

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

Week 12 Review

After assuming the position of having the league's best record, the Braves opened the week by losing in extra innings at home to the Marlins. With Andruw Jones and Estrada injured, this may have led some to believe that they would have a bad week. Not a bit of it! They proceeded to roll off 8 straight wins including a sweep of the Dodgers. Atlanta's pitching (including new boy Benitez) was excellent and they're now 4 games ahead of anybody in the Majors and the only team on course to crack 100 wins.

Elsewhere in the division, the Marlins had a slightly better week but the Phillies slump continues as they can't seem to put up any big offensive numbers (only scored more than 5 runs three times in the last 18 games). The Nats didn't have a great week but have definitely improved from early on. Young pitcher Tony Armas is in excellent form and is one of a number of players who gives hope for the future.

Whilst the Braves have a huge lead in their division, the other 2 NL divisions remain close. In the West, the Giants probably have their biggest ever lead (4 games) over the Dodgers. This was significantly aided by the Giants sweeping the Cubs to end the week. Without this, the Central would have been even closer as this allowed the Reds to pull within a game of Chicago.

The Reds will hope that much-travelled CF Wilson will give them a boost whilst the Giants acquisition of Byrd adds another quality arm to a deep staff. It would be an exaggeration to say that the Dodgers are struggling as they rested a number of stars this week but there are continuing rumours that there might be changes afoot in LA in the coming weeks.

In the AL, the Blue Jays' no better than steady form (14-13 in the last 27 games) has allowed the Devil Rays to pull to within 3 games. Though all the games were close, this was significantly helped by Tampa's sweep of Texas. It was also helped by Boston's sweep of Toronto – and this after they'd gone 0-9 against them this season prior to that. This leaves the Devil Rays in the wild card position.

Meanwhile, the Yankees had a bad week which included a bit of a battering at home to the Twins. I'm sure that GM Dorman is less than impressed that his

men are 4 games behind Tampa despite being 98 runs better in terms of run differential.

The sweep by Tampa hampered the Rangers in their AL West battle against the Angels. Though LA didn't have a great week, they slightly extended their lead to 4 games. Elsewhere in the AL West, the big news was the appointment of a new chief in Oakland. Simon Dunkerley is now in charge – he's relatively inexperienced but will bring freshness and enthusiasm to a potential-laden Oakland team that might benefit from that approach. Everyone in MLB8 welcomes Simon and wishes him the best of luck.

In the Central, the Twins ended the week having maintained their 2-game lead over the Royals. This was despite the Royals shockingly sweeping them in the Metrodome. The Twins got the balance back by sweeping the Yankees whilst the Royals got swept at home to the lowly Mariners. The Royals ended the week winning a series against the Angels but their inconsistency must be infuriating to GM Brearley. The ChiSox continue their search for a new GM whilst the Indians had an excellent week. Overall though, despite a number of very talented stars, their offense continues to struggle and they have scored the fewest runs in the league.

On the free agent front, the D'Backs and Brewers may not be in playoff contention but both signed pitchers who will help them. Randy Johnson returns to Arizona whilst Tomo Ohka joins the Brewers (and this is a different Ohka to the one they traded to Pittsburgh only a few weeks ago!). The Mariners picked up Woods who has potential, releasing talented Garcia in the process. The other interesting move was the Rockies signing of CF Uribe. He comes from the managerless White Sox and looks like he is an excellent prospect for the future which is probably where the Rockies are looking.

The players not signed were almost as significant. Both Franklin and Vazquez were not signed and announced their retirement as a result. Vazquez had a great Season 2 in Washington but never seems to have recovered from being the losing pitcher in World Series Game 7 of that year. A sad end to his career.

The task ahead in Oakland

GM Dunkerley has a task ahead of him in Oakland though he's currently on course to have the #1 draft pick to add to what is far from the worse roster in the league. He's also helped by the fact that there isn't a great burden expectation from fans. The A's total record from the 4 seasons so far is the 4th worst and

the franchise is yet to have a winning season. The best they've done is 77 wins in Season 2.

The biggest problem this season has been their pitching. They have an ERA that is almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a run worse than anyone else in the AL. There is hope though. Foulke and Bradford are good enough at the top of the rotation and have performed well again this season. Hudson has had some issues this year but could be a decent #3. Harden would be the #4 starter but after that it's a crapshoot. In terms of the #5 starter and the bullpen it's a lot of unproven talent that has frankly been awful this season. Consistent management and a little more experience maybe all they need to be a solid group in the future however.

The batting hasn't been great either but in Chavez and Menechino it already has players playing well who will only get better. 2B Durazo hasn't really broke out yet but is too talented not to finally emerge as an all-star performer. There's a slight lack of depth and a weakness at catcher but there's even hope there. Hernandez is the incumbent and, though he's never quite done it, he is still young enough and talented enough to emerge. The pitching certainly hasn't been helped by some poor fielding this season. Hatteberg has struggled at the key position of SS and Lopez has struggled at 3B which is surprising as he's usually a reliable glove. Chavez is very good at 1B and Durazo will only get better at 2B.

I would say it's far from a hopeless task in Oakland and they could easily emerge in future seasons. The biggest weakness is arguably a lack of experience. Only the Rockies, Twins and Brewers have more inexperienced rosters. There's above average talent and potential so a little patience and an experienced head to help some of the youngsters might just turn things around quicker than expected?

All-Star Game Voting

6 sets of votes in for the AL, 4 for the NL. I still want more but think that's enough to justify playing the game with the Week 14 turn. I'll sort with Danny in terms of people who've volunteered credits and letting him know who the managers are, etc.

Based on the voting so far, there are only a few positions where it looks certain who the starter will be. Season 2 MVP, and a frontrunner again this year, Orlando Hudson, looks a lock to start in CF. Kansas City veteran Sweeney looks certain to be the RF with Michael Barrett taking advantage of the lack of competition to be the catcher. There are very close races at 1B and SS and though there is a

favourite to be the starting pitcher it's pretty close and no fewer than 12 pitchers have received votes.

There are a number of positions that are more clear cut in the NL. Ortiz is a clear favourite to be the pitcher as he leads the Majors in ERA, innings, complete games and strikeouts. Reigning MVP Sanders looks a lock in RF with fellow MVP candidate Alou likely to be at CF. The double play combination is likely to be Aurilla and Rivera with Hundley behind the plate. 1B, 3B and LF are very close races though.

Some very good pitchers have surprisingly received no support from the voters. In the NL, Martin, Colon and Pote have all been excellent but not got a vote between them. In the AL, the Royals Affeldt and the Twins bullpen leader Lopez can probably feel unlucky that they've received no votes. As I say, still time for other votes though.

Week 13 Preview

The divisional series this week don't feature any battles between teams in 1st and 2nd. The most interesting series is the Jays visit to the Yankees where the Yanks will look to get back on form. The other key AL matchups of the week are the Twins at the Angels, Royals at Jays and Rangers at Yankees. The Rangers start the week by travelling to Oakland for Simon Dunkerley's first games in charge of the A's. In the NL, the Reds travel to San Francisco to face the Giants in the only series that features teams that both have strong chances of making the postseason.

The current free agent list is probably topped by pitchers Boehringer and Garcia. Boehringer has a career ERA of pretty much 3 dead and has been an excellent performer. Surely he won't be allowed to just retire? There's not a lot of high quality batting available. George Foster who has just been released by the Reds looks to have some tools but has been a major disappointment so far in his career.

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Until next time, Ian.