

'WEEKLY' HIT GROUND BALL 2008 ANNUAL



'Weekly' Hit Ground Ball (WHGB) is, as the name suggests, a weekly column published every Sunday throughout the MLB regular season at www.BaseballGB.co.uk.

The format changed slightly in 2008. Rather than documenting all of the significant/funny events from the week just gone, as was the case in 2007, it focused on one event or a broader theme before providing a round-up of how the week's action had affected the standings. Essentially it was designed to offer something a bit different for established baseball fans whilst also allowing newcomers to learn about the game and to follow the ebb and flow of an MLB season.

Reading through the entries while producing this annual, I was struck by the positives and negatives of documenting the season while it is unfolding. It is virtually impossible to resist the urge of predicting what the future may hold for a player or a team, yet it often leaves you as a hostage to fortune. Similarly, the immediacy of events can easily lead you to focus on an incident or to follow a line of thinking that might not seem so important or inspired on reflection.

But I like to think that this makes the columns all the more interesting and entertaining to read. These were my thoughts at the time and if the benefit of hindsight makes you think 'his confidence was well and truly misplaced there!' every now and then, well so be it. That's just part of the fun.

If I sat down today and wrote about the 2008 season, the promising early form of Livan Hernandez, Jeff Karstens' attempt at a perfect game and the pre-season optimism in Washington certainly would not come to mind. They were all part of what made up the 2008 season though and I'm glad I captured them.

In the same way, my comments from week four about the Tampa Bay Rays (and the Marlins) take on a new life knowing how the season panned out for them.

And sometimes when a prediction doesn't come true, it isn't really your fault anyway. I boldly claimed in week twelve that General Manager (GM) Omar Minaya would "surely" get the sack if the Mets failed to make the postseason for the second straight year. In fact, the Mets' annual collapse down the stretch won Minaya a three-year contract extension. I'm happy being 'wrong' on that point.

All twenty-six WHGB columns from the 2008 season are reproduced here alongside a brief summary of the division and league championship series, followed by articles written during the World Series.

WHGB will return to BaseballGB in 2009. The site is written by British baseball fans, primarily for fellow Brits but with the hope that people from all corners of the globe may enjoy our unique take on the sport.

We aim to cover all of the different parts of the sport that a British fan might be interested in. This ranges from resources explaining the basics of the game, book reviews, MLB, British baseball, European baseball, International baseball*, Fantasy baseball, the history of the sport, and sharing experiences of life as a baseball fan in Britain (watching games on MLB.tv at three o'clock in the morning etc).

(* = and 2009 is a big year in prospect for International baseball, with the World Baseball Classic in March, the World Cup in September and the International Olympic Committee summit in October that will determine whether baseball returns to the Olympic fold in 2016)

I hope you enjoy reading this collection and continue to support us here at BaseballGB.co.uk.

Thanks for reading

Matt Smith
November 2008.

Week One: New Beginnings

6 April 2008

During the opening week, fans of all thirty teams have reason to hope that this year just might be *their* year. Well, maybe not fans of the Giants, Pirates and Orioles, but everyone else at least have a chance to consolidate or improve on their 2007 efforts. A new season means a new beginning for teams, players and coaches alike.

It was a new beginning for the Washington Nationals last Sunday as they opened their beautiful new Nationals Park. The franchise's transition from Expos to Nats couldn't have been handled any worse, but the wounds have healed for many during their three-year tenure in the baseball un-friendly RFK Stadium. With a permanent home now in place, the locals can finally gain an affinity with this team; to see them as their own. While the many cultural differences make it a less-than perfect comparison, you can see similarities with the MK Dons, who are starting to move forward now that they have moved into a brand new stadium.

The Nationals can leave the past behind and focus on building their own history in the U.S. capital. Leading the way, it was written in the stars that Ryan Zimmerman should toast the new stadium with his dramatic walk-off home run on Opening Night against the Braves. The Nats immediately headed off for a six-game road trip after that victory, but will be welcomed back with open arms when they return for their first real home stand on Monday.

The Nationals' 3-0 start to the season turned a few heads, yet it was the Kansas City Royals who really stole the headlines by sweeping the much-fancied Tigers 3-0 in Detroit. The Royals have been in the doldrums for more years than their fans would care to remember, but their new beginning has been heralded by the arrival of a new manager.

