260, and featured pitchers Oliver Perez and Zach Duke already have 17L's.

### **National League West:**

**San Diego Padres:** How about the job Bruce Bochy has done this season? Once thought to take a step back after winning what many called an average to below average division a year ago, San Diego is 45-40 overall and 22-16. Only one team in all of baseball has lost fewer road games and that's the team with the best record in the sport, the Tigers. Anyhow, shortstop Khalil Greene came through in the clutch this week to help the Pads defeat Philly and no longer is in jeopardy of going to the bench. Another good sign appears to be that Jake Peavy (4-8 with 118K's), off Wednesday's win, is poised for a big finish to the season. With seven wins and an ERA of 3.13, Chris Young formerly of Texas has been their ace, while ex-Rangers first baseman Adrian Gonzalez quietly shares the team lead in homers with Green and Mike Piazza. Dave Roberts, Mike Cameron, Eric Young and Josh Barfield account for 51 stolen bases; an aggressive group indeed.

**Colorado Rockies:** This is the best start by the Rockies in a decade. They are in prime position to make a run at the division crown or a Wild Card spot, which speaks volumes for the job Clint Hurdle has done as well. Instead of first baseman Todd Helton being their lone All-Star rep as they look destined to finish last, the Rockies will send closer Brian Fuentes and outfielder Matt Holliday to the mid-summer Classic next week. Garrett Atkins has 25 doubles, Brad Hawpe is hitting over .300 and four starting pitchers have at least six wins in 99+ innings. What do they do before the deadline to solidify their team? Finding another pitcher, especially when you play in hitter-friendly Coors Field, wouldn't hurt. A key priority will be going after a someone like Tampa Bay's Julio Lugo to help out Jamey Carroll and Clint Barmes (.209BA) in the middle of the infield.

**Los Angeles Dodgers:** Brady Penny is 10-2 with an ERA of 2.92. Aaron Sele is still unbeaten (7-0) at Dodger Stadium. Catcher Russell Martin didn't make his first error until his 47<sup>th</sup> start at catcher, which came on July 3<sup>rd</sup>. First baseman Nomar Garciaparra (.397BA with RISP) was deservedly voted into the All-Star game on the final fan vote. What more could Manager Grady Little and the Dodgers ask for? Some power please. While the offense is good at stringing together some singles and driving in runs, their top home run guy - Garciaparra - has ten and LA ranks 29<sup>th</sup> out of thirty teams in homers. Only Kansas City has fewer than their 74 heading into Friday's play. Takashi Saito has saved all six of his save tries, something Dannys Baez can't say (9/16 SV) in Eric Gagne's absence due to injury. An extra bat would give them the upper hand in the division.

**San Francisco Giants:** Inconsistent. Up and down. You could describe the 2006 San Francisco Giants that way. There's been more hoopla over Barry Bonds' home run chase than this team trying to win a division crown, and quite frankly, that's alarming. What is even more alarming is that Bonds has these type of numbers: .242BA, 11HR,

35RBI. Clearly signs that he's a year older and physically taken a toll as have the rest of some of their vets (see Moises Alou and Mike Matheny – both have missed a handful of games). As far as pitching goes, Jason Schmidt's 2.69ERA is tops anywhere, fellow starter Matt Cain is the fourth youngest pitcher in baseball and Noah Lowry can certainly better his 3-5 mark. They're never sure of Armando Benitez and his bullpen mates slamming the door either. Age and injuries could hold San Fran back.

**Arizona Diamondbacks:** Once 34-22 and atop the National League West, the Diamondbacks have gone 6-23 in their last 29 games to sink to the bottom of a tightly crammed division. The Jason Grimsley incident, which caused the team to release him in early June, made them crumble. Now they have to pick themselves up, and most importantly, find another starter as well as a reliever to get back in the thick of things. Eric Byrnes and catcher Johnny Estrada (.409BA w/RISP) were nice off-season pickups. Offensively, Luis Gonzalez, Shawn Green, Chad Tracy and co. are fine. Ace pitcher Brandon Webb, who's 9-3 with a 2.72ERA and two shutouts, needs the #4 and #5 SP's as well as Miguel Batista and Claudio Vargas to be consistent from here on out. The Russ Ortiz experiment finally ended so will it be time for closer Jose Valverde (8.22ERA) to go or have a new role? It might be if things don't get turned around in the other direction.

