

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

Divisional Series Review

Some surprises, some great series and now we're down to just 4 teams. And, after a year where so much has been similar to last, we only have 1 team making a repeat visit to the Championship series.

In terms of drama the best series was probably the Twins and Red Sox. The Sox were the only new boys to the playoffs and frankly looked overawed in Games 1 and 2 at the Metrodome. Game 2 in particular was horrific as they got spanked 21-0.

The remaining games were at the friendly confines of Fenway though and despite the deflation of that heavy defeat, the Sox came back to take the series. After leading the league in offense it was their pitching (well, other than Game 2) that was key to this victory. In the other 4 games, they held the Twins to just 6 runs. Young ace John Burkett was particularly outstanding and pitched a complete game 4-hitter in Game 5 as he outduelled Eddie Guardado.

The Twins will be bitterly disappointed to have lost this series after taking a 2-0 lead. Doubly frustrating that their offense seemed to use up their whole quota of runs in 1 game.

The Reds and Braves repeated their series of last season and, unfortunately for Mike Sim's Braves, the outcome was the same. Despite being out-hit the Reds prevailed behind timely hitting and a couple of fielding miscues by Atlanta.

Atlanta's big stars (Andruw Jones, LaRoche, Russ Ortiz) were all well-below par which will be disappointing for Atlanta. In the series-clincher at Turner Field, young Puerto Rican pitcher Mario Soto was outstanding, pitching a complete game 4-hitter.

The first surprise to mention was in the AL. It wasn't a big surprise that the Blue Jays beat the Angels but it was pretty shocking that the Champions went out without winning a game. The Angels just didn't perform, highlighted by the issuing of 19 walks during the 3 games. A disappointing end to their reign but there seemed to be an unknown special ingredient missing all season compared to last year.

GM Philip Howard will be pleased with a number of things. Jay Powell's complete game in Game 3 was the first complete game thrown by a Blue Jay all

season, his team will be at home for 4 games in the ALCS and will be well-rested compared to their Boston counterparts.

The other surprise was in the NL. Again, with the well-documented injury problems in LA, it probably wasn't a surprise that the Nationals beat them. But, again, it was a shocker that they were swept and managed only 3 runs in the series. Looking underneath that though, this was a series where all 3 games were tight and evenly-matched but the Nationals came out on top in all of them.

LA will be disappointed that, despite the injuries, they had opportunities but just didn't take them. 24 hits and 12 walks led to only 3 runs as the bats consistently failed to deliver with men on base. Symptomatic was the fact that reigning MVP Beltre managed just 2 hits in the series and made a crucial error in Game 1 that led to the only run of the game.

Game 2 was just as tight as Game 1. The 8th inning was probably the key as the Dodgers sent up the middle of their lineup in Hundley, Beltre and Kinkade. The Nats have been great in the field all year and all 3 were retired due to outstanding fielding plays by Cabrera, Barrett and Vidro respectively. It was at about that time that everyone got a sense that this was going to be the Nationals series. The Nationals winning the game with a walk-off home run in extra innings by Guerrero gave them the momentum they needed to close it out in LA.

It just wasn't to be our season by Patrick Lee

To be honest I think it all started to go wrong back in week 13, when Kaz Ishii picked up a 40-game injury. This was followed in weeks 14-17 by 10+ game injuries to Beltre, Gagne, McGriff and Cabrera. We never got back the momentum we had in the first half of the season and we stumbled into the playoffs with only very modest form.

It just wasn't meant to be this year, and with wages likely to bite hard next season I really don't know whether we'll be able to stay ahead of the pack in the NL West. Nevertheless, many congratulations to David and the Nationals and best of luck to all four teams left in the playoffs.

Reaction from the Capital by David Trice

This just isn't the same Nationals team that played over the first half, or even two thirds of the season. Our finances, and stock of potential, has allowed me to coach a few players, so not only are we in good

form, the team is better than it was at the beginning of the year too. We've got all of our guys fit, having missed Vlad, Orlando Cabrera or Carl Everett on many occasions throughout the season, and Jose Vidro towards the end.

Call it the good feelings of having moved in to RFK Stadium, and the new outfits if you like... but there is now a buzz around Washington that this team has a good shot at the pennant.

End of Season Stats Trivia

- Ø 6 catchers in the NL have a better batting average and more RBI's than any in the AL.
- Ø Texas Ranger Michael Young wins the batting title after only hitting .282 last year.
- Ø Dodger Adrian Beltre leads the NL in home runs for the 2nd straight season.
- Ø Mariner Rookie Randy Winn plays every game and leads the majors in doubles.
- Ø Reds SS Ryan Freel goes through the whole season without making an error.
- Ø Yankee Alfonso Soriano becomes the 1st man to hit more than 40 homers.
- Ø Red Sock Lou Merloni leads the majors in RBI's despite only batting .277.

Draft Review

The Brewers had the first selection in the draft and selected young Japanese pitcher Tomo Okha. GM Martin Willan will hope that he can have the same impact on his club that last year's top pick Randy Winn had on the Seattle Mariners.

The Devil Rays picked 2nd and, after bolstering their pitching with late season free-agent acquisitions, decided to acquire speedy outfielder Jonny Gomes. The Giants may turn out to have got the best selection of the rest of the top 5, selecting switch-hitting Dievi Cruz. This follows the selection of switch-hitter Tom Sanders last year. Along with veteran Aurilla, this means the Giants will be able to trot out 3 switch-hitters in their everyday lineup.

Other teams selected projects who will help them down the line. There is still some decent talent left in the 2nd round with a number of raw potential-laden guys available.

Championship Series Previews

The ALCS is an all AL East affair. The Jays and Red Sox battled it out all season for the division and, in

the 18 games they played in the regular season, it was a dead-even 9 each.

The Jays will be well rested following their sweep of the Angels. This will be an advantage, particularly in setting their excellent bullpen for what could be a long 7-game series. They will also have the advantage of 4 games at home in the spacious SkyDome if it goes the full 7.

However, after the emotional comeback against the Twins, fans in Boston are starting to think this might be a team of destiny that can ride this momentum to the World Series. Also, they won't fear the spacious outfield in Toronto as, though this team has power, it can hit for average, has a ton of 'doubles hitters' and the top 2 base stealers in the AL in Damian Jackson and Trot Nixon.

This is just too close to call. The only prediction I'll make is that I think it'll go 7 games.

The NLCS will also be very tight. There is a 'feel good' feeling in Washington, which could sweep them to the World Series. They have momentum, great pitching and great defense. The question is will they have enough offense to get past the Reds?

That will be tough. The Reds are battle-hardened, fundamentally sound in all areas and will be desperate to get over the heartbreak of losing a Game 7 at this stage last year. Their solidity is summed up by the fact that they made the fewest errors in the NL this year – they make all the plays that should be made.

Their pitching is solid and can be spectacular. Their offense led the league in batting average and sacrifices and is led by MVP candidate Ryan Freel. The season series was tight with the Reds prevailing 7-5. This series will be just as close but, with home advantage, I fancy the Reds to win it in 6 or 7.

Should be 2 great series – good luck to all.....

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<http://www.qbspn.com/> Gameplan Baseball news and statistics from all eight Gameplan Baseball leagues.

<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.