Trey Hillman spent twelve years managing in the Yankees' farm system from 1990 to 2001 before a lack of opportunities saw him moving to Japan to manage the Hokkaido Nippon Ham Fighters. During his five years with the team, Hillman was able to bring success to a franchise that had previously been one of the minnows in the Japanese League. When they appointed him in October last year, the Royals expressed their confidence that, given time, he could perform a similar turn around in Kansas City. With a demanding style that has already put a few Royal noses out of joint, Hillman appears intent on pushing this roster out of their slumber.

The arrival of Hillman is the latest indicator of the impact that the Japanese League is having on MLB. Several Japanese players have left their homeland this off-season for a new beginning in the States. Kosuke Fukudome was the Cubs' number one target during the off-season and he will add patience and OBP to a line-up sorely lacking in those qualities. He couldn't have announced himself in more dramatic fashion, slamming a three-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning on opening day at Wrigley Field to take the game against the Brewers to extra innings (Milwaukee prevailed 4-3).

Hiroki Kuroda made a similarly positive first impression with his new club, pitching seven strong innings for the Dodgers on Friday to earn his first Major League win against the Padres. The Dodgers of course were pioneers in bringing Japanese talent to North America when they signed Hideo Nomo back in 1995. While Kuroda is unlikely to replicate the Nomomania that his countryman inspired, he should be an effective starter and it seems fitting to have a Japanese pitcher in the Dodgers' rotation.

Finally, some new beginnings can feel strangely familiar. Torii Hunter signed a five year/\$90 million deal with the LA Angels over the off-season, marking the end of his ten-year career in Minnesota. It was no surprise when the baseball gods decided that Hunter would begin his life in an Angels uniform at

the Metrodome. Some questioned what sort of reaction he would receive. Fans of sporting teams are notoriously fickle; able to disregard years of great service when their hero dares to leave for pastures new.

Thankfully, the Twins fans gave Hunter an emotional ovation, choosing to remember the sterling contribution he made both to the team and the community of Minnesota. He kindly responded by going 0 for 8 in the first two games, before hitting a home run in the last of a four-game series.

It will be seven months before we find out how these new beginnings will end in 2008. With these stories and countless others to unfold, it promises to be a great year.

Week One wrap-up

The standings don't mean much after just four or five games, but they are a fun sight today in any case.

The Marlins and the Nationals lead the way in the NL East, while the Orioles and the Rays are joint leaders of the AL East with the Red Sox and the Yankees languishing at the bottom. In the AL Central, the Tigers sit dead last as the only team in the Majors yet to record a win (0-5). The Indians are just ahead of them at 2-3, leaving the White Sox, Royals and Twins in the top three spots respectively.

Week Two: The price of Young talent

13 April 2008

"It doesn't change anything"

So said the Arizona Diamondbacks' centre fielder Chris Young when asked for his thoughts on signing a lucrative multi-year deal this week. The D-Backs locked up their young star for at least the next six years in the sort of move that is rapidly becoming the industry standard. Indeed, no sooner had baseball fans tried to imagine whether \$28 million would "change anything" for them, than the Indians were announcing a similar deal with their ace starter Fausto Carmona. Rest assured: life's good for young ballplayers right now.

Up until recently, many young players had to wait until they became free agents at the end of their sixth Major League season before they could start commanding sizeable contracts. Yet the financial landscape of the Majors has shifted.

The free agency market has reached insane levels with average starting pitchers like Carlos Silva able to receive multi-year deals worth \$12 million per season. At the same time, and partly as a consequence, General Managers have become unwilling to trade impact players unless they receive offers that knock them off their feet. With top talent so hard to acquire, it is imperative that teams keep hold of their best players for as long as possible.

In the case of Chris Young, Arizona have 'bought out' his first year of free agency and hold a club option for a further year taking them to the end of the 2014 season. They therefore now hold his rights for two additional years on top of the standard contract given to a player when they reach the Majors.

This doesn't come cheap, but the figures are comparable to the wages of Premiership footballers. If the D-Backs pick up that option year, Young will earn £61,000 per week over the next seven years. Carmona's deal is a bit more complicated (a four-year deal with three club option years), but potentially he will earn a similar sum over the same period.

