

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

Week 13 Review

The Pirates started the week with a fantastic sweep of the Reds in Cincinnati that gave them a 7-2 advantage between the 2 teams and put them 4 games ahead at that point. The Reds battled back however, winning their next 5 before losing their last game. The Pirates did win their last 2 series but the Reds are still in range – just 3 games back and with the slight advantage in run differential.

The Cubs had a good week but are only in vague contention for the postseason. The highlight of their week was probably Yhency Brazoban winning his start against the Dodgers in what was an interesting series (more later). The Brewers battled to series wins against Atlanta and Philly and remain only 3 games worse than the Indians.

The added interest in the Dodgers / Cubs series was Game 2 – the night after Brazoban's win. The Dodger starter for Game 2 was ex-Cub Kerry Wood. Wood dominated his former colleagues as he pitched a complete game to guide his team to an 11-1 win. This followed a complete-game victory in his earlier start of the week against the Rockies.

Despite this, LA remain a game behind San Fran. The Giants didn't have a great week but were resting some players as all of MVP candidate Sanders, Aurilla and Bonds got some much-needed rest. It's a big week ahead for them and they will be without former Dodger Izturis. The Giants need to keep going as, though GM Patrick Lee has been quoted as saying that his team are performing at 'about 60%', you do feel that they have another gear or two to find. Whether they find them remains to be seen but this looks like it's going to be a great race.

In the East, the Braves had a very odd week as they lost 5 on the trot (against Philly and Milwaukee) before recovering to win their last 4 as they swept Colorado. As worrying for the Braves is the injury to Chipper Jones. This isn't season-ending but he'll miss about a fortnight. This is possibly the thing that means Florida and Washington still have hope. The Marlins had a decent week but it was a disappointing week in Washington as they lost all 3 series, conceding 6.5 runs a game in the process. Though Livan is now back, Tomo Ohka is now likely to miss 3 starts.

The form team in the whole league this week were the surging Twins. This included sweeps of the Royals and Rangers with recent signing Javier Lopez continuing his liking for pitching against Texas. He has been a major boost to the rotation, though he is another player who has now picked up an injury. However, it was their batting that really shone this week as they racked up 86 runs and scored at least 6 in every game. They've now scored the most runs in the league and are looking very dangerous.

Despite this form, they still trail the White Sox (who had an almost equally impressive week) by 3. Chicago's week

included a very impressive sweep away to the Angels. The Royals had a disappointing week and are 5 games behind the Twins who lead the wild card race. It will be no consolation to GM Alistair Brearley that his team may be supporting his notion that they were slightly over-achieving.

In the East, the Red Sox had a massive series win at home to the Yankees. They were on the way to a sweep before a Mussina 1-hitter (just that hit from a perfect game) in Game 3. They then lost the first 2 games against KC before ace Burkett returned to steady the ship, pitching a complete game. This sparked them to a sweep of Seattle, giving them a 4-game lead. The Yankees aren't playing badly but there's a growing feeling that an equally big threat to Boston is coming from Tampa Bay. The Devil Rays are now only 6 back and strengthened their pitching still further this week with the signing of ex-White Sock Jon Garland.

The Angels got over their defeat to the White Sox by first, sweeping the World Champs in Toronto, and then by signing ex-Mariner Armando Benitez. It is rumoured that the large signing bonus on offer persuaded Benitez to go to LA rather than Minnesota and, though he has struggled at times this year, he could be a major addition to an already strong Angels pitching staff.

Week 14 Preview

The Giants start an interesting week with the week's marquee matchup in LA against the Dodgers. The Giants look well rested but will have their hands full against a Dodger staff that is as good as anyone's.

The Giants then host the Pirates in a series that has been spiced up by various comments in the media. The Giants are saying that former Pirate Joe Beimel is injured and unable to make his start but rumours have been circulating that he doesn't feel mentally ready to face his former team. This may all be media rumour but adds spice to a series that is already very important to both teams. The Giants then finish the week with a trip to Florida.

The Braves host the Marlins in what could be an important series in the East. A series win or sweep for the Marlins would really get them back in contention. Though they have a tough rest of the week, so do the 'Chipper-less' Braves who visit the Cubs before hosting the Dodgers. In the Central, the Pirates will look to solidify their position in a week when they face the 2 weakest teams in the NL.

The marquee matchup in the AL pits the Twins against the White Sox in Chicago. The Twins are in great form but this is a big week as they also face the Red Sox and Yankees. The Royals have a much more manageable week and will look to capitalise and get themselves right back in the race.

