

'Better Eight Than Never' - *The Newsletter of MLB8*

Week 14 Round up

Some flexing of muscles took place in the AL this week as the 'have's' (Toronto, Minnesota, Kansas City, Anaheim and Texas) all had winning records while the 'have not's' (Seattle, Oakland, Tampa and New York) all posted losing records.

This means that the Jays, Twins, Angels and Rangers strengthened their position as favourites to make the postseason, while the Royals emerged as the favourites to take advantage should any of those teams slip up. Boston remain in the wild card race, despite a disappointing week which included being swept by the Devil Rays. The poorer teams may now have another race on their mind but more of that later.....

In the NL, the Dodgers have pretty much clinched the West and showed their mettle with a sweep of the Expos in San Juan. This partly explains the Expos 3-6 week, which tightens up the East again. The Phils may now be out of it at 8 games back but Florida are only 3 back whilst the offensively potent Braves loom only 5 back. They may well though live to regret being swept at Wrigley by the Cubbies where their offense deserted them to the tune of only 3 runs in the series.

The Cubs desperately needed that as their battle with the Reds continued in the Central, as it came after they themselves got swept by the Pirates. The Reds went 6-3 to take a 2-game lead, though 6-3 in a week when they played Milwaukee, Arizona and Colorado may not be classed as a great week by GM Mayfield. The loser of this divisional battle is virtually certain to be the wild card.

All Star Reflections by Philip Howard

Congratulations to Bo and the NL. It was disappointing to lose, but the AL kept it close until the 9th inning. The performance of our 2-3-4 hitters was something of a let-down, but the lower order performed better. Todd Jones in particular was excellent in relief.

My fatal mistake was to give Julio Mateo playing time - Alex Cora and Adrian Beltre jumped on him for home runs! This was done with the best intentions: I wanted to use a specialist reliever, and also to try to give all 12 AL clubs actual playing time, which I achieved through my choice of relief pitchers and the pinch-hitters.

However, in terms both of performance this season (12 HRs given up) and actual ability, Mateo was an unwise selection, and if this were a competitive game then LaTroy Hawkins would have been selected (Ed - a point echoed by Twins manager Dave Brown who described Hawkins slot as fourth

reliever as a "strange choice"). Perhaps we should petition Danny to add a "This One Counts" rule??

(Ed – Please no!! Hate the idea and have enough trouble organising the game without that.)

Dodger Views by Patrick Lee

"Things are looking reasonably good for us at the moment. We rested some players against Arizona this week and could have no complaints about a 2-1 series defeat. But with just about our first-choice line-up we swept both the Brewers and the Expos. Barring a complete collapse we should win the NL West soon, maybe even next week.

Our batting remains solid, and sporadically explosive. Beltre's production has slowed a little, but others have stepped up in the meantime. Such as Jolbert Cabrera, whose remarkable defense (50 Field Saves is 11 more than anyone else in baseball), is now almost matched by his offense (28 HRs - only four behind Beltre). In fact all our batters are contributing positively, game 3 in Montreal being a good example, when all nine batters had 1-2 hits.

But it's our pitching that has pleased me most in recent weeks. All five starters have an ERA well below 3.00, as do our top two relievers, and we're generally pitching far better than I would have expected, especially as our team ERA was in the bottom ten of the majors after the first six weeks of the season.

Looking at the NL overall, I'd still make the Expos favourites for the East, though it's a tough division so there could be more twists yet. If we were to get top seeding we'd probably play either the Cubs or Reds, who are having a great battle for the Central, but since both have superb home records, visiting either for the first two games in a 5-game series would probably make us playoff underdogs!

In the AL the Twins and Blue Jays seem to have the consistency to secure their divisions, but I have a feeling that the Anaheim / Texas duel might give the West winner the extra momentum to get to the World Series.

Comme ci, comme ca! Expos report

The Expos recent performances have been patchy at best. Having hit the top of the tough NL East in Week 9, the Expos have not been able to break clear of the chasing pack, and this week saw the Marlins yet again erode their lead in the division by a further two games. But far from worrying about being overhauled by his arch-nemesis from MLB1, Stuart Guard-Ward, Expos' Coach, David Trice, is relaxed about the team's recent dip in fortunes.