Teams are keen to secure these types of deals because they provide stability from both a financial point of view and in terms of the relationship between themselves and the player.

Ryan Howard's situation is a great example of the alternative. Few can doubt that he is an exceptional talent and that he should be earning a sizeable salary, but the Phillies' attempts to finalize a multi-year deal before he hit arbitration were unsuccessful.

Consequently, the two parties had their first round of arbitration hearings this off-season which saw the Phillies losing their case and being ordered to pay Howard \$3 million more this year than they had wanted. And the cost wasn't just financial: arbitration hearings are often an unpleasant experience and the process could prove detrimental in any future attempts to negotiate a long-term deal between the two parties. It's little wonder that the Brewers are currently trying to agree multi-year deals with Prince Fielder and Ryan Braun before they become eligible for arbitration.

Some would say these deals and the Ryan Howard salary (\$10 million for 2008, which is the best part of £100k per week) are bad for baseball. The fact that teams can pay young players significantly less than their value on the free agent market is held as one of the reasons why smaller market teams can compete with the massive payrolls of the Yankees, Red Sox and their ilk. Yet we have to adjust our mindset to take into account exactly how much money even the lowest payroll teams are now raking in.

MLB Commissioner Bud Selig is quick to remind us that MLB generated a record \$6.075 billion in gross revenue last year. For all of the benefits of new stadiums and massive media coverage, it is the talent and skill of the players that really generates fan interest and therefore generates that revenue. Surely it is only right that they should receive their fair share?

Think of it this way: under the current system, the Brewers are able to pay Fielder and Braun salaries (£6,538 and £4,442 per week respectively) in 2008 that are significantly lower than what the top players receive in the second-tier of English football (accepting that the young Brewers' salaries exclude the value of their draft bonuses). To say they are getting Fielder and Braun on the cheap would be a massive understatement.

They may seem fantastic (some would say obscene) sums to you and I, but Young and Carmona deserve the contracts they signed this week because of the revenue that their talent generates. The fact their respective teams were so delighted to announce these deals is conclusive proof of this fact.

Week Two wrap-up

The D-Backs have an eight-game winning streak on the go and their 9-2 record is the best in the Majors. The surprising St Louis Cardinals (9-3) lead the NL Central, although their schedule (recent opponents: the Nationals, Astros and Giants) may have had a lot to do with their hot start. The same can be said for the NL East leading Marlins (7-4). Elsewhere, the Red Sox and Yankees are beating each other, while the Orioles sit atop the AL East. The A's have won five straight against tough opposition (Toronto and Cleveland) to lead the AL West and the Tigers (2-9) are shockingly the worst team in baseball as the White Sox (6-4) sit first in the AL Central.

Week Three: Beware the knuckleball

20 April 2008

While Mariners manager John McLaren will not agree, the injury that has sent Erik Bedard to the 15-day DL this week has been reason to rejoice for some baseball fans. That's not through any lack of sympathy or respect for the former Oriole, it's because the injury has created a spot in the Seattle rotation for a unique talent: R.A. Dickey.

Dickey doesn't just have a great name, he has a great knuckleball and there aren't enough good knucklers around these days. Tim Wakefield is still taking the mound every fifth day for the Red Sox, and Charlie Haeger is trying to pitch his way back on to the White Sox's roster, but apart from them you will be hard pressed to find many exponents of the knuckling art.

And that's a real shame. Immortalized in the Hall of Fame by Phil Niekro and immortalized in Ball Four by Jim Bouton, the knuckleball is a pitch with a certain mystique and charm. Unless you are trying to hit it. Or even catch it.

Dickey's story is a typical knuckler's tale. Struggling to stick in the Majors as a conventional pitcher, he turned to the butterfly pitch in an attempt to keep his dream alive. The knuckleball has resurrected the careers of several pitchers and it raises the question as to why more don't go down that route. The answer, of course, is that being a knuckleball pitcher in the Majors is not nearly as easy as it looks.

In many ways, you can compare the knuckleballer to a spin bowler in cricket. Everyone on the local village green thinks that they can bowl a few overs of spin and plenty of professional cricketers try to do so to add another string to their bow. The problem they face is that, while they can amble up to the crease and turn their arm over, they can't

actually bowl the delivery well enough to be effective.