#### **American League East:**

**Boston Red Sox:** How great is the power tandem of Manny Ramirez and David 'Big Papi' [also clutch] Ortiz? They're the best combo in baseball, period. They've combined to blast 53 home runs, drive in 147 runs and have drawn 119 walks. At first glance, you might think that makes up a whole season for two individuals. I for one didn't expect vets Mark Loretta and Mike Lowell to both hit .300, and have Kevin Youkilis hit .300 in the leadoff spot as well as Trot Nixon do it further down in the order. Curt Schilling and Josh Beckett had their couple poor stars here and there, but for the most part, were good on the hill. You'll take those ten wins apiece from them, knowing their important work comes in the postseason. Closer Jonathan Papelbon and starter John Lester have been the pitching saviors; now it's time to ditch the idea Jason Johnson is the answer as a fifth starter and go get someone. Seattle's Gil Meche first comes to mind.

**New York Yankees:** Usually a 48-35 overall record, sitting three games behind the Red Sox in the AL East isn't good enough for Owner George Steinbrenner and his high-paid Yankees. However, it has to be taken into account that they lost by 19 runs to a sub-.500 Cleveland team earlier in the week, have had a handful of injuries – none more painful than losing outfielders Hideki Matsui and Gary Sheffield in the middle of that order – and they've lacked pitching depth the whole time. And let's not forget about A-Rod being criticized for every thing he doesn't do, sometimes what he does do. There are those constants like Mariano Rivera closing games, Derek Jeter at shortstop and Joe Torre as Manager. When it's all said and done, if the Yanks are unable to add the necessary missing pitcher(s), the team's fielding and 43-year-old lefty Randy Johnson are the keys.

**Toronto Blue Jays:** If you told GM J.P. Ricciardi off-season addition A.J. Burnett (1-2) would've only made five starts entering this weekend and his team would be five games out of first place – he wouldn't be thrilled, but would sign. Josh Towers (1-9, 9.11ERA) has given them hardly anything in the first half and Toronto really is relying on two pitchers: ace Roy Halladay (11-2, 3.02ERA), a Cy Young candidate to no one's surprise, and closer B.J. Ryan (0.86ERA, 23/24SV), who they picked up this past off-season from Baltimore. Gustavo Chacin is 6-2 through ten starts and he could return come early August. Alex Rios (.330BA, 15HR, 53RBI) was superb in the first half, blending in well with new hitters Lyle Overbay, Troy Glaus (22 homers) and catcher Bengie Molina. Toronto hasn't really gotten hot either so watch out if they do.

**Baltimore Orioles:** When you've got three teams in your division in front of you that stand nine games over .500, it generally doesn't make for a fun division to face. Baltimore goes into Cleveland only .5 game ahead of Tampa Bay, which sees its lineup gain more experience each day; likewise for their young star ace Scott Kazmir. Right now the O's would love to have a Kazmir, a pitcher than could go out and dominate a game on any given day. Erik Bedard and Kris Benson, both 9-6, have given them quality innings, but the rest of the staff – Bruce Chen, Rodrigo Lopez and Daniel Cabrera – have ERA's in the 5's or 6's. That trio also is a combined 9-22. CF Corey Patterson, picked up from the Cubs, has proven to be a threat stealing on the base pads. Grabbing Ramon Hernandez (.274BA, 15HR, 59RBI) in the off-season turned out to be a nice move. Other than them, Miguel Tejada and Melvin Mora – the O' isn't much to talk about.

