

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, August 3rd, 2007
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Baseball's trading deadline has come and gone with a limited amount of movement. Who helped themselves? Who let a golden opportunity to get better slip away? Here's an attempt at breaking down the deals that transpired in the past week.....

Trading Deadline Breakdown/Review: Red Sox & Braves Make Biggest Splashes

One of the big winners from the trading deadline was the Boston Red Sox, who nabbed highly coveted reliever Eric Gagne from Texas. And all they had to give up to get him were Kason Gabbard, David Murphy and 17-year-old outfielder Engel Beltré – none of whom would likely start for them this year or next. Once a lights out closer with the Los Angeles Dodgers, the team he won a Cy Young Award with during the 2003 season, Gagne is an extra boost to an already solid bullpen that includes the likes of closer Jonathan Papelbon (24/26 saves) and setup man Hideki Okajima (2-0, 1.01ERA).

Prior to the 2007 season, Gagne converted a gaudy 161 of 168 save attempts for the highest conversion rate (96.6%) in Major League Baseball history among pitchers with a minimum of 100 career saves. With the Rangers this season, Gagne was 16 of 17 in save opportunities, had an ERA of 2.16 and allowed only two home runs in over 33 innings of work.

The only thing that could make this addition turn out to be not worth the trouble is if he goes down due to injury. While he's been hurt in each of the past two seasons, he's stayed healthy so far in '07 and the nice part is he doesn't have to be the closer like he was in his previous stops. Boston should have no trouble nursing leads once they get to the seventh inning.

At the very least, this acquisition should make them strong enough to get to the American League Championship Series.

Another team glad about what they did before the deadline is the Atlanta Braves. Boston was unable to land Rangers first baseman Mark Teixeira, however, the Braves made sure they got him. It took them parting ways with Jarrod Saltalamacchia, a future All-Star catcher, but Atlanta is hopeful he'll – alongside another one of their pickups – will help propel them into the postseason. They acquired a late-inning relief pitcher in Octavio Dotel from Kansas City that'll help them immensely in holding a lead and finishing off games. Bobby Cox and co. also added left-handed reliever Ron Mahay from Texas to their improved bullpen.

Besides former Yankees great Don Mattingley, Teixeira is the only other player in baseball history to have a 35-homer, 140-RBI season with a Gold Glove before the age of 25. June 26th was the last time a Braves first baseman hit a homer, until Teixeira arrived

and he's already nailed two out of the park. Atlanta now has a pair of switch hitters in the #3 and #4 holes with Teixeira and Chipper Jones. His arrival may very well have an indirect impact on Andrew Jones and Brian McCann, both of whom are hoping to raise their batting average. They've got a couple of .300-plus hitters in Edgar Renteria and Jeff Francoeur that don't get a whole lot of notoriety. Speaking of going unnoticed, pinch hitter Matt Diaz leads the Majors in pinch hits. At one point last season, he was 12-for-32 with a .375 batting average. He's already delivered 4RBI's the first two days of August.

Dotel is the ideal setup man, a role he thrived in with teams such as the Mets and Astros. Sure, his best years are behind him, but he knows the NL hitters and still is effective enough to get them out of a jam in eighth inning situations when they are tied or trying to hold onto a lead. In a limited role, Mahay can be a plus, too.

Other Moves:

*** The St. Louis Cardinals haven't completely fallen out of the NL Central race just yet. Baseball's defending World Champs acquired pitcher Joel Pinñeiro from the Red Sox. I'm not sure he was the guy they were looking for to get back in the thick of things and the playoff chase. In my opinion, that individual is starting pitcher and ace Chris Carpenter, who has been injured and a big reason why for their decline this season.

*** Omar Minaya didn't make a huge move, but did add another stick to the team's lineup. Luis Castillo, formerly of the Marlins and most recently the Minnesota Twins, was brought in to play second base for the Mets. Castillo is an upgrade over Ruben Gotay, based if for no other reason than on his experience alone. When the trade was made, Castillo had a 32-game hitting streak at Shea Stadium as well as a .358 batting average there since 2002. He gives them more stability in the infield, and while New York didn't get that bona-fide, stud pitcher to put them over the top and make them the clear-cut favorites to get to their first World Series in seven years, they're very much alive in a wide-open National League.

*** Philadelphia looked to solidify its position in the Wild Card hunt and NL East division title race. Charlie Manuel's Phillies got Kyle Lohse (6-12, 4.58ERA) from the Cincinnati Reds. Lohse got a taste of the postseason when he was with the Twins, but in order to do so this year, will have to really turn it around and go deep into games, which is something he's done with a pair of complete game performances. That should take pressure off a so-so bullpen. Tadahito Iguchi was an adequate pickup from the Chicago White Sox and really a stop-gap at second base until Chase Utley returns from his injury. Julio Mateo of the Seattle Mariners adds depth to their pitching.

*** Grady Little and the Dodgers made an attempt to bolster their bullpen a little bit with the addition of Scott Proctor from the Yankees for infielder Wilson Betemit. To be honest, the trade was an absolute wash. The Yankees would've been better off shipping so-so reliever Kyle Farnsworth to Tampa Bay in exchange for Ty Wigginton, a

better hitter than Betemit. As for LA, another bat or someone that's more qualified to start off the mound than Proctor was the better option for them.