Spin bowling is predominantly about putting the batsman under pressure by consistently bowling good deliveries. Just like a batter sizing up a pesky knuckler, the batsman sees these slow offerings and feels a compulsion to start whacking them into the stands. The crafty spin bowler preys on the batsman's aggressiveness in the same way that a knuckleball pitcher does, almost goading them into taking wild, unbalanced swings.

The most common reason why a part-time spinner comes unstuck is that they cannot apply the same level of pressure on the batsman as a full-time spinner can. Their four good deliveries in an over are accompanied by two long hops or full tosses, so the batsman can simply wait for the inevitable bad balls and put them away. Two overs for 20 runs (or more) will soon see you being relegated back to fielding duty.

The same principle applies for the knuckler. Throwing a knuckleball is one thing; consistently throwing it for strikes, or at least in a location that tempts the batter into swinging at it, is quite another. Without that consistency, the batter can simply wait for the walk or the mediocre 2-0, 75MPH 'fastball' to hammer into the seats.

It wasn't a fairy tale start for R.A. Dickey as he took the loss for Seattle on Friday night against the Angels. There were some positive signs in his performance though. The Angels took advantage of a shaky first inning by Dickey, scoring three runs in the first frame, but he settled down after that and retired fifteen of the next seventeen batters he faced.

Knuckleballers have to accept that if it's not their day, things can look fairly ugly. The way Dickey battled back and put in a decent showing overall should be enough for him to get a second start next Thursday against the Orioles at least.

If he does get that chance, many baseball fans (except those in Baltimore) will be hoping that he pitches a gem. It takes a lot for a knuckleball pitcher to earn the trust of his manager and MLB will be a better place if Dickey can be an effective Big League starter.

One of the great things about baseball is that players of all different shapes, sizes and skill-sets can play (and have success) at the highest level. Witnessing star sluggers being made to look silly by a knuckler every now and then is an enjoyable example of this appealing trait.

Week Three wrap-up

The Rockies have won four in a row, including a 6 hour 16 minutes, twenty-two inning marathon against the Padres, but they were unable to gain ground on Arizona in the NL West. The D-Backs (13-4) matched Colorado's winning streak and retain the best record in the Majors. The Cardinals' (9-4) hold on first place in the Central is coming under threat from the Brewers and the Cubs (both are just 0.5 games back), while the Mets (10-6) have won five straight to jump to the top of the East.

In the American League, the Red Sox (12-7) have moved to the top of the East, winning eight of their last ten games, although the Orioles are clinging on to their coat tails. The White Sox (10-7) stay in first place in the Central as the Indians and Tigers remain mired in mediocrity, while the Angels (12-7) have edged ahead of the A's in the West thanks to a three-game winning streak.

Week Four: Rays dreaming of a Disney ending

27 April 2008

Major League Baseball made a visit to Disney Land this week, but thankfully it was no Mickey Mouse affair.

The Tampa Bay Rays played a three-game series against the Blue Jays at the Disney Sports Complex in Orlando, following their series against the Rangers at the venue last season. The new environment proved to be a success on the field for the Rays as they swept Toronto and increased their Major League record at Disney Land to 6 and 0.

That success was repeated off the field as well. The Rays and Blue Jays pulled in crowds of 8,269, 8,989 and 9,540. While these are low for Major League standards, they were close to sell outs in the small stadium and sell-out home crowds are something of a novelty to the Rays.

Over the course of the 2007 season, the Rays' average home gate was just over 17,000, which leaves plenty of spare seats considering Tropicana Field has room for just under 44,000 spectators. The Rays' Disney Land experiment was an attempt to drum up some extra publicity and to reach out to the wider Florida community.

It's a smart move and is a sign that they recognise the need to be proactive. Last season, the Rays' home gates were the second worst in the Majors. Sadly for the Florida region, only the Marlins could do worse, averaging crowds of just below 17,000.

Major League Baseball's struggles in Florida are even extending to Spring Training. The Grapefruit League is facing an exodus, with the Dodgers, the Indians and the Reds being the latest teams to confirm that they will be leaving Florida behind and heading to the rival Cactus League in Arizona.

Faced with such difficulties, it is up to the Rays and the Marlins to give their local communities a reason to come out and support them.

