

MLB Baseball Weekly --- Friday, August 4th, 2006
BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

Monday's trade deadline came without Alfonso Soriano being traded. It also came without a major pitcher – Barry Zito, Dontrelle Willis or Jason Schmidt – getting dealt. However, Carlos Lee has found a new home, as have Bobby Abreu, Greg Maddux and several others. We begin with my breakdown of the moves made.....

'Breaking Down' The Trades:

Big Winner - New York Yankees - Getting Bobby Abreu from the Phillies solidifies their outfield for the postseason stretch and fills a void until Gary Sheffield and Hideki Matsui return. When you really get to thinking about it, the Yankees are a deeper team now with Bernie Williams, Johnny Damon and they didn't have to give up Melky Cabrera to get him. Nor second baseman Robinson Cano. Reliever Scott Proctor wasn't involved in the deal. Neither was top pitching prospect Phillip Hughes. All they had to give up was 20-year shortstop C.J. Henry, 27-year-old reliever Matt Smith, catcher Jesus Sanchez and right-handed pitcher Carlos Monasterios. None of those players were on the current big league roster and none looked like 'locks' to make it in 2007. And although he wasn't the reason why they made the deal, getting starting pitcher Cory Lidle certainly helped, given the history of injuries of guys like Jaret Wright, Carl Pavano and age in lefty Randy Johnson. GM Brian Cashman pulled the trigger on what I believed was the best deal before the deadline. Of course, the Yankees spend more money than anyone else in the sport and the payroll can be sickening to look at or hear about at times.

Also Winners - Cincinnati Reds & Detroit Tigers - How much better is the Cincinnati bullpen? Well, if it not that good now then it tells you how bad it was at one point. They brought in lefty Rheal Cormier from Philadelphia, added former Minnesota starter Kyle Lohse, got Eddie Guardado in a trade with Seattle a couple weeks ago, and received Bill Bray and Gary Majewski in a criticized trade with Washington that lost them Austin Kearns. While they might miss Kearns as they are in a bit of funk at the moment, Cincinnati did strengthen its bullpen and are much better equipped for a September run to the playoffs. Guardado is already starting to pay dividends as their closer. This also helps their starting staff, enabling them to maybe go one less inning out in the unbearable August heat. In their deals to get Cormier and Lohse, all they gave up were minor league pitching prospects Justin Germano and Zach Ward. Meanwhile, Detroit had a strong bullpen before the deadline and didn't need to any help to it, but did consider going out and getting another left-handed stick. They did in veteran first baseman Sean Casey, a former member of the Reds who was acquired from Pittsburgh in a trade where all they had to give up was minor league pitcher Brian Rogers. Detroit optioned Chris Shelton, who got off to such a hot tear in April, down to AAA Toledo and will now use Casey (.291Avg.) as their every-day first baseman on into the playoffs. This was a quiet, shrewd pickup by GM Dave Dombrowski as AL pitchers haven't seen him and it showed on Tuesday night when he hit a homer vs. Tampa Bay.

Losers - Milwaukee Brewers - Last Friday, Texas sent off outfielder Kevin Mench, outfielder Laynce Nix and right-handed reliever Francisco Cordero to Milwaukee for a big splash name – Carlos Lee – and prospect Nelson Cruz. In this move, the Rangers clearly got the better end of the deal and here's why. Doug Melvin simply shouldn't have included a prospect in this swap, especially with age on outfielder Geoff Jenkins. Milwaukee was still in the hunt and still are to a certain extent. Plus, they just got Ben Sheets back to form a 1-2 combination in the starting rotation with Chris Capuano that would give them a decent chance at the Wild Card, provided their fielding improves and the bullpen doesn't crumble to pieces. Melvin traded for Cordero when he was in Texas, now hoping he'll push Derrick Turnbow for the closer job. Texas believes Cruz will eventually develop into their starting right fielder and was the one who made this deal happen, according to some people in the media. Though some scouts say he's not as good as he's made out to be, the Brewers could've parted ways with someone else. And if you want to part ways with Cruz, don't part ways with Lee and vice versa. It doesn't completely deplete their outfield because they do get Mench (10 of his 12HR's came before May 5th) and Nix. However, it's a move that could have been avoided.

Boston Red Sox - Why a loser? Because they made no move. Was standing pat a good idea for Theo Epstein and the Red Sox? As long as David Ortiz and co. bails out bad pitching performances with clutch hitting late, in the ninth inning of games, they'll be fine. However, you don't want to count on that happening every time out. Boston felt they were going to be better with David Wells and a couple others returning to them, but Wells recently had a bad outing and catcher Jason Varitek is now out for a month. Once you get around Ortiz and Manny Ramirez, this lineup isn't quite the same as the one that did damage to everyone in their path during the team's 2004 World Series run. Another bat, maybe to come off the bench, could've been used, and another pitcher certainly could've further solidified their starting rotation. Curt Schilling and Josh Beckett hopefully are able to dominate in the postseason – but if unable to – Wells doesn't look like a safe bet. Neither does a young, inexperienced pitcher John Lester, nor the usually dependable knuckleballer Tim Wakefield, now slipping just a bit with age.

New York Mets - It's not their fault, though. The likely season-ending separated shoulder injury to reliever Duaner Sanchez, suffered riding in a cab at 2AM in Miami, forced the Mets' hand to trade away outfielder Xavier Nady for veteran reliever Roberto Hernandez and pitcher Oliver Perez. Now their middle relief leading up to closer Billy Wagner takes a hit going into the postseason, and who knows how long it will be before the talented, yet sometimes a puzzling Lastings Milledge wears out his New York welcome. Plain and simple – they weren't able to get that extra starting pitcher they wanted and will probably be without Sanchez for the postseason.

