

MLB Weekly --- Friday, August 25th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Wow! Has another summer flown by or what? They always do. Sadly, this is our last edition of MLB Weekly for the 2006 season. However, there is some good news. My **HATFIELD SPORTS BLOG** is up and running... and all e-mails are welcomed at hatfieldsports2k4@yahoo.com as I'll continue to talk some baseball all the way through the World Series in October. In addition, look for my **EXCLUSIVE** postseason previews, which I bring to the web page for a third straight year, breaking down each playoff series in the National League as well as the American League. Included with the analysis will be my predictions, too. Without further ado, I bring to you the final MLB Weekly of this regular season.....

September Surely To Be Sensational:

Not every year do we have races as close as the one's this season. When you opened your newspaper today.... oh wait a minute, they don't print late games.... when you logged on the Internet and pulled up the standings, you probably found something very interesting in the American League. All three divisions have the first place team ahead of the second place club by only 5.5 games: NY Yankees ahead of Boston; Detroit ahead of Chi. White Sox; and Oakland ahead of LA Angels of Anaheim. Then look at how good the third place teams. They're Toronto, Minnesota and Texas. All three are over .500 and would seriously be competing for first place in the National League Central and NL West divisions. In the Wild Card race, both the Red Sox and Twins are within four games of the defending World Series Champion White Sox, who could be without slugger Jim Thome (36 homers) in this weekend's three-game series vs. Minnesota. The winner of the series will emerge in front of the Wild Card pack entering Monday. In addition, these two will battle it out in the final three regular season games, which could decide who's in and who's not.

Over in the NL, you have the New York Mets with a huge 14.5 game lead of everybody else. Usually it's the Atlanta Braves leading the rest of the pack like that, but this time it's the Mets and Willie Randolph and co. had that division wrapped up in May. But the Central and West are tight, likely to go down to the final week of the season. Tony La Russa's St. Louis Cardinals breezed by everyone the last two years, en route to winning 100 games each time. They're not getting to 100 this time, and if not careful, they could be stuck at .500 when the season finishes. Though they are 66-60, exactly three months ago they were 15 games above the .500 water mark. For some of you who have trouble in math – that's playing nine games under .500 since then. Once 52-47 and a full five games behind the Red Birds, the Cincinnati Reds have gone just 15-14 over their last 29 games, yet are tied atop the division. GM Wayne Krivsky loaded on up on pitchers – none of which were household names – and the team has been energized by those moves. They sit in front of Philadelphia, led by young power hitting monster and MVP candidate Ryan Howard, as well as San Diego, Arizona and Milwaukee in the Wild Card

race. Over in the West, the Los Angeles Dodgers have been the league's hottest team since the All-Star break, going 19-6 in their past 25 games heading into Friday. Three of those six losses have come in the last three games as the San Diego Padres, a team LA beat in the first two meetings of the season, swept them. Against San Diego, LA is 3-11 on the year. With the departure of Shawn Green to the Mets, Arizona is starting to slip out of it as they've sunk to three games under .500. Meanwhile, despite the departure of Carlos Lee to Texas before the trading deadline, Ned Yost's Brewers are 4.5 games back of the division lead and Wild Card. They're playing spirited baseball at home as their 39 home wins are only bettered in the league by the Mets.

Glavine, Mets Relieved:

Pursuing a second World Series ring and 13 wins shy of 300 for his career, Mets 40-year-old left-handed pitcher Tom Glavine nearly received the scare of his life. Complaining of coldness in his left middle finger following last Wednesday's game against the Philadelphia Phillies, Glavine was tested for a blood clot in his left pitching shoulder. Fortunately for him and the Mets, surgery won't be needed and everything will be fine with – try to refrain from laughing – baby aspirin of all things. Go figure!

Problem With Papi?

David Ortiz (a.k.a. 'Big Papi') was hospitalized last weekend with an irregular heartbeat. No worry, Ortiz swatted home run #46 on the season as the BoSox handed Angels 23-year-old right-hander Jered Weaver, Jeff's brother, his first career loss. Weaver was trying to become only the third pitcher in baseball history to win his first ten decisions. Had he been successful, he would've joined the likes look of Hooks Wilte (12-0) from the 1904 New York Giants, and Kirk Rueter (10-0) when he did with the Montreal Expos in 1993-94. However, last Friday against Seattle, Weaver did become just the second pitcher – alongside Whitey Ford – to begin a big league career by winning nine consecutive games.

It was my feeling heading into the final two games of the series with the Yankees that Boston needed to win both to make the playoffs. Scratch that – had to win both. A loss in either of those final and there was no way I could envision them winning the AL East. What about the Wild Card? Hard to say, but that seemed close to being out of the question, too. Not only did they fail to win both – they won none. Swept, in five games. Yankees Boss George Steinbrenner called it one of the proudest achievements, even though it didn't bring them a Championship or guarantee the division is theirs. Punch the Yanks' ticket for a 12th consecutive postseason appearance – 11th under current Manager Joe Torre. But as for the Red Sox, two years removed from 'breaking the curse' and winning the World Series, I'd be pretty surprised at this point if they make the playoffs.



One of three A's pitchers with double-digit victories, Danny Haren leads Oakland in strikeouts (142) as well as innings pitched. (Photo Courtesy of Jeff Chiu/Associated Press)

HOT:

Astros outfielder Willy Taveras - The guy brings a 27-game hit streak into Friday's play. An exceptional bunter and base stealer, Taveras is one of the few bright spots at the moment for a struggling Houston team.

White Sox outfielder Jermaine Dye - Since hitting .265 in June, Dye has hit over .320 in three straight months. In the team's last two wins over Detroit, Dye smacked three homers and drove in six runs.

Brewers reliever Francisco Cordero - Since being traded to Milwaukee from Texas, Cordero has thrived. Cordero last gave up a run on July 26th against the Yankees, and he's a perfect 9-for-9 on save tries this month.

NOT:

Colorado Rockies - Their six-game slide and 2-8 record in the last ten probably did the Rockies in for 2006. Had they gone 3-3 in their last six, they'd be tied with Arizona for third place and four games of first.

Mariners pitcher Joel Pineiro - Three years ago, Pineiro went 16-11 with a 3.78ERA. This season has been one of the worst of his career as he's 7-11 with a 6.23ERA and nearly as many walks (57) as K's (69). He's also hit nine batters.

Washington Nationals - When it comes to pitching, the Nats have none. The 666 runs they've allowed is the most in the NL. Without Livan Hernandez, the rotation has struggled even more as they have lost five straight, including seven of ten.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Follow me. Follow this triangle of league leaders. Pittsburgh Pirates infielder Freddy Sanchez, a former member of the Boston Red Sox, currently leads the NL in hitting with a .346 batting average. Baseball's home run and RBI leader, David Ortiz of those Red Sox, once played for the Minnesota Twins – the home of the AL's batting average leader in catcher Joe Mauer (.361BA).

Last Week's Trivia Answer: Once