

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

Week 16 Review

As predicted early in the season, the Dodgers became the first team to wrap up a playoff spot. Despite resting a number of players in recent weeks, the Dodgers clinched in front of their home faithful as part of a series sweep against the Cubs.

The edge was taken off this though as they then got hammered by the Nationals and lost all-star RF McGriff to injury. It is reported that, even with intensive rehabilitation by medical staff, McGriff will miss the NLDS and NLCS. He could be fit for the World Series, but his absence will seriously hamper the Dodgers in their attempt to repeat as NL Champs.

Their opponents in last year's NLCS are now very close to clinching the Central again. A good week for the Reds, coupled with poor weeks by the Pirates and Cubs, has the Reds magic number down to 4. The Reds are again strong in all aspects of the game and are great at home. Though manager Mayfield is far too classy a guy to say it, the injury to McGriff has to be regarded as good news for Cincinnati.

The week started in the NL with the Braves taking 2 out of 3 at home to the Nats. It appeared that this would be enough to pretty much clinch the division for the Braves but the final series of the week sparked some life back into this race. As mentioned earlier, the Nats swept the Dodgers. But, at the same time, the Braves were getting comfortably swept at home to the Reds. This brings the deficit back to 4 games which is still a lot but not impossible.

That sweep of the Dodgers got the Nats back on top in the wild card race. They lead only on run differential from Colorado. The Marlins and Phil's are still in the race, just 3 and 4 back. Disappointing weeks saw the Buccs and Cubs fall out of contention.

In the AL, the race out West stayed alive as the Rangers improbably swept the Angels in LA. They then swept the White Sox and looked like they might be giving themselves a realistic chance. Much of this was undone in getting swept in Toronto but the lead is down to 4 games. Much like in the NL East, that's still a lot but not impossible. The feisty Mariners are only a game further back and still just about in it.

The Jays sweep of Texas just continued their excellent form. They have just got stronger and

stronger as the season has worn on and look to be finally wearing down the Red Sox. Their pitching has been particularly strong and leads the AL in ERA by a significant distance.

The next best pitching staff is the Twins and they are now very close to wrapping up their division. The Royals and Indians have both threatened at times but in the end the Twins pitching has been too good, as has their 49-23 record at home in the Metrodome, which is the best in the AL.

Despite a poor week, the Red Sox still hold the lead in the wild card. They are 4, 5 and 6 ahead of Texas, Seattle and New York respectively. Everyone else's hopes are realistically over.

The 'race' for the #1 pick is still led by Milwaukee. They remain a game 'ahead' of Tampa Bay who are 3 ahead of Arizona. The expensive free-agent pick-up of former Brewer Matt Ford shows that the Rays are intent on beating the Brew Crew in the standings even if that means missing out on the top pick.

That move was amongst a number of significant ones at this late point of the season. The Jays further strengthened their pitching depth as they re-acquired veteran reliever Smitherman. The Rangers released under-achieving catcher Diaz in signing former Twin Cordero. The Rangers are planning to go with a cheap platoon at catcher with either a rookie right-hander in the draft or current backup Barajas.

The Cubs gave a significant signing bonus to former Ranger 2B Mike Lamb. This follows their signing of another former Ranger Hank Blalock earlier in the year. Both these players under-performed in Texas so we wish Stewart Jones well with them and hope they perform better for him.

The big splash in terms of the playoff race though was the Marlins signing of ex-Red Matt Belisle. The Marlins pitching has let them down this year but this signing could provide a spark for them down the stretch and, as their finances and wages are in good shape, it is a risk well worth taking.

Running in Sox!!

Both the Boston Red Sox and Chicago White Sox have already comfortably broke the single-season team record for stolen bases in MLB8. The ChiSox led the league with 215 last year and they (253) and Boston (263) have already surpassed that in a year when the stolen base has definitely been in vogue – particularly for the teams in Sox!

News from D.C. by David Trice

In retrospect the series with the Braves was a missed opportunity, with all three games being decided by one run. At least we picked up 1 win, but I would have been ready to concede the division at that point. 2 wins in another one-run series against the Reds and a pounding of the Dodgers (taking advantage of their misfortune and fatigue I expect) left me feeling far more bullish about our chances.

The rotation is in excellent shape, Almonte's continuing absence aside, and the lineup, which was at full strength for the first time in a while, looks to be in fine fettle.

18 games to go, and we have just a marginal advantage in run difference over Colorado - it's going to be a tough run-in, but one I'm convinced we can win. Next week could be decisive, with the Rockies in the final series of the week, and the Marlins (just 3 behind) coming up in the first series.

The view from LA (halo side) by Paul Beaumont

18 games left and a 4-game advantage for the defending champions. The Angels have been carried more by the bats this season as the pitching, and individual pitchers, have been erratic. Hopefully the pitchers can pick up some form in the last few games to carry into the post-season, if the team make it?

With few stars becoming available, and the Halos not being prepared to pay the going rate, the team has invested income into infrastructure and young talent. The FA signings have been inexperienced players with low wages and a high upside.

The club has concentrated on improving their form accompanied by some targeted training. It'll probably be a couple of seasons or so before the real benefit is received but with all the LPs about, with no stars to sign, the Angels feel this is the best way to get future stars on the roster.

Several injuries to SS Kennedy have reduced his playing time this season and, made the Angels offence less potent. Luckily there has been a consistently high level of play from the other veterans on the roster to keep the scoreboard ticking over. It has also enabled youngsters SS Singleton and 2B MacPherson to get more playing time than initially projected.

Last season the Angels gathered momentum as the season progressed, there isn't the same feeling this

year. However, with the experience from last season, and the position we're in, the Angels are going to make it as difficult as possible for anyone to take their crown.

With 18 games left there's plenty of time for the team to get into the sort of form that won the World Series last year, and the team will need to find it otherwise they won't earn the opportunity in the post-season to defend the title as the Rangers will have overhauled them in the division.

Week 17 Preview

That Washington trip to Florida to face the Marlins is just one of 2 massive divisional series to kick off the week. The other is the Blue Jays trip to Fenway to face the BoSox. The Jays are red-hot at the moment and the Red Sox simply have to take that series to have any chance of winning the division. It would also help them in securing their wild card position as main rivals Texas and Seattle play each other.

The Marlins then have the Brewers and Giants so will be disappointed if they don't get something positive from those series. The Nationals then face the Cubbies before returning home for what could be a massive series against the Rockies. Colorado will have faced San Fran and hosted Pittsburgh so will expect to be in good form for the trip to the nation's capital.

The other big series to end the week features the World Champion Angels travelling to Boston. Both these teams are currently in playoff positions but a sweep either way could be very damaging to their hopes. After facing each other, Seattle and Texas will face Tampa and Minnesota and New York and Cleveland respectively. They will hope to put themselves in position should LA or Boston slump.

Reds and Twins will clinch this week but, depending on results this week, other matters could go right down to the wire.....

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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.