Attractive and exciting new venues could be one part of the answer. After several years of posturing and relocation threats, the Marlins have finally reached an agreement to build a baseball-only stadium to replace their tenancy at the ill-suited Dolphin Stadium. The current estimated cost of the 37,000 seater stadium is \$515m (about £260m) and it is scheduled to open in April 2011.

Meanwhile the Rays announced plans for their own baseball-only stadium in November last year. There are many political hoops to jump through before work can begin and approval is far from a given. Naturally, locals are concerned about possible tax hikes and fans also doubt whether sitting in an open-air ballpark is going to be an attractive proposition during hot and humid Florida summers. Still, there are positive signs that a new Rays ballpark is on the horizon.

These new homes can also be joined by a touch of re-branding to bring a fresh and exciting new feel to the teams. The Rays have already gone down this route by dropping the 'Devil' from their name and embracing a new colour scheme this season, while the Marlins are set to be re-named the Miami Marlins as part of the new stadium deal.

But new homes and new names will only get you so far. The best way to get fans into a stadium on a consistent basis is to put a winning team on the field.

Admittedly the Marlins' two World Series victories didn't really have much of an impact on attendances, but Dolphin Stadium undoubtedly held them back from capitalizing on these achievements.

The Rays have good reason to be optimistic for the future as they are developing a fascinating group of talented young players. Many baseball fans would like to see

somebody break the New York-Boston monopoly in the AL East. With the Orioles at the start of their own rebuilding programme and the Blue Jays tripping themselves up at every turn, Tampa Bay are the team most likely to do it over the next five years or so.

If they do, they won't need to go to Disney Land any more to sell out their home stadium. That will be bad news for Mickey and his friends, but great news for Tampa Bay and baseball in Florida.

Week Four wrap-up

The D-Backs (17-7) are showing little sign of slowing down. They now lead the NL West by six games, while the Padres have sunk to the bottom, losing eight of their last ten games. At 16-8, the Cubs are pushing Arizona for the best record in baseball with the Cards and the Brewers following closely in the Central. The Marlins (14-10) have held on to the top spot in the East for another week, but the Phillies, Mets and Braves are looming ominously.

In the American League, the Red Sox (15-11) have lost four in a row to allow the Orioles (14-10) to tie them for first place in the East. The Rays are on a charge, winning their last five, while the Blue Jays ridiculously threw Frank Thomas away and lost six on the spin. The Tigers have picked up their game in the Central and, although they are still stuck in the cellar, they now sit just three games behind the division leading White Sox (13-10). The Indians have won their last five to get them to .500 (12-12). In the West, the Angels and A's (both 15-10) are still tied at the top. The Rangers are already seven games behind, which should please a few Liverpool FC fans at least.

Week Five: The complex case of Cameron

4 May 2008

When Mike Cameron stepped up to the plate against Jason Marquis on Tuesday, it was the end of a long and frustrating wait for his season to start. Watching him smoke a 1-1 fastball into left field for a double, you got the feeling that the Brewers' new centre fielder was looking to make up for lost time.

Cameron spent the first twenty-five games of the season kicking his heels thanks to a suspension, handed down as a result of him failing two drug tests last year for a banned stimulant. The player has since blamed the positive tests on tainted supplements.

The Brewers finalized their one-year deal with Cameron in January, fully aware of the positive drug tests and impending suspension. When the signing was announced, his new manager Ned Yost extolled Cameron's virtues, stating that he "could not find one person, back from his [Cameron's] high school coach to players who have played with him, that would even say he is a 'good guy.' A 'great guy' was the worst that I could get out of anybody". Those sentiments, alongside the guaranteed \$6m they will pay him this year, let you know that the Brewers don't think any less of the player despite his transgressions.

The affair has created an uneasy position. By signing Cameron, the Brewers laid themselves open to the accusation that they were effectively trivialising the issue. MLB's public stance that 'taking drugs doesn't pay off' looks pretty hollow when convicted 'cheaters' have little trouble in finding a team willing to employ them (and for a not insignificant amount of money).

This was exemplified by one of the few interesting sections in the Mitchell report. Internal correspondence between the Red Sox's GM Theo Epstein and a scout showed

they had reason to suspect that Eric Gagne had used performance-enhancing drugs ("steroids IS the issue", so wrote the scout). Those suspicions didn't stop Epstein from signing Gagne at the trading deadline last year.