**Tampa Bay Devil Rays:** Southpaw pitcher Scott Kazmir gave this team and its fans life when it was needed most. "He's been nothing short of brilliant," says one MLB scout. His 10-5 record, 3.29ERA, and 118-40K/BB ratio in 109.1 innings earned him a spot to the All-Star game. Now if the Devil Rays can clone him and make four more, then they'd have a shot to go to the playoffs. As it is, Tampa may have to unload hitter Aubrey Huff or infielder Julio Lugo and they'll still have a formidable batting order. Jonny Gomes leads the team with 18 homers, Carl Crawford gives them speed and Ty Wigginton is their biggest surprise so far. Wigginton had ten homers by May 16<sup>th</sup> and is now at 16; Crawford was an All-Star snub whose got 32 stolen bases to go with seven triples; and the D-Rays are a hearty 21-18 at Tropicana Field.

### **American League Central:**

**Detroit Tigers:** Pitching, pitching and more pitching – the Tigers have baseball's best record (57-28) because of the way their arms have performed. And Manager Jim Leyland's no-nonsense approach. Starters Justin Verlander, who throws heat, and Jeremy Bonderman have tremendous stuff. At the ripe age of 41, lefty Kenny Rogers is doing it and doing it well, sharing the ML lead for wins with 11 heading into All-Star weekend. In the bullpen, Joel Zumaya had his pitches clock in at 80MPH, 101MPH then back down to 85MPH. He, closer Todd Jones and setup man Fernando Rodney have masterfully held down the fort in relief. On offense, Detroit surprisingly saw Magglio Ordonez and Pudge

Rodriguez stay healthy. Brandon Inge and Chris Shelton have 33 dingers too. Look for the Tigers to definitely pursue a left-handed stick and possibly a cheap reliever as well.

**Chicago White Sox:** Controversial Manager Ozzie Guillen is the main attraction here. Winner of 17 consecutive decisions, Jose Contreras has truly flourished in the windy city as the leader of baseball's best, true five-deep pitching staff. The White Sox dangerous offense improved with the off-season addition of Jim Thome alone. Jermaine Dye, Paul Konerko and Joe Crede also strike deep. What further impresses me about the defending Champs is their often overlooked bench. Pablo Ozuna provides speed, Rob Mackowiak fills the utility role and future starter Alex Cintron gives them a spark whenever and wherever it's needed. Finally, the bullpen is where the Sox could ultimately be declared repeat Champs or stopped short of that goal. To this point, closer Bobby Jenks hasn't disappointed, but the setup spot will be tricky to fill around playoff time.

**Minnesota Twins:** What hurt the Twins was the way they started the season off, especially vs. division foes Chicago and Detroit where they were 0-6 against in April. So far this season they are 4-12 when facing the Sox and Tigers. Minnesota was able to go 21-4 in a 25-game stretch by finally scoring runs in bunches (5.3RPG in June). Francisco Liriano (9-1, 1.99ERA) has the third lowest ERA by a rookie before the All-Star break in the last 40 years, and somehow he was bypassed for the AL squad. Former Cy Young award winner Johan Santana wasn't, however. The combo of Liriano and Santana, the M&M hitters - Justin Morneau and Joe Mauer (.391BA - tops in MLB) - and the let-it-all-hang-loose hustle of Torii Hunter give the Twins a chance at the Wild Card. That is if they can mustard up a hot August, when they face the Tigers and Sox nine times.

**Cleveland Indians:** Is Manager Eric Wedge in trouble? After last season's late run that saw them just miss out on the playoffs, a lot of us figured the Tribe would compete for a playoff spot and a chance to go to the World Series. Not the case. Their team batting average is third in the Majors, why aren't they better than their 39-45 record? Quite honestly, the Indians middle of the infield hasn't produced up to their capabilities, and the bullpen took a couple of steps back from last year's rock solid performances. Still, pitchers Jake Westbrook (7-4), C.C. Sabathia and Cliff Lee all have two more wins than losses, and first baseman Travis Hafner has 24 homers in 80 games. Even leadoff man Grady Sizemore kind of picked up where he left off, batting .397 with 25 doubles and six triples. The bench was non-existent and that has to change to sniff third place.

