

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

Week 12 Review

The big news in the NL is the continued slump of the Reds. They are on another losing streak (this time 5) which has allowed the Cubs to pull to within 9 games. Still a comfortable lead but there is an outside chance. The improving Pirates are only 2 games back of the Cubs after a good week, which included a sweep of the Marlins in Florida.

My prediction about the Dodgers last week was pretty much correct as they won 7 out of 9 this week. They are just annihilating the opposition and have the #1 seed in the NL pretty much wrapped up already. It was an awful week for the Rockies, which ended by them being swept at home to the Brewers. This leaves them 6 games behind in the wild card race and reduces the Dodgers 'magic number' to 28.

In the East, the Braves ended the week by sweeping the Reds whilst the Nationals were getting swept in LA. This brings the 2 teams into a tie with the Braves holding the run differential advantage (plus 73 to plus 43). It would be no surprise for the race between these two to go right to the wire again and the loser get the wild card. The Marlins and Phillies are still in the race but both seem unable to go on the consistent winning run that they need.

In the AL, the World Champs are beginning to show their class and stretch their lead in the West as the other teams are struggling to maintain form. The Central remains a three-way race but the Twins continue to hold the advantage, helped by a week-ending sweep of the Yankees.

This may have been a fatal blow to the Yankees postseason hopes as they are now 7 games back in the wild card race. Boston and Toronto look set to fight it out to the end for the division as Boston re-took the lead due to a better run differential.

The loser of this race will be strong favourite to be the wild card, though all of Texas, Seattle, Kansas City, Cleveland, New York and Oakland will still feel they have a chance if they can put a great week together.

Brewers update by Martin Willan

Things are not progressing as well as expected in Milwaukee with the team currently tied for the number 1 draft pick with the Devil Rays.

Once again the pitching is better than the hitting, but even the pitching isn't as good as I'd like. Fortunately

with money in the bank and a low wage bill there's room for new signings if anyone were to become available.

In an attempt to find a decent rotation, 7 different pitchers have started, but only RHP Terry Adams has a winning record (9-7) with a 2.37 ERA, while RHP Ben Diggins is in danger of losing 20 games with a 3-14 record and 5.02 ERA after 12 weeks. It is expected that pitching help will be looked for in the draft, although if the right hitter is available then he may be taken.

The hitters are averaging 3 runs per game and after 108 games no-one has yet reached double figures in home runs while RF Corey Hart leads the team with only 47 RBI. Even worse, IF Bill Hall is leading the team with a .254 batting average. Fortunately there is a lot of potential among the hitters, so hopefully there should be an improvement next season.

This team is definitely in a long-term rebuilding phase - actually that's building phase because we've always been rubbish!

Update from Canada by Philip Howard

Blue Jays GM Philip Howard is pleased with the recent recovery in the team's fortunes. A 13-game streak across weeks 10, 11 and 12 saw them briefly head the AL East, and at the time of going to press they trailed the Red Sox on run difference only. The GM explained "We had a lot of bad luck in the first half of the season, but week 11 was a time when it all went right. We led all those games on hits and walks, but usually you'll get a bad break somewhere along the line. For a while, we didn't."

Excellent pitching was at the heart of the winning run, and Howard was keen to draw attention to the achievements of reliever Trevor Miller. The 6* backup's place on the team was in question over his \$3 million option for next season, but the club's back office concede that he has earned a raise and should provide good value. Coming on in several tight situations, Miller gained 2 wins and 2 saves in week 11, and is second only to Halladay with a 2.59 ERA.

He'll see more action in week 13: fourth starter Jay Powell's poor form, and star reliever Mark Hendrickson's need for 3 days off after a herculean effort to beat the Rangers, means that Hendrickson will step up to the starting rotation as Powell is consigned to the minors. Miller and buddy Aquilino Lopez will need to step up in relief to help the club keep pace with the Sox, who they'll meet once again at the start of week 14.

