

'Better Eight Than Never' - The Newsletter of MLB8

Week 14 Review

The week opened with a shocking series in San Fran. The Dodgers marched into the home of their rivals and just hammered them. It was a thoroughly convincing sweep that maintains the psychological edge that the Dodgers have. 32 runs to 11, 48 hits to 28. The lowest of the low points for the Giants was so-called 'Dodger destroyer' Livan Hernandez giving up 14 hits – and 7 runs before being pulled during the 5th inning of Game 2.

The rest of the week got no better for the Giants as they suffered an equally demoralising home sweep against their other main NL rival, the Braves. This was 21 runs to 7 and against a Braves team that was without likely Cy Young winner Ortiz. They then took only 1 game from Milwaukee and their pitchers continued to struggle horribly (Hernandez again being pulled in the 5th).

The Dodgers probably didn't take as much advantage as they could have done. They lost their ensuing series against the Phillies and Cubs so are still only a game ahead of the Giants. There are still rumours that 1B Beltre may be traded by the Dodgers but this would be surprising in the position they're in though he has picked up another nagging injury at the all star game.

The NL had another team go 1-8 – the Cincinnati Reds. They got swept by the Nats and Braves and, with an excellent 8-1 week from the Cubs, the Reds are now a distant 7 games back. There are rumours that GM Bo Mayfield has lost the hunger he once had and is thinking of resigning. I think everyone would agree that this would be disappointing and, despite their poor week this week, Cincinnati fans certainly wouldn't want him to go.

Elsewhere in the division, the Pirates had a better week. Though the Brewers took 2 games from the Giants they are currently in line for the #1 draft pick and signed Freddy Garcia from the Mariners. Garcia has struggled (3-24 record in the last 2 seasons) but may benefit from a change of scenery. The Milwaukee pitching staff certainly needs a boost as it has been struggling badly.

All 4 teams had winning records in the NL East but the division has effectively been over for a few weeks. Already the Atlanta Braves 'magic number' is down to 18. They're the only team in the league with an ERA below 4 and even have a 7-game league in terms of homefield advantage in the NL. The Nationals continued their solid play of recent weeks and signed pitcher Vicente Padilla from divisional foes the Phillies. He joins a pitching staff that rates 2nd in the NL despite trading Livan Hernandez earlier in the season.

Padilla would have been the Phillies all-star representative but this left the Phillies unrepresented unfortunately. GM Rob Crowther wasn't overly concerned and was just pleased to have a winning week and win a series against the Braves. The Marlins winning week didn't really do anything other than that they're currently no longer in line for the first draft pick!

In the AL, the best record of the week went to Oakland. Though new GM Dunkerley is still getting to grips with the personnel, he was extremely pleased to have 3 pitchers throw complete games (Harden, Hudson and Bradford). He and GM Eatough are doing good jobs in improving their teams and may emerge next season as threats to the continued dominance of the Angels.

This is partly due to the fact that GM Gibson has pretty much accepted that his team just don't have what it takes. After leading most of Game 1 against the Angels, the Rangers blew it and embarked on a run of 20 consecutive Angel runs without reply. They recovered to win the final game but the damage was done and they are now 7 games behind LA and 4 behind Kansas for the wild card. LA just cruise on as new signing Escobar hurls a complete game in his Angel debut. They even felt that they could afford to just release veteran pitcher Aaron Sele.

Tampa didn't have a great week but GM Dilworth was pretty content as it was a tough schedule. They are still only 4 games back of Toronto and 2 out of the wild card. The Jays aren't exactly flying at the moment but are maintaining a decent lead. It will be interesting to see if GM Howard can light a fire under his team to get them in top form as the end of the season approaches.

The Yankees lost all 3 series this week and are in danger of quietly slipping out of contention. They have the 2nd best run differential in the AL and are probably unlucky to not currently be in a playoff spot. They have great support and maybe that can help get them back in the race. The Red Sox won the first 2 games of the week (against the Yankees) and then lost 7 on the bounce. 3 of the defeats were only by a run but it was another demoralising week for GM Denyer.

The top 2 continue their battle in the Central. Both the Twins and Royals had up and down weeks (Twins lose the series to the Indians but sweep Boston, Royals get swept by the A's then sweep Texas) but, by the end, the Twins lead by just 1 game. The Royals are currently the wild card as they seek their first ever playoff appearance. GM Sandry didn't have a great first week for the ChiSox but is probably looking to next season.

