

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

World Series Review by Philip Howard

The World Series began with the meeting of aces Roy Halladay and Livan Hernandez. The Nationals drew first blood with a Vidro solo homer, but the Jays countered with a 3-run third inning. Despite Vidro scoring again on a Cabrera double, the lead stayed with Toronto, with a familiar sight for home fans as Halladay handed over to Hendrickson for the save. Werth and Clark batted in all Toronto's runs in the 5-2 win.

Game 2 saw the Blue Jays forced to move Jay Powell up the rotation, Chulk having failed to recover in time from the complete game which sealed the ALCS. Powell was overcome primarily by Vlad Guerrero, who hit for the cycle. Zach Day pitched well before a perfect 3 innings from Martin secured the 7-2 Washington win.

The series headed to the US capital tied at 1-1. Chulk finally appeared for the Jays in game 3, facing another on-form pitcher, Javier Vazquez. Cabrera gave the Nationals a flying start with a 3-run homer in the first, but Toronto rallied in the third to take a 4-3 lead on Delgado's 2-run single. Washington tied the score on a Calloway single, but the deciding runs came Toronto's way when they loaded the bases before Berg doubled in three off reliever Kershner. Chulk pitched a complete game for the 7-4 win.

Game 4 was a fine pitching duel between the supposed weakest starters. Ohka won with a 6-hit complete game behind superb defense from double-play duo Vidro and Cabrera, while Brian Fuentes conceded just 4 hits but, critically, two came together in the 5th as Chavez got Barrett onto the scoresheet. The 1-0 home win tied the series at 2-2.

Halladay and Hernandez faced each other again in Game 5, and the Jays starter was destroyed by a 2nd inning in which he faced 12 batters and saw Calloway double in Cabrera twice to open and close the scoring. Hernandez lasted until the 7th and benefitted from strong relief work from Ayala, Eischen and Koch. The visitors had the majority of the hits, but lacked momentum as Washington won 8-2.

As the series returned to Canada, Zach Day had the chance to win the Series for Washington, but was chased out in the 5th inning as he failed to retire any of the first five Toronto hitters. With the score at 3-0, Kershner came in to concede a Hudson sacrifice and a 3-run long shot from Werth. A Delgado grand slam in the 7th ended the scoring at 12-0, as Powell cruised to a 5-hit shutout.

So, it was all down to Chulk and Vazquez in Game 7. In a quiet start, Washington took the lead when Chavez plated Everett in the 3rd, but it was Vazquez who cracked first, conceding a double then four consecutive walks to leave the game in the 5th. Almonte couldn't secure the outs,

allowing Hudson a 3-run double for a 5-1 Toronto lead. A Guerrero double pulled one back, but Washington had to wait until the top of the 9th for their opportunity to tie the game, as Johnson's walk and Schneider's double brought Everett to the plate as the potential tying run. Instead, he hit a grounder to Guzman for the final out, and series MVP Chulk was mobbed by his teammates after an 11 strikeout complete game.

Blue Jays manager Philip Howard lauded the whole team, but had special praise for his starters, who pitched all but 6 1/3 innings across the 7 games, and for leadoff man Eric Hinske, who had five multi-hit games. He sent his commiserations to Nationals manager David Trice, saying "It was a great series, and either side could have won. I'm sure that the Nationals, with their superb pitching staff, will have a lot of success in the future."

Trice was equally gracious in defeat – "Congratulations to the Blue Jays and Philip for winning a thrilling series. Exactly as Philip predicted... score 5 runs and the Blue Jays win the game. Still, leading 3-2 I really had hoped that I would get a strong performance from Vazquez or Day to seal the series, but instead both left the game after four innings of pretty poor pitching during two games that we didn't really compete in.

A disappointing end to what had turned in to something of a fairy tale season for the Nationals for a couple of weeks."

End of season awards

AL MVP - In a tight race that was very difficult to call, CF Orlando Hudson of the Toronto Blue Jays has been named AL MVP. Hudson was 4th in the AL in RBI's, 3rd in doubles, 1st in triples, hit 31 homers, stole 37 bases, played an outstanding center field and was the key to Toronto making the postseason after a very poor start.

Other players worthy of specific mention in a very close race are Alfonso Soriano (led the majors in home runs), Roberto Alomar, Julios Matos and the Cleveland outfield trio of Escobar, Phillips and last year's MVP Milton Bradley. All of these players suffered from playing on teams that fell out of the playoff race.

From contending teams, mentions for Boston's Damian Jackson (led the majors in steals, third in doubles) and Lou Merloni (2nd in the majors in homers and leader in RBI's), Twin Corey Koskie (100 RBI's in a disappointing Minnesota lineup) and Blue Jay 1B Dave Berg. Special mention also to Mariner rookie LF Randy Winn (more of him in the next edition).