The Yankees and Devil Rays meet in Tampa in a series that might determine who will pose the main threat to the Red Sox down the stretch. They have quietly put themselves into contention but this could be a defining week for Tampa as they also face the top 2 teams in the AL in the form of the Angels and White Sox.

We also have the all-star game this week. The series is tied at 1-1 and, after their convincing inter-league performance in Week 10, an NL win would give them a fair bit of bragging power against the AL.

All-Star Game Preview

The game is in Cincinnati this year and the managers are Patrick Lee and Philip Howard, who might be glad of the distraction in what has been a very disappointing season in Toronto. We've had a decent number of votes in and the starting lineups are as follows –

AL – Stevens and Merloni (Red Sox), Alomar (White Sox), Soriano (Yankees), Hudson (Blue Jays), Bradley (Indians), Hall (Devil Rays) and Koskie and Guardado (Twins). John Olerud of the Mariners has been selected as the DH.

NL – Chipper & Andruw Jones (Braves), Hill & Rivera (Pirates), Hundley (Dodgers), Morgan (Reds), Cabrera (Marlins), Sanders (Giants) and pitcher Bernero of the Rockies. Alou of the Cubs has been selected as the DH.

3 starters from each team were unanimous choices from the voters. These were Chipper Jones, Rivera and Sanders in the NL and Soriano, Bradley and Hall in the AL.

Sanders and Hall are probably the big stories as they make their all star debuts. Hall has finally emerged to be the best catcher in an American League that is pretty weak at that position and has been a driving force for his much-improved team. Sanders spent most of his rookie year in the minors and was disappointing in his brief major league stint. However, that development is reaping dividends now and he is an MVP contender for the transformed Giants.

Three AL starters make it 3 starting appearances in a row which is a great achievement. Soriano has made the LF position his own and quietly goes about being one of the best players in the league, Alomar is at 1B and finally getting the team success he deserves in Chicago. The 3rd player is SS Koskie who fought off the threat of last year's NL MVP Freel. Koskie has again been the key man in what, this season, has been a potent Minnesota lineup.

No-one has made 3 consecutive starts in the NL but Andruw Jones does make his 3rd trip, 2 of which have been as a starter. Other players making their 3rd appearance overall are Hundley, who makes his 1st start at catcher, and perennial ace pitchers Hernandez and Ortiz. In the AL, starting pitcher Guardado makes his 3rd appearance as does Burkett of the Red Sox.

It's interesting that the team with the best record in the league – the Angels – do not have anyone in the AL starting lineup. This means one of two things. Either, the voters don't know what they're on about or, more likely, it illustrates that this is a deep, solid team that doesn't necessarily need one player to be in dominant form for them to be successful.

AL Selection Commentary by Philip Howard

The DH picked himself: Olerud topped the week 10 batting averages and slugging percentage. I'm grateful to the voters for picking Hudson ahead of him for CF, as he is easily Toronto's best batter and a fine fielder with speed on the bases, but Olerud's bat is impossible to ignore. Freel was among the best batting infielders, but him being a shortstop was an important factor, giving him extra adaptability over other IF candidates such as Chris Gomez. Mike Sweeney's power beat out the fielding of Manny Alexander, who earns a place on the bench.

In the bullpen, Sweeney was a close second to Guardado in the vote for the starter, and there's no contest for first reliever. I picked Foulke of the A's as second reliever to make it very likely that every AL club would be represented on the field of play as well as in the overall selection. Burkett's durability and strike out numbers deserve some recognition, so he will appear third.

Below that, my personal preferences held sway - with so many great sluggers at the game, a record of conceding few home runs was vital. So, I picked Chulk, whose ERA is misleading this season, as the final reliever, with Tom Gordon to finish. Gordon may not be a full-time closer, but with the poor control of the leading closers he is at least a full-time reliever who the AL should be able to rely on. I also favoured control pitchers for the non-playing positions.

With so much power on the team, creating a batting order was an interesting task. I don't usually use Hudson at lead-off, but the immense bats of Olerud, Bradley and Soriano pushes him out of the heart of the order, and with Hudson's speed the only way to go was up! Some of our players down the order are slower, so I'm concerned about double-plays but we're nevertheless strong all the way.

I predict a moderately high scoring game - despite the calibre of the pitchers on both sides, someone is bound to have an off day and they will be punished! Best of luck to Patrick, and I hope it's a good game for all of you "watching" at home.

Good luck and thanks from the editor

Here's hoping it's a great game and thanks to the managers, voters and all those who have offered and / or are paying credits.

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Until next time, Ian.