The end of week 13 will also be notable for the return of leadoff man Eric Hinske from his customary mid-season break. The easily fatigued speedster will seek to raise his on-base percentage above .400, and hopes for a

return to the kind of form which saw him lead the league with 63 steals last year. If he can provide a platform for red-hot sluggers Orlando Hudson and Dave Berg, the Toronto offence might give Miller and co a few more leads to protect over the next few weeks.

Update from LA – the Angels by Paul Beaumont

The management feel the team are settling into the change of name reasonably well. The Halos have opened up a 7 game lead over the Rangers (who we visit in our next series), as the Athletics and Mariners are having trouble sustaining their early season form. Currently LA is two games up in the race for homefield advantage over the Red Sox and Blue Jays; the Halos face the Red Sox at Fenway in the third of the upcoming series.

This season the bats have improved to give a more balanced look to the Angels, last year the pitching was the area that was relied upon to get the wins. The Halos currently have four bats with .300+ Avg (min. 88 games played) and everyone has made significant contributions; no-one has been asked to carry the team. Five players have 10+ HR's, seven players have 30+ 2Bs, eight players have 30+ BBs, and eight players have 10+ SBs. The only area that the team need to upgrade is 2B, and youngsters C Molina, LF Owens, and CF DaVanon have continued their development.

On the pitching side it has been a mixed bag this season. The staff didn't 'kick on' as the management would have liked earlier in the season but have become stronger as the season has progressed. The main addition has been lefty Bobby Abreu who has been employed in a variety of roles. Brendan Donnelly has had a poor year, and is currently contemplating this as a free agent. Other moves have been to bring players wages more in line with what the club feel they deserve.

Wages are down to 83 LPs and the club have heavily invested in merchandising this season. A further improvement to the stadium is currently being considered. The club feel that there is sufficient depth to postpone investment in the trainer until next season.

The AL doesn't have a team that is head and shoulders above the rest with 10 of the 12 teams being at or within 10 games of the best record. With a third of the season still left there's plenty of time for someone to make a run. Everyone will be keeping their fingers crossed to avoid the long-term injury to a star as there are no replacements available.

Week 13 Preview

It's possibly the last chance for the Rangers to get right back in the AL West race this week as they host the Angels. It's a huge week for Texas as they also face

New York and Cleveland – 2 teams still in the wild card chase. The Angels end their week with a trip to Fenway for a series that may have implications for the #1 seed in the AL.

This ends a tough week for Boston who also face the Yanks and Royals. The Jays meanwhile have a much easier looking week as they host Tampa and the A's either side of a trip to the ChiSox. In the Central, the Twins look to have an easier week on paper than their challengers and will aim to take advantage of this.

Massive series in the NL East as Mike Sim's Braves make their first trip to Washington to face David Trice's Nationals. Both teams will be missing players – the Nats are without OF Carl Everett whilst the Braves are without ace Russ Ortiz. This robs fans of a potential meeting between Ortiz and Cy Young winner Livan Hernandez. Trice will be hoping that this gives his team the edge.

The other big series in the NL ends the week as the Dodgers travel to the Reds. There is no real chance that the Reds can catch the Dodgers for #1 seed but this could be a big series for the Reds' psyche. They've been on an iffy run and a hammering at home to the Dodgers could be a huge psychological blow if the teams again face up in the NLCS.

All Star Game

Will run during Week 14 and will take place at the Sky Dome in Toronto. American League Manager will be Paul Beaumont, the NL manager is yet to be confirmed. There may still be votes to come in (final deadline 7th May) but the following are the projected starting lineups at the time of going to press.

AL – Alomar (ChiSox), Jackson (BoSox), Lopez (A's), Koskie (Twins), Molina (Angels), Soriano (Yankees), Young (Rangers), Bradley (Indians), Benoit (Rangers)

NL – Beltre & Cabrera (Dodgers), Bay (Pirates), Freel & LaRue (Reds), Helton (Rockies), Kinkade & McGriff (Dodgers), Alvarez (Dodgers)

Thanks to those who have voted and contributed to this edition. Still time for others to get votes in if they wish.

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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.