

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

Week 16 Round up

Amazing week in the NL. The Braves (minus a couple of starting pitchers) go 9-0 including a no-hitter by Horacio Ramirez. The Expos don't have a bad week but are suddenly behind the Braves on run differential.

The bright news in Canada was the continuing slump of the Cubbies. They are now only 1 game ahead of the Expos / Braves so maybe the loser of that race may still get the wild card (and both have better run difference than the Cubs).

And guess what the first series of next week is Expos at Braves - massive! - and the Braves without possible Cy Young winner Russ Ortiz. The other bad news for the Cubbies is that young 2B Derrek Lee is out for the year.

Quietly amidst this drama in the NL, congratulations to Patrick Lee and his Dodgers for being the first team in MLB8 history to clinch a division.

As the week came to a close, their celebrations were dampened somewhat as they were swept by the Braves. This, combined with the Reds good week, means Cincy retake the lead in the race for homefield advantage. Chicago have chased the Reds hard but, when it mattered this week, the Reds showed their class in sweeping the Cubbies.

In the AL, the Jays pretty much secured their place in the postseason. The Twins still look likely in the Central, though the Royals are hanging on. Out West, things swung again as the Angels roared back at the Rangers. As described later, GM Gibson was disappointed but pragmatic about his team's week.

Twins Thoughts by Dave Brown

Another winning week, 5-4 this time, keeps the Twins well positioned to make the play-offs. That's now a winning week streak of 8 (7-2, 6-3, 5-4, 7-2, 6-3, 7-2, 6-3 and 5-4) which surely makes the Twins the hottest team in MLB8 over the second half of the season.

GM Brown splashing out back in week 9 on RF Richie Weeks was questioned at the time in some quarters, but it's surely not coincidence that his signing almost perfectly coincided with Minnesota's rise to the top. As they say, it's a player's value to the team which shows how much he's worth!

The only disappointment from week 16 for the Twins was that after going 5-4, in a tough week which included beating closest rivals Kansas City 2-1, and sharing 6 games with Toronto and Boston, the Royals managed to recover and actually reduce the gap in the AL Central to 5 thanks beating the Angels 2-1 and sweeping the A's.

So GM Brown has to continue the balancing act of trying to keep players fresh for the play-offs while still doing enough to win the AL central. Tricky...

Looking ahead to the post-season, things look like they'll be very tight. I really don't see any big difference between the likely contenders; just small things like injuries or home-field advantage could just make the difference.

But if I'm forced to make a tip, (ed – you're not, but it's fun and always adds a bit of spice!) I suppose I'll go for a world series between the Dodgers and the Blue Jays with the Dodgers to win in 6.

The View from Arlington by Ian Gibson

Last week was great but we did put everything into it so had to rest a number of very fatigued players this week (most of whom are just as fatigued now even though they barely played!).

Maybe unsurprisingly then we went 3-6 and now have the Angels back to just 1 game behind - and they have an advantage in run differential. We're still in reasonably good condition for the wild card (should the Angels overhaul us) but far from comfortable.

Even considering the resting of players, we were poor. Getting swept by the Mariners (in Arlington!) was dreadful with the AL's worst offense putting up 17 runs against our vaunted pitching.

Was a bit lucky to be honest to go 3-3 the rest of the way. All the games against the BoSox were close and we sneaked 2 of them. Then took 1 of 3 in Cleveland (making 8 errors in the series as obviously our gloves missed the flight to Ohio!).

I would like to take this opportunity to thank many fellow managers for their congratulations on my recent marriage. But also a warning – now that that's out of the way, I will be FULLY focused again and looking for every possible edge to bring a World Series to Texas!

Expos fans fear "Le fold"

Having lead the fiercely competitive NL East down the stretch, the Montreal Expos had their division lead snatched away by the in-form Atlanta Braves. Montreal,

hampered by injuries and fatigue, have limped through recent weeks, winning five games in Week 16, whilst Atlanta are soaring, going unbeaten last week.

Many fear that the psychological blow dealt by Atlanta coupled with their superior form and fitness over Montreal will lead the Expos challenge to explode in the forthcoming 18 games.

But to represent this division race as a simple case of in-form chaser catching the limping leader does not properly reflect the narrow margins of victory and defeat that this season in MLB8 has brought, and by which the Expos suffered this week.

Without Claudio Vargas, a fine reliever in the Expos organisation, Montreal allowed Philly and Chicago to come from behind and steal one run victories in late innings in each of their four defeats this week. A sweep of the D'Backs in the final series recovered some dignity from what was otherwise a poor week, compounded by Atlanta's exceptional performance.

Tied on games, but leading by run difference, Atlanta host Montreal this week in their last remaining head to head series in the regular season. The Braves have not had great success against Montreal this season, winning four and losing eleven over the inaugural MLB8 season.

If the Expos are the Braves bogey team, GM Trice hopes that the French Canadian hoodoo will hold, especially since the team starts the week without Almonte, regular starter, as well as Vargas still out for 7 more games.

3 positional starters have reached high levels of fatigue, and a fourth is still recovering at Triple-A Indianapolis from a dip in form brought on by tiredness. The chances of the Expos resisting the Braves will be slim, but a good series result to start the week could set them on their way.

Realistically, though, the team are now chasing the slumping Cubbies for a wild-card place, and looking over their shoulder hoping to evade the grasp of the Marlins and Phillies.

If another Trice team does fold, as they have before with a playoff place already in sight, then insiders say that next season is unlikely to see the team mount another strong challenge. It has been suggested that the Expos wages could jump by as many as 14 next year, which would limit further investment in the stadium and facilities.

For Montreal, all efforts are focussed on winning now, and the team remain upbeat and determined with their trip to Atlanta ahead of them.

Braves thoughts by Mike Sim

Everything clicked this week. I was very concerned coming in as 2 of my usual 5 starting pitchers were injured - Ramirez for 5 games but I knew I had to get him a start somehow. I couldn't start Ortiz in game 1 (though it was his turn as he was fatigued) and I really wanted to see how he'd go against the Dodgers.

This meant raiding the bullpen for my ace reliever Hampton and he responded brilliantly (despite being fatigued for game 1... a necessary risk). Had to plug in 6* LHP Bong and he did well, 1 hit and 2 runs in 6 innings. Overall the best bit was how stingy the pitchers were - we gave up 4 hits in 3 games to the Pirates and did well in Florida and at home to LA.

Hitting has been frustrating me all season. We have been amongst the top run scorers (and runs for / against) in the league without the wins to show for it. This week we got the key hits from just about everyone in the line-up.

Some weeks you just get lucky, others you get burnt - we got lucky and right on time. LaRoche had a huge series vs LA but we got people on base enough to put pressure on opposing pitchers all week. The series win in Florida was our biggest of the season and set the tone for the week.

The NL East would love to send 2 teams to the playoffs - the Cubs would love to stop us. The Braves-Expos matchup is huge but in another way is just 3 games. If we lose all 3 and then win the remaining 6 games and are a game up on the Cubbies for the wild card I'd be happy enough.

The Phillies may not be out of it yet and the Marlins definitely aren't. IF either sweeps their series, they could be right back in there.

Losing Ortiz is tough - he's been our only pitcher with any success against Montreal but we'll move on. We need to score runs against what will be some tough Expos starting pitching and get into that bullpen!

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Until next week, Ian.