

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

Week 11 Review

After winning Game 1 of their series against the Marlins, the Atlanta Braves winning streak finally ended at 17. As streaks often do, it ended in convincing fashion as the Marlins won 10-1 behind a superb pitching performance by Josh Beckett. Despite this minor setback, the Braves still managed to extend their lead at the top of the division – to 8 over the Nationals and 9 over the Marlins.

Mike Sim was pragmatic about the streak ending – “after the highs of the past fortnight a more modest week was bound to feel a little disappointing but was happy enough to escape with a 5-4 week. A high point was (all-star candidate) Andruw Jones clubbing 2 grand slam home runs”.

The NL Champion Nationals are now 5 games back in the wild card race but made a move to address this by signing ex-Red 2B Sean Casey. Casey could be a key addition for a team that has the pitching and defense and just needs a bit more offense to give them a chance of repeating last season's success.

The current wild card team is again the Dodgers. This is at least partly due to the Giants defeating them in the series in San Francisco – a series victory that delighted manager Marc Bradbrook. The Giants home form in particular has been outstanding recently and their pitching seems to be steadily improving as the season goes on. The Dodgers continue to battle, though another injury to a key batsman (McGriff on this occasion) must be a frustration to GM Patrick Lee.

The Cubs ended their week by being swept in San Fran which makes the Central pretty much a 2-horse race. Both the Reds and Pirates went 6-3 and, whilst the Pirates maintain the lead, the Reds have really hit form and have an offense that has really started to click. It will be interesting to see whether the experience of GM Mayfield can overcome the less experienced but highly competent Pittsburgh boss Guy Handley?

In the AL, the Angels were unofficially crowned AL West Champions for a 3rd time as a horrible week for the Rangers and a good week for them leaves them a massive 18 games clear. Their experience and battle-hardened qualities saw them sweep the Twins

and pull out two 1-run wins at home to the Red Sox to close out the week.

Despite this, the Red Sox were able to extend their lead in the East to 5 games. The Yankees are chasing but are scuffling a bit at the moment, particularly on the road. The Devil Rays are a further 5 games back but are harbouring slim hopes of getting the wild card slot.

With a view to this, they signed ex-Twin pitcher Kyle Lohse. Lohse struggled this year in the Twin Cities but was a very solid performer in the previous 2 seasons. A disappointment will be the injury to all-star candidate Terry Shumpert. Boston will also be concerned about an injury – theirs to ace John Burkett. After hurling 2 complete games this week, it seems that Burkett will need to miss 2 or 3 starts.

There was a change of leadership in the AL Central. The Royals feel from division leaders to wild card leaders as the White Sox reeled off 6 straight wins to secure a 2-game lead. The Twins are still in contention though they are still struggling to really find consistency on a game-to-game basis. The next couple of weeks will probably be crucial to their hopes of making the postseason.

Divisional Records and Rivalries

Though we are only in the 3rd season of the league, there are already some well-established divisional rivalries. The Nationals (previously Expos) and Braves have had a rivalry from early on, the Giants and Dodgers is now becoming a major rivalry, the Angels and Rangers was before my Rangers fall from grace this season. Others are perhaps emerging like the Pirates and Cubs, Red Sox and Yankees and the White Sox, Twins and Royals in the AL Central.

So, I thought I'd have a look at the records teams have against divisional opponents from the start of the league to now –

AL East

Boston / New York	17-19
Boston / Tampa Bay	29-16
Boston / Toronto	21-21
New York / Tampa Bay	20-22
New York / Toronto	20-25
Tampa Bay / Toronto	12-24

1. Toronto (70-53) 2. Boston (67-56) 3. New York (59-64) 4. Tampa Bay (50-73)

AL Central

Chicago / Cleveland	17-19
Chicago / Kansas City	23-22
Chicago / Minnesota	19-23
Cleveland / Kansas City	18-24
Cleveland / Minnesota	15-30
Kansas City / Minnesota	15-21

1. Minnesota (74-49)
2. Kansas City (61-62)
3. Chicago (59-64)
4. Cleveland (52-71)

AL West

Los Angeles / Oakland	21-15
Los Angeles / Seattle	34-14
Los Angeles / Texas	21-18
Oakland / Seattle	24-15
Oakland / Texas	24-24
Seattle / Texas	19-17

1. Los Angeles (76-47)
2. Oakland (63-60)
3. Texas (59-64)
4. Seattle (48-75)

NL East

Atlanta / Florida	24-18
Atlanta / Philadelphia	20-22
Atlanta / Washington	18-21
Florida / Philadelphia	18-21
Florida / Washington	19-23
Philadelphia / Washington	19-23

1. Washington (67-56)
2. Philadelphia (62-61)
3. Atlanta (62-61)
4. Florida (55-68)

NL Central

Chicago / Cincinnati	14-28
Chicago / Milwaukee	27-15
Chicago / Pittsburgh	19-20
Cincinnati / Milwaukee	28-11
Cincinnati / Pittsburgh	25-17
Milwaukee / Pittsburgh	13-29

1. Cincinnati (81-42)
2. Pittsburgh (66-57)
3. Chicago (60-63)
4. Milwaukee (39-84)

NL West

Arizona / Colorado	14-22
Arizona / Los Angeles	15-30
Arizona / San Francisco	22-20
Colorado / Los Angeles	16-26
Colorado / San Francisco	22-23
Los Angeles / San Francisco	24-12

1. Los Angeles (80-43)
2. Colorado (60-63)
3. San Francisco (55-68)
4. Arizona (51-72)

Make of all that you will but it provides further evidence as to why the Jays, Twins, Reds and the 2 LA's have won division titles in both complete seasons. Doesn't explain why the Braves have won 2 division titles and are on course for a third though?

Week 12 Preview

The big divisional series of the week sees the top 2 in the AL Central battle it out in Chicago as the White Sox host the Royals. Chicago is on a 6-game win streak and hold a 6-3 advantage in the season series, so will look to extend their slender lead.

The other big divisional series sees the Nationals travelling to Atlanta to face the Braves. This has been a good rivalry for sometime and the Nationals – with new signing Sean Casey likely to make his debut – will look to overturn what is a 6-3 season advantage for the Braves. They'll need to win the series to really be in a position to put some pressure on Atlanta in the division race.

The Nats then have 2 series that – with due respect to their opposition – are easier than the Braves matchups against the Reds and Giants, so this could be the week they look to make a move. The Marlins are still part of this and face the Phillies and Cubs before a trip to the Dodgers. However, they will be without all-star candidate Martin Young this week.

After the Chicago / KC series, perhaps the biggest story in the AL is how the Red Sox will fare without potential all-star starter John Burkett. They face Tampa, Chicago and Oakland. The Yankees have a tough week, with trips to Toronto and Chicago either side of a home series against LA, but need to take advantage of a week when Boston are 'Burkett-less'.

All-Star Voting

Votes coming in slowly but surely (5 sets in) but still plenty of time (just as a reminder the deadline is 10th March) so get looking on the GBSPN website to help with your selections.

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Until next time, Ian.