

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

Week 8 Review

Unlike the other 2 NL divisions, the East continues to be close and got even closer this week. The Expos had a tough-looking week which included series against the Reds and Dodgers. Following getting swept by the Reds, they took a 2-1 series win in Canada against the Dodgers to rescue their week and hang onto a 1-game lead.

This was further helped by having won their home series against the Marlins. The Marlins followed this by swept by the Pirates before rescuing their week with a home sweep of the D'Backs. The Phillies (5-4) and the Braves (7-2) got closer to these two, the Braves impressively winning a tough series against the Reds. Expos are top – 1 game ahead of the Marlins, who are 1 ahead of the Phillies who are 1 ahead of the Braves!

As mentioned, the other 2 divisions are probably over already. Though there is still over half a season to go, the Reds 11-game lead in the Central and the Dodgers 15-game lead out West are likely to be unbridgeable. However, there is some excitement as their closest challengers (the Cubs and Rockies respectively) are level with the Phillies and just 1 game behind the Marlins in the wild card race.

Elsewhere in those divisions, the Pirates had a better week (5-4) but the focus for GM Handley is likely to be on reducing their wage bill, which is the highest in the majors. The Giants had a poor week, the only bright spot of which was the signing of Jose Lima who will be a good addition to their bullpen. The Brewers continued what looks to be a slow but steady improvement and were 'overtaken' by Arizona for the worst record in the NL. The D'Backs are really struggling and hold a 7-game losing streak.

All the divisions are pretty close in the AL. The team with the biggest lead is the Twins who are now 5 games clear of KC. Only 4 weeks ago it was the other way round with the Royals having a 5-game lead. The tide really seems to have turned in this division and it would be no surprise for the Twins to stretch their lead as the season goes on.

The other 3 teams will have to focus on getting in the wild card race.

In the East, the BoSox continue to get injuries (Alan Embree this week) but maintain a 3-game lead over New York. Statistically, Boston look nothing special but they do lead the league in stolen bases and GM Denyer's men have done an excellent job at manufacturing runs. The Yankees 'look' better (best run differential in the AL) but can't seem to get over the hump and catch Boston in the standings.

The Blue Jays continue to loom in the mirror (5 games back) whilst the Rays had 2 series wins in their 4-5 week. This included a series against the Yankees in which Tampa won both games by 1 run – losses the Yankees can ill afford. Tampa have, in fact, been OK at home but have the worst road record at 6-27 away from 'The Trop'.

The West remains tight with the Angels holding a 2-game lead over the A's who occupy the wild card position. This is despite the A's taking the series from the Angels when they played this week. Texas are 5 back after a week that started with a sweep of the Mariners but was followed by series defeats to Chicago and Toronto. The M's had a bad week (2-7) and fall to .500. The bad news for the Angels is the injury to star pitcher Jarrod Washburn who will miss at least 3 weeks.

Top Pitchers

After having featured the top offensive players a few weeks ago, this week I feature the top pitchers so far this season. Interestingly, the ERA in the NL is 3.92, compared to 4.35 in the AL. Not sure whether that means the NL has better hitters or the AL better batters but there have been a number of outstanding pitching efforts in the NL thus far.

The NL Cy Young race last year pretty much involved 3 players – Russ Ortiz (Braves), Livan Hernandez (Expos) and Adam Bernero (Rockies). Though not exactly falling apart (6-3, 3.26 ERA), Bernero really isn't in the race this year. Ortiz and Hernandez are though and are joined by a few other pitchers who have dominated this year.

Again, there is nothing really to choose between Ortiz (9-2, 2.01 ERA) and Hernandez (9-2, 2.35 ERA). But there are a few others performing as

well. Kerry Wood (Cubs) leads the NL in complete games, innings and K's and is 10-4 with a 2.62 ERA. Josh Hall and Seth Etherton (Reds) are 16-5 between them with ERA's not much over 2. Scott Eyre (Giants) and Josh Fogg (Pirates) have been good also.

However, the star has been the Dodgers' Wilson Alvarez (11-0, 1.30 ERA). He's recently been suffering with a slight injury, which the Dodgers hope won't unduly affect him in the second half of the season.

In terms of bullpen guys in the NL, the Phillies' Ryan Madson leads them all in appearances and is 4-1 with a 2.57 ERA and 10 saves. Other good performers have been Eric Gagne (Dodgers), LaTroy Hawkins (Cubs) and John Patterson who has been one of the few bright spots for Arizona.

In the AL, the top 2 starting pitchers have been Joaquin Benoit (Texas) and Eddie Guardado (Minnesota). Both were out-performed by teammates Callaway and Hawkins respectively last year but have emerged as the staff aces this year.

Other top starters have been Roy Halladay (Jays), Tim Hudson and Chad Bradford (A's), Roger Clemens (Yankees), Ryan Franklin (Mariners), Bartolo Colon (ChiSox) and Rick Reed (Twins).

The top bullpen performers have been the Royals Al Levine (6-2, 2.90 ERA, 4 saves), the Twins Juan Rincon (6-2, 3.01 ERA, 2 saves) and the Mariners Aaron Loper (12-4 in 77 innings).

Week 9 Preview

In the NL, the week features a repeat of season 1's NLCS and what could be a dress rehearsal for this year's NLCS as the Reds travel to LA to face the Dodgers. The Reds will look to carry good form into that series which follows home series against the Cubs and Giants. The Dodgers host the Rockies before travelling to Philly looking to avenge a rare series defeat earlier in the season.

For the Phils, this follows a series against the Expos and is before a series against the Brewers. Looking at the NL East schedules, it would be surprising if anyone was able to put any distance between themselves and the others. In terms of the wild card, there are a number of important

series with the Cubs looking to have the toughest week as they face the Reds, Expos and Braves.

In the AL Central, the Twins will look to put more distance between themselves and the Royals as the 2 teams face off in KC. This is a series that you think the Royals will have to win if they are going to catch the Twins in the 2nd half of the season. The Twins follow that with tough series against the A's and Mariners but the Royals have it no easier against the BoSox and Yankees.

That series ends a tough week for the Yankees as they also face Toronto and Texas. These 2 series are at home though and are series the Yankees need to start winning if they are to overhaul Boston. Boston have series at home to Tampa and KC before a trip to Anaheim. The Jays look ready to make a surge but haven't quite put a long sustained streak of wins together.

The Angels begin their time without Washburn with series against Seattle, Cleveland and Boston. The other 3 teams will be hoping that this affects them and that they can take advantage with a good week. However, all have tricky weeks as there are very few 'easy' series in the AL – if such a thing exists anyway.

The season reaches its halfway point this week and there are only really 3 teams who don't have a chance of making the postseason. It promises to be an enthralling second half with close divisional races, close wild card races, battles for homefield advantage, the all-star game, etc. Even the teams who may be out of the race have lots to play for in terms of setting their teams up for the future.

Contributions for future issues will be greatly appreciated.....

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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.