

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

Week 17 Round up

In the AL, things tightened up again in an enthralling AL West race. Ian Gibson's Rangers struggled their way to a 4-5 week while Beaumont's Angels won all 3 series to go 6-3 (conceding only 25 runs in the 9 games). They hold a 1-game lead which is effectively 2 as they have a huge advantage in run differential. Week 18 is going to be interesting for these 2 ballclubs.

The Rangers still though hold a 5-game lead in the wild card race over the BoSox who are themselves a game ahead of the Royals. Both these teams have nothing really to play for other than chase Texas for the wild card as (though not mathematically) the Jays and Twins look to have secured their divisions. The Jays week was saved by their series against the A's (see later).

Over in the NL, it was another incredible week in the NL East. The Braves took 2 of 3 from the Expos in their crucial series on the way to a 6-3 week. However, the Expos enjoyed being back in Montreal as they swept the Giants to end the week still tied with the Braves.

The Braves have a big advantage in run differential but this looks like it will go down to the wire and the season-ending injury to talented RF Langerhans will not help the boys from Atlanta. And suddenly the Phils are within 5 though their surge looks to be just too late.

The consolation for the loser of this race is that they may now get the wild card as the Cubs disappointing slump continued. They had been on a great run but seem to have hit the wall in the last few weeks. Being swept at home to the Pirates summed up their week as their bats all seem to have gone cold at the same time. A season-ending injury to all-star Sammy Sosa only compounds their problems heading into the final week.

Though the Reds only went 3-6 the Cubs problems mean that they have now clinched the division. However, they have fallen 1 game behind the Dodgers in the race for homefield advantage. The Giants horrible season continues – they have lost 7 on the trot and are only 2 games 'behind' Seattle in the race for the No.1 draft pick in the first MLB8 draft.

On the free-agent front 3 contending teams made their final moves to strengthen their roster for the final push.

The Jays and Twins chose to strengthen their pitching (though the Twins acquisition was more for the future) while the Dodgers added versatile IF Shane Halter to their powerful lineup. The Devil Rays also invested some of their hard-earned fortune on talented 2B prospect Geoff Blum.

Philly Thoughts by Rob Crowther

We're very pleased with our performances in recent weeks, can't really explain our sudden turn around in form other than the fact we've mostly had three healthy starting outfielders in recent weeks in stark contrast to the middle part of the season. We've also invested in a fair bit of coaching over the last few weeks so that maybe helped a little too.

I'm not expecting any miracles in the final week, and that's what it would take for us to make the playoffs, but I'm maybe regretting that we didn't pick up any half decent outfielders when we had the chance because there were none on the FA list when we were ready to sign them. We did pick up Perez but we suffered 2 injuries at the same time and he couldn't play both positions.

Next season is what we're all about now. We've started building up the merchandising, we're waiting for next season to invest in trainers and we should have a few spare LPs to fling at the stadium, so financially we'll be in OK shape (though not as good as some Florida teams!). We have several young players with decent potential and have trained this year with a focus on our stadium so we hope to have a much improved record at home next season as the players gradually adjust.

Our main hole in the batting lineup is at reserve catcher but there look to be some good prospects in that position on the draft and in the free agent list. We expect to do some 'cycling' of pitchers through the FA list in the early part of next season as several of the guys we have will not be good value, but we'd avoid picking up anyone who wasn't at least half decent as a replacement, unlike early this season where we needed to generate some LPs.

The outlook from the Sky Dome by Philip Howard

The Jays had a very mixed week - our starting pitching was disappointing in the opening series against the Yankees, but was superb against the A's, with a complete game one-hitter for Kelvin Escobar and a no-hitter for Vinnie Chulk. As Chulk walked the second

batter of the first inning, the scale of his achievement only gradually became apparent. It was based on a long succession of routine ground-outs and fly balls: there were only 3 strikeouts, and no field saves. DH Chris Singleton did single on a 7th-inning error by catcher Greg Myers, but was the only Athletic to reach first after that first-inning walk.

Looking ahead, the team's pitching was strengthened by the signing of free-agent pitcher Fuentes. While he's had a poor season, the extra depth should ensure that the Jays have veteran support and can cover any losses of form in the playoffs. One area of concern is infield depth, with an injury to 2B Mike Bordick meaning he'll enter the playoffs short of match practice, but GM Howard is happy overall with the resting of starters which should ensure that key men such as Eric Hinske are in good shape to meet the best teams in the league.

Week 18 Preview

The final week of this 1st season is upon us and it really seems no time since the start of this league that we all entered with some trepidation. All the contending teams would argue that all their series are crucial but there are a few that jump out immediately.

The week begins with the Rangers hosting the Angels. Texas then travel to Tampa before returning home to face a Royals team that will be hoping they are still in the wild-card race at that point, having hosted the ChiSox and Mariners in their first 2 series. The Angels travel to the Jake before ending the season hosting the Jays in what could have divisional, wild-card and homefield advantage implications.

Boston will hope to sneak back into the wild card race and take advantage of any Texas slump. They will need to have a good week but will think it is possible as they play the Yanks, A's and White Sox, 3 teams with losing records.

The Twins have arguably the easiest week of the 4 teams in the race for homefield advantage and will hope that this gives the edge in this tight race. This will probably go to the wire and could still include all 4 teams right to the end as they are so close - Jays (91 wins), Twins (89), Angels (89) and Rangers (88).

In the NL East, the Expos face the fading Marlins and will look to beat them whilst hoping that the surging Phillies inflict some damage on the Braves. The Expos then have a 'relatively' easy looking series at home to

the Buccs before their week turns nasty with a trip to LA to face a Dodger team that may well have homefield advantage on their mind.

The Braves leave Philly to host a Cubs team fighting for their playoff lives, before ending their season with a trip to the BOB to face the Diamondbacks. I won't say that it will come down to the team that wants it most but it will probably come down to the team who has the most energy after an exhausting season.

The sandwich around the Cubbies trip to Atlanta is a trip to Milwaukee and a home series against the Fish. Though they are struggling with form and injuries, one last big effort could propel them into the playoffs, though they have an inferior run differential. 1 of these 3 teams (Braves, Expos, Cubs) is going to be very disappointed to see a great season come to nothing.

In the race for homefield advantage, the Reds face 3 teams with losing records (Pittsburgh, Arizona and Colorado) so will hope that they can cash in on this. However, aside from the Expo series, the Dodgers have a relatively easy week as they face the Rockies and Brewers. There is very little difference in run differential between these teams though there is an argument that the Reds will want homefield advantage more as they have made the Great American Ballpark a fortress and have the best home record in the Majors.

In the race to be worst, the Giants could go 0-9 as they face Arizona, Philly and Milwaukee. However, they would still need Seattle to win 3 games from their series against Oakland, KC and New York.

Nailbiting week with 12 teams still in with some sort of chance of the postseason and another 2 fighting it out for the No.1 pick. And don't forget those other 10 teams are still playing hard also and could still play crucial roles as spoilers.

Good luck to all.

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<http://www.gbspn.com/> Gameplan Baseball news and statistics from all eight Gameplan Baseball leagues.

<http://www.uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/gameplanbaseball/messages> A discussion group for Gameplan Baseball managers. The group includes discussions on the features of the game, news, results, and possible developments.

Until next week, Ian.