

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

Week 15 Review

Arguably the biggest story of the week was the Twins blowing open the AL Central division. They started the week just one game ahead of the Royals and travelling to Kansas for the opening series. 3 games – and 3 Twins wins later – they were 4 games clear. The Royals then suffered another devastating home sweep – this time to the Red Sox – and at the end of the week the gap between the 2 teams was 7 games.

A very happy GM Dave Brown was particularly pleased with his starting rotation as the rotation went at least 8 innings on 5 occasions and pitched at least 6 innings in all 9 games. It's back to the drawing board a little for the Royals though they are only 4 games back in the wild card race and must get back on track immediately. Elsewhere in the division, the White Sox sunk to the bottom of the division. New boss Craig Sandry's rebuilding job may take time but the start to his reign has certainly been disappointing.

As the Central swung perhaps decisively, the AL East got even tighter. The Jays had a winning week (5-4) continuing their steady form (either 4-5 or 5-4 every week since Week 9) but the Devil Rays went 7-2, including a sweep of the A's to pull to within 2 games. This run of form has not only put them in with a chance of the division but has put them 4 games clear in the wild card race. The Yankees are just 3 games behind them but you start to get the feeling that they may come up just short of a postseason place again.

The AL West got a little closer but the Angels still hold a 6 game lead over the Rangers who are 4 games behind Tampa for the wild card. The Rangers management perhaps gave an indication that they were giving up as they signed prospect Chris Johnson from Chicago, releasing main reliever Dominquez. The Mariners had a solid week, whilst the A's struggled. The positive thing for the A's is their excellent financial position and that they are in the race for a very high draft pick.

In the NL West, the Dodgers doubled their lead (from 1 game to 2 games!) over the Giants. GM Lee was pretty content with his team as he was able to go 5-4 without Beltre, Hundley, Coomer, Kinkade and Cora. The Giants 4-5 record was disappointing but they do hold a 9-game lead in the wild card race so look a lock for the postseason anyway. The Rockies only went 5-4 but came up with a very impressive stat as 4 different pitchers threw complete games – 3 of them shutouts.

Despite getting swept by the Braves in their final series, the Cubs look to have the NL Central locked up as they

hold an 11-game lead. This would be the franchise's first postseason appearance and rich reward to Marc Riviera who has done an excellent job. Sadly, the Reds are quietly slipping away. The Pirates had an excellent week but it will be too little, too late. The main joy for GM Handley was beating ex-Pirate Joe Beimel again during a sweep of the Giants in San Fran.

Continuing what seems to be a psychological edge that the Pirates have over the Giants, Handley was keen to point out that ex-Giant Ryan Drese has pitched well since joining the Pirates (nearly 60 innings, 3.52 ERA) after struggling horribly with the Giants. GM Bradbrook maintained a dignified silence though Handley did admit that these minor issues don't mean that he isn't envious of the Giants likely playoff appearance.

The NL East has turned into a laugher. The Braves magic number is already down to just 2 and it wouldn't be a major surprise to see them clinch the division in the opening series against the Nats. They are 9 games better than any other team in the Majors and, though GM Mike Sim is keen that his players don't get carried away, they have to be regarded as favourites for the World Series at this point. The other teams had weeks that are best just not to be talked about.

Race for the top draft pick

It's basically a 3-horse 'race' for the top draft pick (Florida, Milwaukee, Oakland). The Marlins currently 'lead' by 3 games with the Brewers doing themselves no good in this 'race' by winning 6 games this week. The Marlins have at least continued to trim their wages and their lowest wins total is matched by the lowest wages in the league.

This year's draft class is generally accepted to be slightly disappointing. There doesn't look to be a huge amount of star quality but the top pitcher available (and likely #1 pick) is widely thought to be a cut above any other player available.

The voice of an Angel (well the Angel boss anyway!)

As the month of August ends GM Paul Beaumont is happy with the 6 game lead in the AL West over the Rangers. He said "I'm happy with the trades made for leftie starting pitchers. It has given us more options with the staff. Escobar has made a good start but Ramirez has been much more hit and miss. A change was needed and we feel better for the ones made.

