

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

Week 3 Review

In the AL, the Red Sox continued their excellent start and now hold a 2-game lead over the much improved Yankees. The Jays have struggled so far but spirits still seem relatively high in Toronto (see below) while the Rays bottomed out with a 1-8 week though, again, there is still optimism for the future in Tampa.

In the Central, the Royals and Indians continued to look impressive as they both went 6-3. The Twins continued to splutter a bit but they may be another team whose performances have been better than their results so far. The ChiSox had a poor week made even worse by an injury to C Sandy Alomar. They are, though, far from a poor team and have lost a few close games.

Out West, the A's continue to hold a 3-game lead over the Angels who, in turn, are a game ahead of the Rangers and Mariners. The Angels are trying to kick-start their season and the Rangers are also looking to try and improve their consistency and turn close defeats into victories. The A's though look strong and have added a couple of solid switch-hitting veterans in recent weeks (Mendy Lopez and Travis Lee) to complement their young squad.

The NL East again looks like it will be a 4-team dogfight. The Expos staked their claim with an 8-1 week that finished with a crushing sweep of the Giants in San Fran. The Braves also finished with a sweep of the Brewers in Milwaukee and hold the best run differential in the NL outside of Los Angeles. The Phillies are strong and the Marlins added a couple of players to strengthen this week in a division where all 4 teams have winning records.

The Central is becoming 2 divisions in 1. The Cubs and Reds will fight it out again for the division whilst the Pirates and Brewers fight it out for bottom place. The Cubs eked their lead out to 2 games, mainly due to a tremendous 2-1 series win in Cincinnati. The Cubs have had injuries to their lineup but have pitched superbly. The Reds have lost a few close games though and remain a massive threat.

The only other incident of note in the division was an 'alleged' perfect game for Joe Beimel of the Pirates against the afore-mentioned Brewers. I say 'alleged' perfect game because C Matt Stairs made an error to ruin the perfect game for Beimel. A perfect pitching performance but not a perfect game. GM Willan must be pulling his hair about his offence which failed to score more than 1 run on 6 out of the 9 occasions this week.

The Dodgers look to be cruising to another NL West title which must be pleasing to holidaying GM Patrick Lee – though one suspects he may still be pulling the strings from Oz. All the other 3 teams are struggling. Particular sympathy to GM Stones in Arizona who only has 1 series win to his credit so far – against the Expos oddly enough.

Changes in Anaheim by Paul Beaumont

One month into the new season and the World Champions (will milk this while it lasts) have made a steady but uninspiring start to the season. The pitching has struggled to get anywhere near the heights of last season but has recently shown signs of improvement. To, hopefully, help speed this up the Angels signed leftie pitcher Abreu. He could fill the 5th starter role or operate from the bullpen, or maybe both.

In the same move veteran 2B David Eckstein was released. The move was more of a kick-up-the-backside for the team than a reflection on Eckstein, although he made a poor start to this season. His replacement MacPherson started well hitting .322 for the last nine games. Hopefully, the message will be received by the rest of the squad and the Halos will respond in the correct manner.

Report from Braves HQ by Mike Sim

Well, 15-12 is a very acceptable return for the opening 27 games, though I still believe more is possible from this squad. The run difference (+42) is way superior to the rest of the NL East, yet the record isn't - testament both to the tenacity of the other skippers in the division and to our own weaknesses. We are capable of beating anyone, handily too at times. Yet we're capable of losing to anyone - often in the same series. It is curious that we're hitting .277, allowing .225 and are only 3 games over .500....

So 6-3 for the past 9 games was pretty good considering we were without our leading hitter, C Johnny Estrada who is hitting .378. Pleasingly his backup Eli Marrero stunned the Braves (and I suspect Brewers) by hitting his first home run.

That miracle aside, it was expected that the Braves would re-sign backup C Jonathan Schuerholz but he preferred to sign with the Montreal Expos. I guess he felt the Expos offered him a better chance of regular play, though the Expos are pretty well equipped in the C position so who knows. He'll be missed if Estrada goes down to any further injuries, but the LPs will come in handy.

A ligament problem will keep Rafael Furcal out of the team for 3 weeks which hurts our defence and we'll be

asking backup 2b Jesse Garcia and backup 3b Carlos Moreta to fill in for the team RBI leader.

That's likely to be a problem when the first series is against division leaders Montreal, particularly when you consider their last series saw the opposing team manage 9 hits and 1 run in 27 innings. Not very encouraging!

Longer term, the season is shaping up to be every bit as good as season 1. There are a great number of AL teams with great infrastructure and the NL is lagging behind in purchasing power - this may eventually lead to an imbalance between the leagues, though I think the NL skippers are aware of the need to build financial foundations.

Outlook from the SkyDome by Philip Howard

The Blue Jays remain optimistic, despite a 10-17 start to the season.

"Our starting pitchers are on form, and we can bat down to number 8 in the order", claimed GM Philip Howard. "Some of the staff got off to a slow start, but we're confident of turning the corner. Looking at runs for and against, we should have maybe won 13 games by now. Our luck will change."

The club has economised on its wage bill recently, most recently replacing starter Kelvim Escobar with ex-Ranger Jay Powell. With six ex-Jays in the free agent pool, Howard is hoping for a windfall of compensation payments to further ease their financial position, which was not helped by the debacle surrounding the recruitment of reliever Jerome Gamble. The club have now confirmed that outfielder Enrique Wilson (now a Marlin) was their intended target.

Toronto has an important Week 4 ahead, in the enforced absence of team-leading DH Jayson Werth. A visit to the Devil Rays requires a convincing series win, before hosting the impressive Indians and travelling to Texas, where Powell is likely to start against his old club.

'Rays' of light? by Troy Dilworth

Devil Rays Week 3 "School" Report Verdict: Need to Improve!

The truth is that the start to this season has disappointed me greatly. I appreciated that we had a lot of ground to make up from last season but over time the squad has actually been moulded into what I have wanted.

True, the squad still has a fair way to go but I now feel that there are enough "pieces" in place that we can actually

start to compete in series. Ok, my total wage will suggest otherwise but that's because we have replaced many of our overpriced players unlike many of the other teams out there. Our results simply have to improve with the players already on the roster in my opinion.

There are enough decent batters in the lineup to be scoring more runs than we have so far managed. I believe it's only a matter of time before this unit clicks into place.

The pitching has been a shambles to this point but even here there are grounds for optimism. Slowly the kinds and types of pitchers that we require have been acquired (the trade of Bell has been questioned in some quarters but Tejera has been acquired to fill the setup and closer positions). I can see an improvement occurring in my team's ERA sooner rather than later.

If only the batting and the pitching could click at the same time then the current "worst" team in the league will start to drag themselves out of the "basement".

At least I don't have to worry about my financial position which is a big help when trying to sign players of quality. Come the end of the season, which I appreciate is a long way off, these Devil Rays will have a 15 stadium, 200 merchandising and a trainer of level 20.

The question is, will they also be sitting in 3rd place or better (!) in the AL East as promised by management at the start of the season or still languishing at the bottom of the pile?

Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year to one and all!

Week 4 Preview

Big series this week between Anaheim & Texas, Indians & Kansas, BoSox & Yanks, Reds & Expos, Dodgers & Cubs, A's & Yankees, Expos & Dodgers and Braves & Reds.

But to finish a big thank you to those who contributed to this issue and a big thank you to everyone in the league for allowing me a year as your newsletter editor. As Troy said, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to everybody!

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<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.