

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

### Week 18 Round up

What a finish! The AL went something like this –

|             |                               |
|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Toronto     | 91,92,92,93,93,94,95,95,95,95 |
| Anaheim     | 89,89,90,90,90,91,92,93,94,95 |
| Minnesota   | 89,90,91,91,91,91,92,92,92,93 |
| Texas       | 88,89,89,90,90,91,91,91,92,92 |
| Boston      | 83,83,84,84,85,85             |
| Kansas City | 82,82,83,83                   |

KC finally dropped out of the wild card race following their 2-1 home series defeat to the ChiSox. The BoSox were officially eliminated following a defeat at Fenway to the A's, which was coupled by a Texas win in Tampa. That left the 4 playoff teams competing for playoff seedings.....

With 4 to play, the Jays held a 3-game lead over the others. They, Anaheim and the Twins won their next games whilst Texas got beat by Tampa, thus eliminating them from the race for homefield. The Jays travelled to Anaheim knowing that they only needed to take 1 game to secure homefield throughout the AL playoffs. The Twins and Rangers were hovering to try and take advantage of any scraps.

The Angels won the first game whilst Texas lost heavily to the Royals and the Twins lost to the Rays who continued their role as spoiler. This pretty much set it that the Twins would be the 3 seed and Texas the 4 seed. Game 2 in Anaheim and the Angel pitching staff continued to stifle Toronto on the way to a 5-1 win.

This set up the winner takes all clash on the last day of the season. In a thrilling game amidst raucous scenes at Edison International Field, both starters left early and both teams left numerous baserunners as the Angels held on 4-3. If the lack of homefield advantage in the ALCS (if they get there) comes back to haunt Toronto, GM Howard will rue his team's inability to capitalise when they had runners on base.

The NL was just as thrilling and went like this –

|              |                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Los Angeles  | 95,96,97,97,97,98,99,100,101,101 |
| Cincinnati   | 94,95,95,95,96,97,97,97,97       |
| Atlanta      | 87,88,88,88,88,89,90,91,91,92    |
| Montreal     | 87,88,89,89,89,90,91,91,91,92    |
| Chicago      | 85,86,87,88,89,89,90,90,90       |
| Philadelphia | 82,82,83,84,85,86,87             |

The Dodgers clinched homefield with 2 games left as the Reds slumped to a season-ending sweep in Colorado. The East and wildcard race was gripping throughout the week. Whilst the Phils took 2 from the Braves, the Expos were winning 2 of 3 against the Marlins. The Cubs swept the Brewers in Milwaukee to leave themselves level with Atlanta and 1 behind Montreal.

Things got even more interesting as the Cubbies won the first game in their series in Atlanta while the Expos lost at home as the Pirates roughed up Livan Hernandez. The Braves and Expos then turned on their pitching. Atlanta took the other 2 games against Chicago as Byrd and Ramirez pitched complete games. Meanwhile, the Expos staff worked out of numerous jams to throw consecutive shutouts against Pitt (despite 23 baserunners in the 2 games).

This left Montreal a game ahead of the Braves who were a game ahead of the Cubs with the final series to play. The Expos lost a tight game in LA whilst Atlanta defeated Arizona and Chicago beat Florida. This put Atlanta top on run differential. All 3 teams then lost their next game, effectively eliminating the Cubbies as their offense just ran out of steam, possibly due to the injury bug.

The Expos were in the postseason but knew they needed to win in LA and hope Atlanta lost in order to win the division. They duly prevailed over a Dodger team looking ahead to the playoffs and then waited. The news eventually filtered through that, in a tight game, Atlanta's bullpen allowed nothing in the final 3 innings as they held on for a 6-3 win.

So, LA ranked 1, Cincy 2, Atlanta winning the East to rank 3 and the Expos 4.

### Halo Hollerings by Paul Beaumont

After a disappointing start to the final nine games, losing 2-1 in Texas, the Angels finished in style. The last five games were victories, including a sweep of the Blue Jays to secure the divisional title and homefield advantage in the AL.

The solid acquisitions made by the Angels during the season (Osik, Clayton, Lewis, Weber, MacPherson, and Sweeney) have settled in well to help form a tough, deep roster. The performance over the last few weeks has been especially good as star SS Kennedy has been out with damaged knee ligaments. Unsung heroes on the team have been Jones and Lewis from the pitching staff and Figgins and Molina from the position players.

The Angels now face a tough five game series versus their divisional rival Rangers. With the first two games in Arlington the series is too close to call. From the regular season stats the Rangers shade the pitching (despite Anaheim having a slightly lower ERA) as they, statistically, have the stronger frontline starters with the phenomenal Drese in the bullpen. The Angels depth in the line-up means they just shade it offensively, despite missing Kennedy.