We have had 3 major injuries this season, all to pitchers in the bullpen. Luckily we have quite a bit of depth so we haven't been hurt too badly. The current injured players will be back to play in the post-season, should we make it. We've a feeling a bat will be injured this week (*ed – and I thought Dave Brown was the only*

mystic GM!) and we've everything crossed it's not to a key player. We've also got a bit of depth within the position players to platoon quite a bit to keep fatigue down. This has the added bonus of the team keeping the platoons where it has increased 'productivity'.

Nothing is being taken for granted though as with 27 games left anything can happen. Hopefully players will play themselves into form at the right time. No team in the AL is way ahead of the rest so it's all 'up for grabs' with everything still to play for."

'On the range' in Texas by Ian Gibson

We're not happy about it but there's a general feeling in Texas that we won't be catching the Angels and will be watching them win their 4th consecutive AL West title. Credit to them though, they have been just that little bit better than us. GM Beaumont is taking nothing for granted but even if they only went 13-14 down the stretch, we'd need to go 19-8. Unlikely I'm afraid.

Our pitching and fielding has been more than good enough. The problem has been the consistency of our batting. We've had power (4 players with 20 or more homers already) but a lack of consistency in terms of making contact. No postseason would be particularly harsh on ace Joaquin Benoit who's been simply outstanding this season (13-3, 2.18 ERA). Time is marching on for Benoit and it is rumoured that if he doesn't see real signs of contending for a World Series early on next season, then he will look to move to a contender – as former colleague Mickey Callaway did (and is now flourishing) in moving to the Braves.

To rest or not to rest? That is the question.....

With just 27 games left, there are decisions to make for everybody. A key question for teams that look likely to make the postseason is whether to go absolutely all out for homefield advantage or rest players to limit fatigue and ensure that key players are fresh?

One more good week for the Braves will mean that they can probably relax and rest players during the last 2 weeks whilst still being relatively assured of homefield during the NL playoffs (though they have comfortably the best road record in the league anyway!). For others (Cubs, Dodgers, Angels, Twins, Jays) it's more of a question.

This would look to have the biggest impact for the Blue Jays. Their record in the Rogers Centre is the best in the league but only 5 teams have a worse road record. You get the suspicion that they may have been resting people periodically but homefield advantage could be very important to them. The Angels are pretty solid all around and pretty much as good on the road as at home. The Twins currently have homefield advantage

in the AL and would probably like to keep it as any small advantage could be the determining factor in a tight AL. A slight niggling injury will mean that star SS Corey Koskie will get his 'rest' in the next week and a half.

Over the season, the Cubs and Dodgers have identical home / road records. You get the feeling though that homefield would be more important to the Cubs. They were 6-0 at Wrigley this week, 0-3 on the road and don't have the same postseason experience as LA. LA have been resting players recently anyway and GM Lee is probably more concerned about avoiding a serious injury than whether his team gets homefield advantage throughout the playoffs.

They had a 4-3 road record on their way to the World Series last year. It's perhaps only against the Giants that they would want homefield – but winning the NL West again would secure that.

Week 16 Preview

There are no mouth-watering divisional clashes this week with the main interest being whether the Braves will clinch the NL East at home to the Nationals. If they don't then they are likely to do it in LA against the Dodgers – a team likely to be one of their main rivals if they are to make progress in the postseason.

As teams start to flex their muscles in readiness for the postseason, it will be interesting to see the outcome of the Blue Jays at Angels series. The Jays are 7-2 against the Angels this year, something that LA will want to change in case they meet again in the postseason. Conversely, GM Howard will want to turn around a 3-6 record against playoff-bound Minnesota in the final series of the week.

The Rangers playoff hopes could be revived or extinguished in their middle series as they host the Devil Rays. Tampa are 6-3 against Texas this year and a repeat is likely to end the Rangers' playoff hopes. The other interesting series is the Giants at the Cubs. In another potential playoff preview, the Giants will look to get back on track and maintain a 7-2 hold over the Cubs during their meetings this year.

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Until next time, Ian.