

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

Divisional Series Round-up

The Divisional Series proved to be just as exciting as expected. All 4 series were close with the Braves and Reds playing out a classic 5 game series. News and views below.

In the draft, the M's shocked everyone by taking Randy Winn as the #1 selection allowing the Giants to select powerful switch-hitting RF Tom Sanders. In the long-term, the Devil Rays may prove to have made the best selection in their acquisition of pitcher Lance Carter who, according to scouts, has the potential to be the top of the rotation starter they need.

Fans face 'fin' in Montreal

In the week that the Montreal Expos crashed out of the NLDS, reports suggest that the Expos front office haven't just bid 'au revoir' to their fans for the season. This time it could be 'good-bye'.

As Juan Rivera struck out to end Game 2 of the NLDS in a 4-2 Dodger victory, discussions were going on in the luxury boxes regarding the fate of the franchise. Falling attendances and an aging facility at the Olympic Stadium have forced MLB to consider an approach by the Expos to re-locate to another city, perhaps Washington D.C.

As these discussions progressed, so did press speculation that a move to the Eastern United States was possible. Competing groups are bidding to induce a team to come to the Maryland or North Virginia areas since an obvious baseball market, the Baltimore metropolitan area, is ignored by MLB8's distribution of clubs.

GM Trice knows that his position in the organisation could be undermined if, as expected, the re-location comes with investment from new sources. Despite securing a wild-card place and a tie for first place in the division, the 3-1 NLDS defeat was an unwelcome result for a team and management well aware that their performance on the field affects the off-field fortunes of the club and the city in which they live.

Trice is cagey about the possibility of a move. "I've loved every minute in Montreal. If we have to move cities to be competitive then we have to move cities, but I'll miss these people and these fans, and my family will miss their lives here. But, je ne regrette rien - if it's D.C, then lets go."

Conceding that the players and GM may not be the first choice of any incoming ownership Trice was swift to respond. "I'm a professional baseball man, and so is every one of my team. We know the rewards for performing at the highest level are great, and the risks if you do not perform go with it hand in hand. We're all one step away from being out of a job, whether there's a new owner around the corner or not."

That said, he didn't ingratiate himself to any new ownership group when he went on the offensive regarding the motivations behind moving the club. "I think sometimes people forget that some aspects of the game of baseball are more permanent and inspiring than simply the measurement of wins or the accumulation of dollars."

The smart money says that Trice will be rewarded for his achievements this season with a contract extension before a move is confirmed or canned. But it is likely that in order to build a state-of-the-art facility in a new city, several of Trice's players will find their future's lie on a different major league roster if the move goes ahead. It's also likely that the team will be asked to build around a young batting lineup with considerable potential, and attempt to find new pitching prospects to support them in future seasons.

"We've got a number of contracts up, and there are a few players who will not be such good value to us next season as they were this year. We might look to trade them or cut them as we try to keep our wages down, which might otherwise go up by as much as 15-20%." said Trice.

This means that there is likely to be a drop off in some areas too, although young players such as Everett, who emerged to replace Zeile at leadoff towards the end of the season, will see greater responsibility and could soften the blow. Likewise, young pitchers like late-season acquisition Miller and even promising rookie Armas should see plenty of innings in 2005.

The club will focus on the development of their young talent in the forthcoming season, and will make a poor selection to repeat as an NL playoff participant, no matter which city they end up in. Whether the Expos fans have any team to cheer come April remains to be seen.

And elsewhere in Canada.....

Tempers were high in Toronto, as the Jays crashed out of the AL playoffs in four games against the Twins. GM Howard snarled that the club were lucky to even win 1 game. "We were outit in every one of those games", he said, adding that "no jobs are safe on this team - apart from mine, of course."

There were few positives for Toronto. They may have removed their starting pitchers too early, but more importantly chief reliever Hendrickson was knocked around the park in games 3 and 4. On the offence, only Carlos Delgado hit above .250, and star outfielder Orlando Hudson and DH Werth landed just 1 single apiece in the entire series.

Better fatigue management may help a little next season, but they will face a battle to improve significantly.