All-Star Game by Mike Sim

The build-up to the game was hampered slightly by the news that Vicente Padilla was no longer with the Phillies

and was ineligible for the game. It emerged during the All-star break that he had signed with the Nationals, but sadly not in time to take his place. The replacement was the Giants Joe Biemel who can consider himself unlucky not to have been in the original squad. This left the Phillies as the only unrepresented team for the NL.

The squad for the NL had one major injury worry - Russ Ortiz was nursing a sore shoulder but he got the all-clear from Braves medical staff. The concerns were academic as Ortiz dominated from the start. Pitching for the first time in a week Ortiz looked sharp, striking out 5 and allowing 2 hits and no walks in 5 1/3 innings.

To be fair, the NL got off to a roaring start with Tom Sanders, Todd Hundley and Todd Helton all notching RBIs in a destructive first inning. The AL starter John Burkett gave up another run in the 2nd, a Rivera RBI single. Both teams' pitchers did well in relief though the Giants Livan Hernandez was probably the pick with 2 perfect innings. MVP went to Ortiz though Sanders or Beltre both had 3 hits, the latter also notching 2 RBIs.

So overall, a fun game where the result was of secondary importance. The fans enjoyed it and the players got a few days off from the serious stuff ahead.

GM Banter

The performance of Livan Hernandez against the Dodgers led to some well-natured banter between the 3 GMs at the centre of that trade – Lee, Bradbrook and Trice. Lee perhaps started it as he was encouraged to gloat a little bit about the sweep. Trice then got involved and outlined the comparison below –

Pitcher 1 - The Nats were 6-7 in his 13 starts and we gave up 37 runs (3.80 RA), 78 hits and 27 walks (1.20 WHIP).

Pitcher 2 - The Nats were 8-5 in his 13 starts, giving up 38 runs (3.96 RA), 87 hits and 23 walks (1.30 WHIP). This pitcher also has pitched 2 complete games and a shutout.

So which is which?

Obviously, Hernandez is pitcher 1, and the 'makeweight' in the blockbuster deal was Eyre. Hernandez is doing a consistent job in San Francisco now (7-5, 3.79 RA, 1.43 WHIP) but the drop-off hasn't been too bad for Washington - for the time being. It may have left us stronger even in the short-term since Eyre has been good and we've found some financial flexibility that has enabled us to have a more balanced 5-man rotation.

Lee jumped on this and continued his comments as he recounted a conversation he had with GM Gibson at the time of the trade – "personally I never felt he was likely

to replicate his outstanding lifetime ERA against us in a Giants uniform because of the change to an environment much more hostile to pitchers - and one which would particularly expose any susceptibility to the long ball. Hernandez had only started 2 games in Dodger Stadium as an Expo / Nat, and had gone 1-1 and given up a HR in both (he has now given up 4 HRs in his two starts against us since the trade).

He did temper this though by saying "doesn't mean to say he won't still come good, or serve the Giants well in the playoffs when it matters the most, but I still think the Nats got the better deal in that trade". GM Bradbrook was relatively quiet (as you would probably expect after going 1-8) He simply re-stated that he felt that this was a move that could 'push his team over the edge' after coming so close last year. The only time to really tell on this trade (even in the short-term) will be the end of the season and if Hernandez helps the Giants win a World Series then it has been well worth it.

Trice's final comment in relation to this was short and to the point – "Livan started Game 6 two years ago with a chance to win the World Series for the Nats - he couldn't do it". This is a story that I think will run and run and just adds to the excitement of this great league.

Week 15 Preview

There are no divisional series as big as the Giants v Dodgers last week, but this week features a big one in the AL as the Twins go into Kansas City trying to defend their 1-game lead. Another game between the top 2 is the Reds at Cubs. Obviously the Reds struggled this week but a sweep at Wrigley would give them renewed hope.

The opposite way of looking at it is that they travel to the Dodgers after that and 2 series defeats would confirm that their season was over. Other significant series sees the Angels at the Yankees, Royals at Devil Rays and Cubs at Braves. Whilst the Dodgers and Giants continue to batter each other, it isn't beyond the realms of possibility that this series could be a preview of the NLCS.....

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Until next time, Ian.