A cynic would say that MLB teams don't get any extra wins by taking the moral high ground. That's true, but we should be grateful for it. The moral stance on drug use is not nearly as straightforward as some would have you believe. Labelling someone as a 'drug cheat' and treating them as a pariah is easy when you see things in black and white, but the issue of PEDs is a genuinely grey area. The positive reaction of some athletics fans towards British sprinter (and Rugby League winger?!) Dwain Chambers shows this to be true.

You could put an argument forward that the Brewers would have been in the wrong had they not signed Cameron. He ticked all of their boxes in terms of the player they wanted. Yes, Cameron was caught breaking the rules (knowingly or not), but he received his punishment and now he has served his time. That should be the end of the matter. While the thirty-five year old isn't the player that he once was, Cameron can still hit and play a decent centre field. Why shouldn't he continue to earn a living as a Major Leaguer?

If we look to the moral high ground, we have to accept that, whether fairly or not, each case is judged differently. Sometimes there are valid reasons for this; sometimes it is the product of personal bias. Cameron tested positive for banned stimulants rather than designer steroids and has a solid reputation as being a good person (as Yost attests), so the moral majority are on his side.

Compare that to a certain Mr B. Bonds. Strictly speaking, Bonds hasn't even knowingly failed a drugs test, but with the circumstantial evidence, allegations of perjury over his head and a bad reputation with the media, no MLB team is willing to employ him regardless of

the fact that he would still be a valuable addition to any line-up.

MLB teams may have an inconsistent approach towards people who fail drug tests, but that's only a reflection on the complex nature of the issue. Cameron's return highlights the fact that if you want to live by a drug-testing programme, you have to accept it for what it is. There will always be a black mark against his name, but that's no reason why he shouldn't continue his career with the full support of the fans in Milwaukee.

MLB's drug-testing policy doesn't give a player a life-time ban for two failed tests, so baseball fans shouldn't give him one either.

Week Five wrap-up

Eight games ago, the Dodgers were 9 and 13 on the season. Now they're 17 and 13 and have climbed to second place in the NL West; however they still trail the Major League-leading D-Backs (21-9) by four games. The Cards (19-12) have a half-game lead over the Cubs in the Central, while the Marlins' run at the top of the East has come to an end. The Phillies (17-14) take over, spearheaded by second baseman Chase Utley whose 13 home runs lead the Majors with his nearest rivals four behind.

In the American League, the White Sox dropped from first place in the Central last night, as the Twins' (15-14) take a half game lead thanks to a four-game winning streak. The Red Sox (19-3) have a two game lead over the Orioles and the Rays in the East, with the injury-plagued Yankees stuck in fourth place with a .500 record. In the West, the Rangers have won their last four to catch up with the Mariners who have lost their last four. They both sit on a 13-18 record, four and a half games behind the division-leading Angels (19-3) and three and a half behind the A's.

Week Six: Unpredictable pitchers

11 May 2008

The eternal frustration of fantasy baseball is that however much research you put into preparing for a draft, to a great extent your success depends on predicting the unpredictable. The same applies for a GM of an MLB organization, only they are playing with real money, real human beings (and their families) and will really be facing the sack if it all goes wrong.

When it comes to unpredictability, pitchers top the lot. Take the Indians for example. Their staff ace C.C. Sabathia picked up the win on Friday night against Roy Halladay and the Blue Jays. Nothing unusual about that you might think, but this was only his second 'W' of the season. His 2-5 record with a 6.55 ERA is not what people expected from the reigning Cy Young winner heading into the season.

Fortunately for Cleveland's GM Mark Shapiro, Sabathia's slow start has been counter-balanced by Cliff Lee's unexpected turn around. The left-hander struggled so badly in 2007 that he was demoted to the Minors during the season, but he has a perfect 6-0 record in 2008. Lee has given up just four earned runs during this period, good for an 0.81 ERA, and has struck out thirty-nine batters while walking just two. Beating the Yankees on Wednesday night in a much-hyped battle against the then fellow undefeated starter Chien-Ming Wang summed up the fairytale.