*** As his job status may be up in the air at this moment, Phil Garner and the Houston Astros got Ty Wigginton from Tampa Bay for reliever Dan Wheeler. Garner hopes that Wigginton hits more consistently than Morgan Ensberg, who seemed to be in a funk and needed a change, was. Wigginton can bat fifth in Houston's lineup behind Lance Berkman and Carlos Lee, plus is capable enough to play pretty much anywhere across the infield. In each of the past four games, the Houston Astros have allowed 11 or more runs. The 1986 Milwaukee Brewers are the only other team to do that in the last 50 years. So in other words, what I'm trying to say is their pitching is no longer as dependable as it once was, meaning their playoff chances for '07 are pretty much shot.

*** Under first-year Manager Bud Black, the San Diego Padres picked up ex-Astros 3B Morgan Ensberg as well as utility player Rob Mackowiak from the White Sox. Two years ago, Ensberg really was a threat with the bat in his hands and provided power, cranking out 36 home runs, 30 doubles and drove in 101 runs. Last year he got issued 101 walks and his batting average dipped from .283 to .235. This season was no different in Houston as he hovered around .230/.235. Either he was getting behind pitches too late or on them too early and his confidence has been affected. A change of scenery should do him good. Mackowiak had some good days with the Pirates when he was in the NL and can be used as a starting outfielder if needed or a pinch hitter off the bench.

Give San Diego credit for this – they're trying to improve their anemic offense. In Wally Joiner's first day as hitting coach, the Pads scored 11 runs. Problem is both the Dodgers and Diamondbacks are playing better, more consistent baseball at the moment, and the Colorado Rockies no longer can be taken lightly. Getting rid of Scott Linebrink, now with Milwaukee, last week probably wasn't their best decision.

*** Pittsburgh was able to pull off a deal with the San Francisco Giants to get pitcher Matt Morris. Morris has a record of 7-7 with a 4.35ERA in 21 starts, and while he hasn't pitched well as of late, he is 6-0 at PNC Park. My question is, did the Pirates make this move just to have him for the rest of the season or are there plans in place to keep him beyond the '07 campaign? There better be or else this was a wasted trade.

*** One of the teams that decided to stay pat in the NL West was the first place Arizona Diamondbacks. Expected to hit a slump, especially when it was announced last Friday that Randy Johnson would be out for the rest of the season, the D-Backs reeled off ten wins in 11 games going into yesterday. Another hitter wouldn't have hurt since batters #4-7 have all been hitting under .250.

*** As predicted, the Cleveland Indians got Kenny Lofton. Cleveland can use him in a variety of ways – pinch hitter, pinch runner, starting outfielder. Even at his age, Lofton provides speed, a solid bat and his glove isn't bad either. He's a veteran player,

and on a team with some younger guys, they're hoping that his leadership and experience rubs off on some of those less experienced players as we inch towards September.

*** Somewhat surprising, the Angels didn't do anything. Didn't make a stronger push for Teixeira, a veteran starting pitcher or even someone to use off the bench. While I don't consider them a 'loser' for failing to make a deadline deal, they certainly could've bettered their World Series chances by giving Vlad Guerrero more protection in the lineup than just a Garret Anderson past his prime and a Gary Matthews Jr. who only performs at home (.314 batting average there; struggles on the road with a .245BA).

*** Also a slight surprise, the Washington Nationals didn't part ways with Francisco Cordero, plus gave contract extensions to infielders Ronnie Belliard and Dmitri Young. Many felt as if the Nats would be the NL version of what the Texas Rangers were this year before the deadline, and the Pittsburgh Pirates were last season. Or what we call 'sellers.' Instead, they were quiet and actually reaping the benefits with a three-game winning streak and record better than four teams in the NL. That's not too horrible for a club most, myself included, thought would be a synch to lose 100 games.

HOT:

Mariners pitcher Miguel Batista - The former Diamondbacks and Blue Jays right-hander has won each of his last three starts, including four of five since June 30th. His 11 wins match a career-high he set last year as well as in 2001.

Orioles pitcher Erik Bedard - On Tuesday night, he beat the Red Sox for his seventh win in a row. Bedard, the Majors' leader in strikeouts with 181, has developed into a top-notch lefty in baseball and should be one for the next few years.

Phillies outfielder Pat Burrell - His .435 batting average during the month of July was the second highest in the National League. In addition, Burrell reached base safely in 21 straight games heading into August.

NOT:

A's pitcher Joe Blanton - After starting the season with an 8-4 record, Blanton has since dropped four straight as Oakland continues to slide. In fact, he's been touched up for 52 hits and 24 earned runs in his last five starts.

Twins infielder Nick Punto - With almost as many stolen bases (13) as RBI (20), Punto holds a batting average just 11 points above the Mendoza line of .200. He's failed to get a hit since July 25th, and not so coincidentally, they are 6-9 their last 15.

Blue Jays third baseman Troy Glaus - An ex-All-Star with the Angels, Glaus is currently in a bit of a funk with Toronto, having gone 2-for-24 with only one RBI over the past seven days.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

When leading or tied after six innings, the Boston Red Sox are 58-4. That record should continue to get better with the addition of Gagne.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

On this date in baseball history in 2002, which former member of the Seattle Mariners tied a Major League record for sacrifice flies in a game with three? He became the sport's 11th player in history to accomplish the feat.

Last Week's Answer: Lou Gehrig (13), Jimmie Foxx (13) & Al Simmons (11)