Texas / Anaheim report by Ian Gibson & Paul Beaumont

IG – "Congratulations to Paul, a good win, and good luck in the ALCS."

PB – “Thanks, getting the two wins in Texas made it pretty hard for you to come back.”

IG – “I’m very disappointed to have my season come to an end but have to take full responsibility. My gamble (intended to get as many lefties and switchies in the lineup) that put RF Laynce Nix at 1B, leaving right-handed 1B Hank Blalock on the bench backfired spectacularly.

Nix made 3 errors in the 4 games. Two in Game 1 led to 4 or 5 unearned runs and was decisive in terms of the winning margin. Then after seeming to sort it, he made a decisive error with the scores tied in the top of the 9th of Game 4 (which obviously we needed to win to stay in). So that was that. I gambled and lost.”

PB – “The five unearned runs in Game 1 were key. They turned out into base runners and may have contributed to Benoit’s early exit (five hits, two walks in 3 innings with all 6 runs scored) as the inning was ‘extended’, and he then had to pitch with runners on base.”

IG – “Over the series, I had more hits and walks but obviously made key errors and didn’t hit any homers to capitalise when we had men on. To make me look even more foolish, Blalock (who I installed as pinch-hitter at all infield positions) went 2 for 3 when he came in so may well have had a good week - who knows?

Anaheim were slightly better than us during the regular season and slightly better in this series so prove themselves the better team.”

Braves / Reds Report by Mike Sim & Bo Mayfield

MS – “Kudos to Bo whose team shrugged off a quiet end to the regular season and dug themselves out of a 2-0 hole to record a fine series win. We wish them luck in the upcoming NLCS.”

BM – “Thanks Mike, it was quite a series.”

MS – “We had our chances - up 6-1 in game 4 needing to hold on to win the series things looked good, but the Reds hitters were incredible - we walked 10 and struck out 1 as they literally walked back into the series!

Game 5 was 2 weeks too late for us. Two weeks ago Russ Ortiz had 9 form, had thrown something like 5 complete games in 7 starts and was unbeatable, before going down to a short injury. Unfortunately for me, he never recovered his form and was a liability in the series against the strong Reds hitters (I mooted leaving him out but well...)

Our hitters did well considering all bar 1 had 4 or more fatigue and I couldn’t have asked more from the big name guys - we really missed Langerhans - his replacement went hitless in 5 games and the bottom of my order went 3 for 27, though not unexpectedly.”

BM – “The loss of Langerhans certainly helped my cause as I then keyed LaRoche allowing my right handed starters a chance. Even so the hitting was good and left my pitchers in less than ideal shape on form/fatigue for the next round.

The Reds again proved they are very good at home and average at best on the road. That doesn’t bode well for the LA series but I’m happy to be there.

Excellent season for the Braves topping the toughest division in the league.”

Dodger Reaction by Patrick Lee

“We’re obviously delighted to make the NLCS, particularly as due to an error on my part Kaz Ishii - 20-5 on the season - was left out of our starting rotation and played no part against the Expos. After losing the opening game in the 10th inning, we pitched tighter and became more aggressive offensively, and we won the series as convincingly as I could have realistically expected against a very good Expos team.

Looking ahead, the Reds - who won a thrilling series with the Braves - owned us in the regular season so we may start as underdogs against them. As was the case against Montreal, I feel we’ll probably need to get at least one win on the road, which won’t be easy given Cincinnati’s phenomenal home record. I just hope we do ourselves justice.”

Championship Series Previews

4 teams left and it’s the Twins against the Angels in the AL and the Reds against the Dodgers in the NL. The Twins and Angels were an even 6-6 against each other in the regular season and both won their series 3-1. Both teams have great starting rotations and explosive offenses so it could be a classic series and is too close to predict.

In the NL, the Dodgers have the homefield advantage against the Reds and played a game less in their series so would appear to have an advantage. But, the Reds won the season series 9-3 so may hold an ‘indian sign’ over the Dodgers. The Dodgers pitching has really improved late in the season and if they pitch as well as they did against the Expos then you would probably have to JUST favour them.

Rangers are out but still excited about the postseason!

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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.