Cliff Lee has been a big bonus for Cleveland, yet the Angels needed more than a pick-me-up after their formidable 1-2 punch of John Lackey and Kelvim Escobar both went down with injuries during Spring Training. The Angels turned to the lesser-known Santana and he has responded brilliantly. Ervin suffered a similar experience to Cliff Lee last year, being sent down to Triple-A for a month after a disappointing first half to the season

that ended with him tagged with fourteen Major League losses to seven victories (and a 5.76 ERA to boot). So far this season, he's 6-0 with a 2.02 ERA and his last start against the Royals, a four-hit shutout, was probably the best of his career. Joe Saunders (6-1) has started well too for the Halos.

The Angels had to cope without the reassuring presence of their ace on the mound on opening day. In Minnesota, they had no such problems with sending out their number one starter for game number one. The trouble was, he didn't seem to offer much reassurance to the Twins' faithful.

Livan Hernandez is a sizeable step down from Johan Santana as your staff ace, but eight games in and he is 5-1 with a 3.83 ERA. In his last two starts, Hernandez has played his role as the staff leader extremely well. Against their AL Central rivals the Tigers and the White Sox, he came out with the win in both, pitching seven innings against the former and pitching a complete game against Chicago.

And if Twins fans were initially struggling to come to terms with the idea of Hernandez being their number one, spare a thought for fans in Florida. Many people couldn't resist smirking when it was announced that Mark Hendrickson would be the Marlins' opening day starter. Ditched by the Dodgers over the off-season, the former NBA player did little to silence the doubters by conceding six earned runs and taking the loss that day against Johan Santana and the Mets. Yet he rebounded from this inauspicious beginning by winning his next four starts (admittedly two coming against the Pirates and one against the Nats, but they all count) and he currently sports a 5-1 record.

Hendrickson is pitching well, the Marlins have got off to their best start in franchise history and reports suggest they are about to sign a six-year/\$70m extension with their star shortstop Hanley Ramirez. Anyone who had predicted that sequence of events six weeks ago would have had their sanity questioned.

So it's true that the unpredictability of pitchers can drive a GM mad, but they shouldn't bemoan their bad luck too quickly. That unpredictability can also provide a few very welcome surprises.

Week Six wrap-up

Greg Maddux won his 350th career game last night against the Rockies, but there hasn't been much else in the way of good news coming out of San Diego. The Padres have sank to the bottom of the NL West, ten games behind the division-leading D-Backs (23-14) who have cooled down recently with a 2-5 record on the week. The Cardinals (23-15) remain at the top of the Central as the Brewers continue to fall, in part due to the ongoing struggles of Eric Gagne. There are no such struggles in Florida. A week after losing their grip on first place in the East, the Marlins (22-14) grabbed it straight back by winning six in a row.

In the American League, the Red Sox (24-15) have a 2.5 game lead over the Rays in the East, while the White Sox and the Twins (both 18-17) share first place in the disappointing Central division. There's a tie at the top of the West as well between the Angels and the A's (both 22-16), but the two teams beneath them are heading in different directions. While the Rangers have won five in a row to take them two games below .500, the Mariners are on a dismal run having won only five of their last twenty-one games.

Week Seven: Interleague weekend

18 May 2008

Here we are in mid-May and baseball traditionalists are already having their tails pulled. The weekend has been given over to Interleague play for twenty-eight teams (with the Cubs and the Pirates sitting this round out), providing match-ups between genuine local rivals, ho-hum games between teams with no links whatsoever, and a topic of conversation that can ignite heated rows in an instant.

It does seem a bit early to be playing interleague baseball. Most teams have barely started getting their teeth into their normal rivalries, so to be switching to games with the other league almost feels as though we are breaking away to a sideshow before the proper competition has had a chance to get going.

This is one of many issues raised by the way this concept has developed over time. Change is always resisted by many; it's human nature to stick with what you know and are comfortable with. Change is seemingly inevitable though, whether it is for the better or not.

Interleague play can be thrown together with the designated hitter (DH) rule and the wild card to add up to the trinity of divisive modern baseball changes. The impact they have had on the baseball landscape when you put them together is considerable.

