

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

Week 4 Review

Week 4 in the AL East saw the first series of the season between the Red Sox and Yankees. Dorman's Yankees posted their intent to be a major threat this season as they took the series 2-1 at the Bronx. The Yanks flexed their considerable offensive muscle, posting 30 runs for the series as they climbed to a league-leading team batting average of .300. The bad news in New York is a lengthy injury to solid starting pitcher Felix Heredia.

This helped them to pull to within a game of Paul Denyer's Red Sox, who got battered by the Twins before getting back on track against the Mariners. The Blue Jays stabilised the ship going 5-4 – leaving them 6 games back of Boston. The struggles continue in Tampa who have a league high team ERA of 6.19. They signed former Rockie pitcher Amaury Telemaco this week but are likely to need further reinforcements to completely turn the pitching around.

In the Central, the Royals maintained their solid form going 5-4. This leaves them 3 ahead of the Tribe and 5 ahead of the Twins, despite both Cleveland and Minnesota having a better run differential. The ChiSox are in danger of losing touch with the rest, having lost their last 4 games.

In the AL West, the Oakland Athletics maintained their lead, though the Rangers and Angels are both now breathing down their necks having cut the deficit to 2 games. The Rangers had the best week in the Majors made even sweeter by the fact that it included a sweep of the Angels in Anaheim – some measure of revenge for last year's ALDS! The bittersweet part of the week was an injury to all-star closer Ryan Drese who will be missing for the next 3 weeks with a knee injury.

The Champs, of course, showed their class following this, sweeping the Rays and the White Sox to currently hold a 6-game winning streak. They have scored at least 6 runs in 7 consecutive games! Both teams re-signed cheap former pitchers who could help in the bullpen.

The NL East is as it always is – high quality and close. Assisted by series wins in Atlanta and LA, the Expos hold a 2-game lead over Atlanta and Florida. The Braves have a superior run differential but, like last year, don't seem to be able to consistently turn this into wins. Like the Rangers and Angels, the Braves and Expos re-signed solid players as they continue to steadily improve their squads.

As mentioned by GM Guard later, the Marlins are improving and ended the week with a sweep in Arizona. The Phillies week fell away and they are currently on a 5-game losing streak as their offense seemed to go into a slumber. GM Crowther will need to turn this round quickly in this division. Good news for Philly was the re-signing of Kevin Millwood, which further improved their pitching depth.

In the Central, the Reds won all 3 series to get back on level terms with the Cubbies. They have a vastly superior run differential (67) though have yet to turn this to any clear advantage. The Cubs continue to perform well and their only blip was getting swept at home to the Dodgers as the LA bats caught fire.

Just when the Pirates looked to be heading into oblivion, they re-discovered their form and now hold a 5-game win streak. The Brew Crew continue to struggle and, again, hold the dubious honour of having the worst offense in the league. With few offensive options available, the Brewers spent big in acquiring former Blue Jay pitcher Kelvim Escobar. GM Martin Willan will be hoping that he can help what has been a slightly disappointing pitching staff this season.

Out West, the Dodgers lost a series at home to the Expos but maintained an 8-game lead. Their nearest challengers, the Rockies, had a good week as they won all 3 series. The Giants continue to struggle as they lost all 3 series and the learning curve continues in Arizona, though they did claim a series win this week in Milwaukee. The other bright spot in the desert is the signing of LF Brad Wilkerson who looks to be a bargain at that price.

In terms of overall pitching stats, Messrs Ortiz and Hernandez could be heading for another Cy Young showdown. They both have 5 wins and outstanding ERAs. Their main challengers so far would be John Hall (Reds), Wilson Alvarez (Dodgers), Doug Davis (Brewers) and Kerry Wood (Cubs).

In the AL, the top starters have been Joaquin Benoit (Rangers), Chad Bradford (A's), Roger Clemens (Yankees), Brian Anderson (Royals), Alan Embree (Red Sox), Eddie Guardado (Twins) and Jarrod Washburn (Angels). A few relievers have been outstanding – notably Al Levine (Royals), Juan Rincon (Twins) and Aaron Loper (Mariners).

Twins Thoughts by Dave Brown

(Editor's note – I received this just after finishing the last edition so it is a report following Week 3)

So the topsy-turvy start to season 2 continues! Oakland comfortably leading the AL West, while the Blue Jays have another losing week to now be running at 10-17...who'd have predicted that before the season started?? In the National League, though, normality seems to have returned with the Dodgers storming away in the West while the Expos & Braves are now at their expected positions in the East.