"There's no need to panic, we are conscious that the performances have been poor recently, but there are rational explanations as to why. Recent injuries have hurt our regular battery, with Michael Barrett going down for 14 games after

we had rested him for 6 games, as well as a number of injuries to pitchers in the past weeks. Losing Claudio Vargas for 32 games was very tough on us - our trainers aren't very high, but they aren't the worst by any means."

The Barrett injury was particularly galling to Trice, coming as it did after Barrett had had a week's rest following an appearance in the first series of Week 13. "Michael hurt himself in a routine warm up, but it has taken him a long time to overcome this sore knee. In the interim we have had to manage with Matt Cepicky, a 4*, behind the plate for what will be a 20 game stretch when Michael returns against the Reds this week."

Barrett has had a poor season, and has suffered some with fatigue from early in the season, meaning that the Expos will undoubtedly be in the market for a replacement in the off-season. During the start of the season Barrett's early form lead the Expos to release reserve catcher, Wil Cordero. However this decision has hurt the Montreal club in recent days.

"Ordinarily we wouldn't run so light in this position, but we needed cover elsewhere and tried to stock our Minor League clubs early in the year." Ironically Cordero joined the Minnesota Twins, a team whose sweep of the Expos started to raise eyebrows in Canada. "Minnesota have a great team in great form - look out for them in the ALCS" was Trice's appraisal of a team who are 24-9 in their last 33 games. (Ed – This is fair comment though news from Minnesota is that GM Brown is concerned by the injury to star pitcher Eddie Guardado, though this is not long-term).

By contrast the Expos are 17-16, but that is still equal to the Marlins and just 2 games worse than the NL East's form team, Atlanta, who are 19-14. In that period the Expos swept the Cincinnati Reds, who have dropped their early season form at the wrong time, and the two teams meet again this week in different circumstances to Week 11.

"The Reds are a great club, but the loser of this series may start to worry about reaching the playoffs - that's for sure", said Trice over a citron presse in a Montreal cafe.

"We have had to rest a number of very good players, Cabrera, Zeile, Schneider, Guerrero, Calloway and Vidro, over the past few weeks. That's the meat of this lineup, and without them we are a weaker team. However I am sure that I am not alone in resting my stars in the run-in to the playoffs, and feel confident that we have to put ourselves in the best position to progress in the playoffs even if we risk missing them by doing so. It's no good celebrating a division title if you get swept in the NLDS. It may not make any sense, but I manage a French-Canadian ball club that plays home games in San Juan - I don't have to make sense!"

Perhaps it is those long trips to San Juan that have worn down the team. However the Expos have picked up a number of young players in recent weeks which means that the minor

league system is stocked with some pretty good prospects for the future. The highlight was signing Matt Miller from Colorado, a fine pitcher who is developing his fastball in Triple-A at the Edmonton Trappers.

He joins Nick Johnson, Carl Everett and Juan Rivera as good young players signed this season, along with the fantastically talented Endy Chavez, who is batting .255 with 8 home runs and 59 RBIs in the majors despite being a rookie. Clearly he's favourite for this year's Rookie of the Year.

In the end, the Expos believe that they are doing the right things fundamentally to build a good ball club, including paying attention to their stadium, and will be strong this year and in the years to come, although they are fully expecting their three excellent competitors in the NL East to have the same feelings about their team. For Trice, questions still remain about this year. What if the Expos don't come out on top?

"Bof?" says Trice, with a typically gallic shrug. "Another drink?" Comme ci, comme ca!

Week 15 Preview

There are the usual number of key battles this week (Rangers at Angels, Expos at Marlins, Blue Jays at Royals, Marlins at Dodgers, Expos at Reds, Angels at Twins, Rangers at Blue Jays, Royals at Red Sox, Dodgers at Cubs) but the most intriguing part of the week may be the release of the upcoming draft list.

This focuses the mind onto the teams who are struggling in this first season in MLB8. The race for the No. 1 pick is currently headed by the Mariners who are followed by the Giants, Brewers, D'Backs, D'Rays, Athletics, Yankees, then Rockies.

They will be interested to see the quality of players available and, in this early stage of the league, it is possible that a top rookie could make a big immediate impact. The M's, Brew Crew and D'Backs will surely be looking for a big bat to boost their lineup. This could leave the pitching-needy Giants and Devil Rays to pick up the best pitching prospect/s.

Interesting times throughout the league.

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Until next week, Ian.