**Kansas City Royals:** You know you're bad when you win 12 out of 17, but remain 24 games under .500. That is the case with the KC Royals, who would have to go 51-27 the rest of the way to be a .500 ball club when the season is over. At least unlike last year, the Royals won't have to go through multiple Manager changes. They are actually closer to the fourth place Indians than the Twins are to the division leading Tigers. Mark Redman is their lone winning starter, the offense leans on veteran Reggie Sanders [on the trading block] and the bullpen wasn't that good for any portion of the season. Closer Andrew Burgos has blown eight saves and has an ERA in the 6's. Too bad Mike Sweeney is hurt and they lost Carlos Beltran a few years ago.

### **American League West:**

**Oakland Athletics:** This is a club that traditionally over the past few years gets hot in the summer time, particularly around August. So I guess the good news would be the A's are already in first place, five over .500, and haven't been the healthiest of ball clubs. The A's defense, headlined by 2B Mark Ellis & CF Mark Kotsay, is tied for third in the bigs in fielding percentage. In the pen, closer Huston Street has received decent help from Justin Duschner and Kiko Calero. Oakland, which will soon get starter Rich Harden back in the rotation, has the worst batting average in baseball. But it's understandable considering the injuries and acceptable since they are in first place. Without Milton Bradley, Frank Thomas (19HR) and Bobby Crosby for chunks of the first few months, I'd expect the hitting to turn around. Watch out, their best baseball may be ahead.

**Texas Rangers:** Bringing in Kevin Millwood and Vicent Padilla in the off-season didn't thrill everyone, but now that they each is 8-5, that matters very little. Texas' pitching isn't wonderful, though does it really need to be for this offensive-minded club? Ian Kinsler leads AL rookies in hits. The shoe size switch to a 12½ fit [no pun intended] OF Kevin Mench, and Michael Young went a club record 42 straight games without committing an error while batting over .300. Hank Blalock continues to provide steady numbers (12HR, 56RBI). Four different Rangers have 24 double or more, a big reason why they lead all of baseball in that category. For the Rangers to make a serious chase at the division crown, they'll have to add a couple live arms in relief. Had they saved half of the 18 games they've blown, Texas would be a 50-win club right now.

**Seattle Mariners:** Since their 2001 loss to the Yankees in the ALCS, the Seattle Mariners have been glaringly absent from postseason baseball. They now may be two games under .500, but the M's sit only 3.5 games behind Oakland for first place and have a puncher's chance to make a run. Ichiro is among the ML leaders in hits and is tearing the cover off the baseball as usual. Defensively, the Mariners have been sound, committing just 39 errors. Boston is the lone team with fewer errors thus far. Rael Ibañez gives them some offensive pop (18HR), while Felix Hernandez (8-8) is the face of the pitching staff for the future. Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexon are the keys to their success. The question will be will Seattle get rid of some pitchers like Jamie Moyer and/or Gil Meche, as was the case two seasons ago when they sent Freddy Garcia to Chicago,

**Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim:** Mike Scioscia team was three wins away from a second World Series appearance in four seasons. Now they are a ways off from getting back to that level. Bartolo Colon got off to an 0-3 and 0-4 start for the first time in his career. Ervin Santana, at 9-3, is pitching lights out at times for the struggling Halos. Defensively, the Angels aren't quite the same team they've been in the past. They've made 25 more errors than division rival Oakland and it hasn't been hidden by an offense that has third worst batting average in the American League. In order to push Oakland all the way up until the final week of the regular season, they'll need a spark from

someone other than Vlad Guerrero and Garret Anderson. Catcher Mike Napoli (.282BA, 11HR) might get hot in the second half, though they don't have a real strong hitting infield. Francisco Rodriguez (19/21 saves) is a proven money closer.

**TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:**

**On July 4<sup>th</sup>, the Yankees were defeated by the Cleveland Indians by 19 runs, marking the second worst loss in franchise history. Back on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2004, they were defeated by 22 runs. Can you name the team that handed them their worst loss ever?**

*MLB Weekly June 23<sup>rd</sup> Answer: Eric Valent*