As for the Twins, a 4-5 week sees them stay in 3rd with the gap to the Royals reaching a somewhat worrying 5 games. GM Brown has no complaints with the pitching – the best in the American League. Although last year's Cy Young winner, LaTroy Hawkins has started somewhat poorly (ERA 4.88), partner-in-crime Eddie Guardado (also an all-star candidate last year) has been at the top of his game

with 3 complete games pitched from 6 starts, no homers given up, and an ERA of 2.01! And in relief, Juan Rincon has only given up 1 run in over 23 innings pitched.

But the batting is where the problems lie. New recruit at 3B, Gerald Laird, is doing pretty well – currently batting at .266. The worry is established stars Luis Rivas, Richie Weeks, and Lew Ford, who have been seriously under performing. Weeks comes back this week after missing some games through injury, so the Twins management will be hoping that he's back to his form of last season!

The last week was a pretty tough series of games for the Twins, so 4-5 wasn't really that bad. It started in Kansas City – a pitching dominated series taken by the Royals 2-1, 0-4, and 5-3; Minnesota victory thanks to a complete game shutout by Guardado. Then the Angels blew into town and showed their return to form in repeating their AL Championship win. Quite a few runs in the series, the fact that Guardado & Hawkins weren't playing was probably no coincidence!

To wrap up the week, the Twins travelled down to Texas and came away with a pleasing 2-1 series win. Another series of pitching duels with the Rangers kept to a miserable 7 runs in regular innings. Surprise, surprise, Guardado & Hawkins were back pitching! Only catch being the Twins offense wasn't much better and so we had 2 games go into extra innings – split one apiece.

So it's now reached the point where the Twins can't afford to let the Royals get much further ahead. We know we've got the potential to put a good streak together, we showed that last year, but there's a limit as to how big the gap can be allowed to get. Come on offense – get those bats swinging!

Marlin Mutterings by Stuart Guard

It has been an interesting start to the new season and on the whole we're pretty happy with things in Florida at the moment. Okay we are third in the East but then again we know how competitive this division is and there are only three games splitting all four teams none of which have a losing record, something that no other division can say.

We are batting much better this year and have some batters who are starting to find their feet and get the job done. Pitching looks good although the bullpen haven't been as solid as we would like and form is poor in this area at the moment, something that we need to look at addressing.

So what news of the squad this season (which is after all where a lot of MLB8 coaches are looking at). Well on the pitching front we acquired Rob Bell in a trade with Tampa and it was a trade that gave both teams the type of pitchers that they were looking for. Bell looks to be a quality player and is settling well which is just what the pitching staff need at the moment.

The rest of the pitching unit is progressing well but there is some work to do. Looper is costing us a lot and his ratings have dropped from last year so a decision needs to be made on him. Form is an issue for some others so certain players may find themselves playing a few games in the minors to freshen them up in the coming weeks.

On the batting front things have progressed well. Enrique Wilson looks to be a good acquisition for the future of the club bringing both experience and potential. For the first time we have done some coaching and were impressed with the improvements that Brooks and Harris made when they received some specialist work, meaning the two youngsters are performing now and offering a lot for the future. Cory Sullivan looks to be another in this mould and it does mean the futures of Redmond and Jenkins might be elsewhere if replacements can be found.

In summary then a marked improvement on last years batting and a reasonable record at the moment, especially given some issues with form. Finances look good at the moment and the infrastructure of the club is looking solid. The team is definitely moving in the right direction – the question is how quickly we get there compared to the other Eastern teams.

Week 5 Preview

This week sees a return to the inter-league rivalry. The NL held supremacy last year (112-104) so the AL will be keen to re-establish some balance this season. As an AL manager, I would like to point out that the NL went 16-6 in extra inning interleague games last year. Not saying that that's luck – just saying they were close games!!

There is a mouth-watering series to kick off the week in Anaheim where a repeat of last season's World Series will take place against the Dodgers. The Angels also have to face the Reds and Marlins in a difficult week.

Other notable series are the Jays hosting the Braves, Marlins at Yankees, Reds at Royals, Dodgers at Yankees, Cubs at the Twins and the Blue Jays, Reds at Rangers, Expos at A's, Phillies against Texas and Kansas and an explosion of power-hitting offenses as the Dodgers host the Tribe.

Inter-league gloating or excuse-making welcomed for the next issue!

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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.