NL MVP - SS Ryan Freel is a deserved winner of this award. He led the NL in runs scored, doubles, triples and fielding saves, whilst coming 2nd in RBI's and hitting over 30 homers and stealing more than 30 bases. In addition, for the second successive season he has gone through the whole year at SS without making an error – an incredible achievement.

Team-mates Jason LaRue and Sean Casey also deserve mention, particularly 2-time all-star LaRue who was 2nd in the NL in batting average, knocked in over 100 runs and led the league in walks.

Other players worthy of specific mention are reigning MVP Adrian Beltre (who was just as good this year and may have been even better as he was much improved with the glove), fellow Dodgers Jolbert Cabrera and Mike Kinkade (who led the NL in RBI's) and the emerging stars from Colorado, Kit Pellow and Todd Helton.

AL Cy Young - The decision in the AL was probably easier than the NL and it's fair to say that the quality isn't quite as good as the NL. The principal candidates are Joaquin Benoit, Ramon Ortiz, Vinnie Chulk, Roy Halladay, Jose Contreras, Chad Bradford, John Burkett and Eddie Guardado.

Others worthy of specific mention are Roger Clemens, John Lackey, Rick Reed, Mickey Callaway (who again led the AL in innings pitched) and probably the best reliever in Mark Hendrickson who pitched over 200 innings and had 15 wins and 12 saves.

To get down to a final 5, Bradford, Chulk and Halladay were 'eliminated'. Bradford's won-loss record wasn't quite good enough whilst Chulk and Halladay had their number of innings limited. Chulk also gave up 30 stolen bases.

5th place goes to John Burkett, the ace of the Red Sox staff. He was again a workhorse and was exceptional down the stretch. However, he only had a 13-11 record over the whole of the season. In 4th place comes the Yankees Jose Contreras. He pitched a ton of innings with a great ERA and was joint leader in wins with 18. The only thing that went against him was that his team slipped out of the postseason race late in the year.

3rd place goes to the leader of the Angels pitching staff, Ramon Ortiz. After a slightly patchy start, Ortiz dominated and about the only thing that goes against him is that he gave up 20 home runs.

In 2nd place is Ranger Joaquin Benoit. He had the best ERA, most strikeouts and second most innings in the American League. He did though fatigue slightly late in the season with an ERA over 3 and the Rangers only winning 6 of his last 13 starts. This was a factor in the Rangers missing the playoffs.

Therefore, the winner is the Twins' Eddie Guardado. He was right up there in innings pitched, led the AL in complete games and jointly led the AL in wins as he went 18-7. Whilst colleague, and last year's Cy Young award winner, LaTroy Hawkins had an 'off' year, Guardado was the key in leading the Twins to a second successive AL Central Division title.

NL Cy Young - There are 5 outstanding candidates for this award (Russ Ortiz, Livan Hernandez, Seth Etherton, Wilson Alvarez and Kerry Wood), as well as others worthy

of specific mention (Brian Meadows, Terry Adams, Zach Day, Kevin Brown, Javier Vazquez, John Bale, Adam Bernero and probably the pick of the relievers in Ryan Madson who had 12 wins and 15 saves).

The first one to be eliminated from the 'Big 5' and therefore 5th is Seth Etherton of the Reds. He was outstanding but did lose 10 games and pitched fewer innings with fewer strikeouts than the other contenders.

4th place (and two-thirds of the season gone he looked the certain winner) goes to Wilson Alvarez. Over the whole season there is little or nothing to separate him from the top 3 but in his last 12 starts (when the Dodgers needed some momentum due to their batting injuries) he went 1-6 with an ERA of almost 4.50. When there is so little to choose, these things weigh heavily.

In 3rd place (and I'm sure he deserves better) is the Cubs' Kerry Wood. He led the majors in innings pitched, complete games and strikeouts but what goes against him is playing on a relatively poor Cubs team. This was a major factor in him losing as many as 13 games and only winning 18. His ERA also rose very slightly late in the season as he went 4-7 in his last 12 starts. This is splitting hairs but such is the high standard of pitching in the NL.

So it came down (as it did last year) to a battle between Russ Ortiz and Livan Hernandez. To be honest, it's pretty impossible to choose between them. Ortiz had a slightly lower ERA, threw more complete games, had more strikeouts and gave up fewer stolen bases. However, Hernandez pitched more innings, issued fewer walks, gave up fewer homers and had a lower opposing batting avg.

In the end, the award goes to Russ Ortiz. The only real reasons I can give are that he was the only 20-game winner in the majors and just lost out to Hernandez in an incredibly close race last year. It would be no surprise if these 2 battled it out for the award again next year – and led their teams into playoff contention.

Thanks to all those who contributed. The next edition will feature the rookies of the year, gold gloves and silver sluggers in both leagues as well as a 'does size matter?' article from Tampa Bay GM Troy Dilworth. Comments are welcomed on the award winners so far who have simply been personal judgements made by your editor.

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Until next week, Ian.