Noteworthy Accomplishments:

Last Friday, Houston's Luke Scott became the first Astros player to hit for the cycle since Craig Biggio in 2002. Also last week... Cleveland Indians pitcher Jeremy

Sowers became the fifth rookie since 1990 to throw consecutive shutouts, joining the likes of Dontrelle Wills (Florida - 2003); Rolando Arrojo (Tampa Bay - 1998); Hideo Nomo (LA Dodgers - 1995); and Mark Gardner (Montreal - 1990). Sowers was the franchise's first player to do it in 34 years.

Other 'Tidbits':

*** Did Dodgers GM Ned Colletti fools us? He made us think the Dodgers were starting to fade out of the NL West hunt, then he pulled the trigger on a deal to get Greg Maddux. On Thursday night, Maddux polished off 18 Reds batters, not allowing a single run or hit to get his 10th win of the season and help LA finish off a road sweep of Cincinnati. Ridding themselves of relievers Danys Baez and Will Aybar, the Dodgers have a building block for the future in Wilson Betemit. By getting Maddux, the Dodgers were able to put Aaron Sele in the bullpen temporarily while the rest of their rotation consists of Brad Penny, Derek Lowe and Chad Billingsley. Colletti's team also brought in middle infielder Julio Lugo, an experienced bat with decent power to help with Jeff Kent on the DL and give Rafael Furcal a veteran double play partner in Kent's absence. Don't look now, but the Dodgers are only three games removed from the top spot in the division.

*** As predicted, the Pittsburgh Pirates were sellers at the deadline. And in some ways, what they did made sense. They didn't get rid of their top-notch young talent, such as pitcher Zach Duke or hard-throwing reliever Mike Gonzalez. Xavier Nady might be a steal for them in that outfield, provided he plays like he did with the Mets [not the Padres] and hangs around for the start of the 2007 season.

*** Even though they are tied with Tampa Bay for the fewest runs scored in the American League, Oakland should win the AL West because of their pitching. The only team in their league that has allowed fewer runs is Detroit – considered to have the best pitching in baseball. In fact, heading into Thursday's play, the Tigers had allowed **51 fewer runs** than the next closest team in the Majors! Over in the NL, only three teams – the Mets, Padres and Rockies – have allowed less than 500 runs.

*** Did you see who is atop the Major League wins tally? It's Detroit Tigers pitcher Justin Verlander, whose 14 wins not only have him in the discussion for American League Rookie of the Year, but possibly AL Cy Young. It has been a great year for young pitchers – just see Francisco Liriano (Minnesota), Jered Weaver (Angels) and Jonathan Papelbon (Boston).

*** Remember before the season when it was written that Philadelphia's Ryan Howard, the Home Run Derby Champ from a month ago, was the NL version of Boston Red Sox DH David Ortiz? Well, the two appear to be batting it out for the regular season home run crown. Coming into Thursday, Big Papi had 37 blasts to go with 105 RBI, while Howard led the NL with 36. And let's put the debate of 'who is the best clutch player in the sport' to rest. No disrespect to Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter or St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols – Papi out-shines them all when a game is on the line. Time

and time again he delivers. Too bad Howard won't get to showcase his power skills in the playoffs, but he's still got a bright future ahead of him.

HOT:

New York Yankees - Atop the AL East standings, the Bronx Bombers are well on their way to a 12th consecutive playoff appearance if they keep playing like they are heading into Friday. Their big five-game series at Fenway is only two weeks away.

Mets outfielder Carlos Beltran - The former Kansas City Royals and Houston Astros star had a whale of a series in Atlanta last weekend. Beltran leads the bigs in RBI on the road. If he's able to carry this hot streak into the playoffs, he might not only win NL MVP, but help the Mets reach their first World Series since 2000.

Angels outfielder Juan Rivera - Clearly having his 'breakthrough season', Rivera would be a great get for you fantasy nuts out there. He had a hot July, hitting 11 home runs to help the Angels to a 19-7 record during the month.

Braves pitcher John Smoltz - Since July 3rd when he pitched six strong innings to lead the Braves past the Cardinals, Smoltz has a record of 5-0 in his last six starts. In fact, the 39-year-old Atlanta right-hander hasn't lost since June 13th at Florida.

NOT:

Toronto Blue Jays - Shea Hillenbrand might've been right, although he shouldn't have wrote it on the team's clubhouse board. This looks like a sinking ship. Just swept by the Yankees, Toronto has lost five straight and might be this year's version of the Baltimore Orioles – team that made moves in the off-season but sputters late.

St. Louis Cardinals - If not careful, St. Louis, which rebounded from its last slump, might find themselves neck-and-neck with Cincinnati for the division crown in September.

Indians bullpen - Tribe blew their third game in a row on Wednesday night. Manager Eric Wedge isn't blameless by any means in all of this either. Both he and Toronto Manager John Gibbons might be on the hot seat to begin next season.

STAT OF THE WEEK:

Currently the Detroit Tigers are 72-36. Last season's version of the Tigers went 72-90. Do the math – by going 1-53 the remainder of the way they can surpass their win total from 2005. Detroit last won 100+ games in 1984 when Sparky Anderson was the Manager and the Tigers won the World Series. They might as well hand the AL Manager of the Year award to Jim Leyland right now.

TRIVIA QUESTION OF THE WEEK:

Entering Friday, what American League team has the most one-run victories so far this season?

Last Week's Answer: Roger Clemens