

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

Freel to Texas!

The biggest news in the league this week came off the field as last year's NL MVP, Ryan Freel, was traded from Cincinnati to Texas in exchange for exciting pitching prospect Lou Pote. This is a stunning move with the Reds being perennially successful and starting well again this season, whilst the Rangers have really struggled this season (9-18).

GM Mayfield is obviously confident that this move will help him in his rebuilding job as he looks to go at least one step better than he has done the last 2 seasons. GM Ian Gibson was delighted with the move and feels Freel will be a major addition not only to a struggling offense but also to his pitching staff with Freel being such an outstanding defensive player at shortstop.

"There is no doubt that he (Freel) is a major acquisition. We feel Lou will become an outstanding starting pitcher in this league and didn't want to give him up but it isn't often that a reigning MVP becomes available so we felt we had to pull the trigger on this deal. We haven't yet decided where Ryan will bat in the lineup but he is someone who can run, hit doubles, homers, and for average so he will be a major addition wherever we decide to bat him.

We've been disappointed with our pitching so far this season and can't really understand why it is under-performing. Our fielding hasn't been great and this seems to have affected the confidence of our pitchers. A Gold Glover like Ryan, along with someone as versatile as Eckstein, should give them the confidence to pitch to contact and allow the infielders to make the plays."

Week 3 Review

The Florida Marlins continued their excellent start to the season. They have the best record in the league (19-8) and hold a 4-game lead over the reigning NL Champion Nationals in the NL East.

The Dodgers again look the class of the West, though this looks a better division this time. They hold a 4-game lead over San Fran with the Rockies and D'Backs only a game further back. The Giants made another major acquisition this week in signing former Dodger Cesar Izturis. The Giants offense is

starting to have a very dangerous look about it as they try to mount a serious challenge to the Dodgers.

In the Central – despite making changes – the Reds continue to lead though by only a game from the improving Pirates. They have improved each week so far but face an important week this week that should give an indication as to whether they are likely to sustain their challenge.

In the AL East, GM Dorman's Yankees signalled their intent to be a major challenger this year as they swept the Blue Jays at Yankee Stadium. This was a convincing sweep as well with the Blue Jays vaunted pitching taking a bit of a spanking – a fate that the Indians pitchers also suffered against the Yanks later in the week.

They hold a 2-game lead over the Red Sox, whose offense started to show real signs of life this week, and a 3-game lead over Toronto. The Devil Rays are 5 games back but look a much more competitive outfit this season.

In the West, the Angels served up an embarrassing sweep of the Rangers in Texas to start the week (31 runs to 9). Despite not doing much the rest of the week they look to be the class of the division again, with the A's as their main challengers. The A's pitch well and, if they can improve their home form, could yet pose a significant threat to the Angels. Texas will hope that Ryan Freel will make an immediate impact on the AL's lowest-scoring team.

In the Central, the Twins won all 3 of their series as they cut the Royals lead to just a game. KC currently have the best pitching staff in the AL and will hope that that continues if they are to maintain a lead over a very solid looking Minnesota team. The Indians had a poor week where their pitching took a hammering whilst the White Sox stabilised nicely. A look at their roster has you wondering whether this team should be providing a bigger threat to the other teams in this division.

Off the field, Freel's move seems to have sparked a flurry of activity – or at least rumour – as a number of trade possibilities appear to be being discussed. It will be interesting to see what moves take place.

On the injury front, veteran 3B Mark DeRosa's injury will be a big concern in Atlanta as he is likely to be out for 4 weeks. No other injuries appear to be as serious, though it will be interesting to see how the Reds manage this week without veteran 2B Sean Casey on top of Freel departing for Texas.

NL East Review by David Trice

Any week you have Atlanta and Los Angeles is going to be tough, and going in without Javier Vazquez and with Hector Almonte on very negative form is only going to make it tougher. I also had to ditch both my setup man and closer as a result of hugely negative form. That said, 4 wins is a disappointment, since we've been swinging the bat pretty well in the opening weeks. That was not the case this week, though, with 5 of the 10 players that featured on negative form for the week.

Losing two to Atlanta was the key to the week, since our best three pitchers were up in this series. The two we lost to Los Angeles were more predictable since Miller was serving up meatballs and Almonte evidently had other issues on his mind.

There is a certain amount of inevitability about the Marlins putting a good start to the season together - they are scoring a lot of runs and Florida have always been there or there about, usually with a stronger second half if I recall correctly. They fell just shy of winning the NL wild-card last year after a strong run, and have maintained that momentum. But they are giving up a lot of runs too.

Each of the teams in the division have very little margin between runs scored and allowed, and an injury, a loss of form, a key signing or players over-achieving or under-achieving, coming back to the 'norm' could adjust the balance in this division quite dramatically.

It is a division that has had it's fair share of ups and downs with each team at some stage leading the division and looking like the class of the four. In the first season at this stage Atlanta (19-8) held a 3 game lead over the Phillies, and the Expos were in the basement, 5 games behind and again with a negative runs difference that is similar to ours today. Last season at this stage the Expos were 16-11 after winning 8 games in a week, but clearly this was a short term spike. The Marlins were in the basement, although just 2 games behind.

However, in the final analysis Atlanta have risen above by season's end, sometimes from the cellar to first, and from further back than 8 games behind if I recall correctly. The Nationals aren't pushing the panic button yet - we'll get better than our recent performances - but the division remains as tight as ever. Perhaps we'll struggle to defend our wild-card spot, let alone the Pennant, but it will continue to be an absorbing season, I'm sure.

Week 4 Preview

Even though it is very early in the season, there are a few major divisional battles to start the week which may say a lot about who will win divisions at season's end. The Twins travel to Kansas in a battle for top spot in the AL Central, whilst the A's travel to Los Angeles to face the Angels. Can their pitching stop the Halos' high-powered offense and get them right in the race as legitimate challengers?

Probably bigger than these 2 series are in the NL. The Reds travel to Pittsburgh to face the best pitching staff in the majors so far and only a game ahead of the Pirates. Can they manage without Freel and, if not, can the Pirates take advantage and signal what might be a change in the balance of power in this division?

Finally, the Marlins travel to RFK to face the Nationals. Though the Braves have won the division in the last 2 seasons, a series victory in Washington against the reigning National League Champions would indicate that this Marlins team is ready to take the crown this year.

There are a number of other series that look interesting. The Pirates follow their series against the Reds with a home series against the Dodgers then a trip to Colorado. The Dodgers also face the Marlins in LA this week. The Reds follow the Pittsburgh series with a trip to Atlanta for a matchup of repeating division winners from Seasons 1 and 2.

In the AL, the Angels continue a potentially big week by playing against the other two division's leaders, as they travel to New York and then host Kansas City. The Twins play the Blue Jays in a matchup of 2 teams who have made the postseason both times so far. Also, the A's follow their series against the Angels by playing 2 contending teams (KC, Boston). With the teams they are playing, it could be a big week for both Kansas City and Oakland this week.....

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Until next week, Ian.