However, this is the playoffs where superstars step up to take their team through. If the Rangers win their home games the Angels are going to struggle to get through and SS Kennedy will, probably, have already played his last game of the season (about 40 regular season games ago)!

### **Expo Summary** by David Trice

Obviously I am really pleased to have made the playoffs, especially having had such a tough time of it in a division with three top quality managers. Commiserations to Stuart, Rob & Mark - I hope Mike and I can bring back the NL Pennant for you!

Also a word for Stewart Jones, the Cubs manager. Stewart, tough luck mate, it's very hard to miss out on the playoffs after such a long season, and I really can sympathise with your disappointment after throwing away the wild-card spot in MLB3 with six straight losses to end the season. The luck wasn't with you, especially since you were robbed of Sammy Sosa for the few games at the end there, but I look forward to playing in Wrigley again next year.

I haven't had a chance to look at the Dodgers yet, although I know that they had the better of the season series over us, 4-8. The worrying factor is that until the final day of the season they had won 5 on the trot against us, including a sweep in the Olympic Stadium in Week 14.

The fitness of my team has been a concern, and we scraped by this week in some narrow encounters, not least a thrilling 11th inning win against Florida in which Vladimir Guerrero hit a game winning grand slam to break a scoreless game.

In my favour I shall be able to start all of my usual pitchers and with the extra days rest will stretch their outings even further. That said, Matt Miller and Zach Day are both in superb form in the bullpen, so the question will really be can I provide enough run support, and can I get the expected quality starts from Ohka, Almonte, Hernandez and Vazquez?

Congratulations to every team who won their division or made the playoffs - I think the league has been an extremely well contested regular season, and I'm expecting to see some tense tight playoff series.

A note on form, the Angels and Twins come in to the playoffs with the joint best record in the AL, 21-12 over their last 33, whilst Texas (16-17) and Toronto (15-18) have struggled in to the playoffs.

In the NL, the Phillies finished a strong 25-8, but it was all too late, whilst the Braves 23-10 sealed the division title for them and Montreal's 19-14 was enough for fourth on form and the wild-card spot. LA, ominously, finished 20-13. The Reds appear the weakest on form at the moment, with a 16-17 record, whilst Chicago's 12-21 finish was only 'surpassed' by the Giants who won only 9 of their last 33 games.

The significance of the last 33 is that every team played every other team in their league in this period. However, it's the next 5 that count for those playoff challengers. You may not have noticed the recent performances of Alex Escobar, from the Cleveland Indians. The LF won the AL batting title with a .313 average and lead the league in RBIs with 113. He was 5 homers short of the Triple Crown and, I

don't know about you, but I think his performances have gone unnoticed all year. A possible MVP candidate? The fact that the Indians did not make the playoffs may hurt his chances.

In the NL I'd back Adrian Beltre and his 37 HRs and 103 RBIs as the league's best. But in a season when pitching has certainly ruled hitting, can a case be made for Ortiz, who lead the league in ERA, or Hernandez who lead the league in wins and strikeouts as being most valuable to their Braves and Expos team mates? It's an interesting one which I think might keep the other managers interested throughout the playoffs.

### **Postseason Preview**

8 teams remain and, with things to play for right up to the end of the season, it's likely that there's a fair amount of fatigue amongst most of the teams – along with a few crucial injuries.

In the AL, the Jays face the Twins whilst the Angels face up to rivals, Texas. The Jays hold a 7-5 lead in the season series and were 2<sup>nd</sup> in the majors in stolen bases. However, the Twins have the best ERA in the AL, bat pretty well and are the toughest team to strike out in the league. Close games expected, close series expected, tough to call either way.

The Angels and Rangers have battled it out for the division all season and have split the season series 9 each. The main difference between the teams is that the Anaheim is much more explosive than Texas'. The Rangers pitching will need to perform and look to take advantage of the absence of Adam Kennedy and shut down the Angels. Again, too close to call and tough hard battles expected between these 2 big rivals.

In the NL, the Reds face the Braves whilst the Dodgers face the Expos in a repeat of the last series of the regular season. The Dodgers have won the season series 8-4 and if anyone has been able to rest players it is probably them. Therefore, they would have to be slightly favoured against the Expos.

The Reds have homefield advantage against the Braves and have the best home record in the majors. The 2 teams are the best hitting for average teams and fielding teams in the NL and, though the Reds have pitched better, Atlanta holds an 8-4 lead in the season series and has really improved its pitching down the stretch. Just too close to call this one.

Good luck to all playoff participants and the same to all in getting the player you hope for in the inaugural MLB8 draft.

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Until next time, Ian.