The DH was introduced in the American League in 1973. While it hasn't necessarily prompted a significant boost in offense, it has created a situation where the two leagues play by different sets of rules. Some see this as a good thing, offering variety and giving each league a slightly different character. The downside is that each team (if they are smart) will gear their roster to best match the rules

by which they mainly play, making things awkward when the two sides join up for interleague play.

This is fine in the World Series, where that clash is now a fundamental part of the contest, but it's a different story when the games count towards each team's regular season record. When the margins are so small, a team may reach the play-offs on account of how well they adapted to the opposing league's rules during the interleague games (e.g. whether your regular DH can play a passable first base or has to sit on the bench/cost your team runs due to fielding errors).

It's something of an oddity that the interleague schedule can have a bearing on which teams come out on top in their own league. This season, the Brewers have to play three games against Boston, while the Cubs miss both the Red Sox and the Yankees, despite the NL Central being matched against the AL East this year. Maybe over the course of several years things will even themselves out, but if the Brewers drop games against the Red Sox and miss out to the Cubs by the slimmest of margins, that's not going to be much comfort to them. Is it right that a team can make the play-offs simply because they had a slightly easier interleague schedule than their main rival?

Being strict about which teams play against each other gets even more complicated when we consider the unbalanced schedule and the wild card. The latter has won over many of its critics since it was introduced in 1995, not least because the fears that it might dilute the standard of postseason play have proved to be unfounded (four teams have gone on to win the World Series after making October through the 'back door'). Yet the wild card is not really a fair competition in one sense: the teams that are competing for it do not play the same teams the same amount of times.

In fact, the more you think about the way MLB is structured, the less sense it makes. If you aren't going to strictly compete within

your own league, why bother splitting the teams into two at all? If you are going to play a significant number of interleague games, shouldn't the teams all play by the same set of rules? Why split the teams into divisions when they don't really mean anything anyway, particularly as you don't have to win your division to make the postseason?

The current system has developed in piecemeal fashion over time. It is definitely not the way you would structure the competition if you were starting from scratch, but it's also hard to argue that MLB is fundamentally flawed when attendances are so high, TV deals are so lucrative, and the product on the field is of such outstanding quality.

For all its flaws, interleague play is here to stay. Put it down as a quirk in the system and enjoy those mouth-watering Orioles-Nationals games.

Week Seven wrap-up

Tampa Bay (25-18) goes 5-2 on the week to force a tie with the Red Sox (26-19) at the top of the AL East. The Yankees sit dead last and Hank Steinbrenner is even suggesting that his team needs to play more like the Rays. The White Sox (22-20) have won four in a row to stay ahead of the Indians in the Central, while the Angels (25-20) have a half-game lead over the A's in the West. The Rangers' great run of form has seen them work their way back to .500 (22-22).

In the senior circuit, the main changes have taken place in the Central. The Cubs (26-17) now lead the way, with the Cardinals and the Astros being their closest rivals. The Brewers have sunk to the bottom thanks to a four-game losing streak, two of which coming in a double-header yesterday against the Red Sox. The Marlins (24-18) are just about holding off the rest of the NL East, while the D-Backs continue to lead both the West and the whole of the Majors with their 27-16 record.

Week Eight: Tick, Tock. Tick, Tock ...

25 May 2008

Like the White Rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, MLB Commissioner Bud Selig is frantically rushing around, looking at his watch and muttering "Oh dear! Oh dear! The games are running too late".

All thirty MLB teams were informed this week of plans to crack down on the many little factors that can slow the pace of a game. Batters won't be able to amble to home plate when it's their turn to stand in the batter's box, pitchers will have to deliver their pitches more promptly, batters won't be granted time once the pitcher has started his delivery, and the home plate umpire will be breaking up those all-too frequent powwows on the pitching mound.

I know what you're thinking: shouldn't they be doing all of this already?

Yes they should; the above are all things that can be found in the official rules as they stand. For some reason though, they are not enforced. The pace of games has apparently become a personal bugbear of Bud's so action is being taken. For the time being at least.

Fans of all sports will be familiar with the routine. The official rules/laws are seemingly only there as a guide, with custom and tradition dictating which are obeyed and which get overlooked. Every now and then something or someone will highlight the fact that a rule isn't being enforced and, amid an avalanche of publicity, a determined effort will be made to correct the situation. The officials, players and coaching staff will play along for a while, giving the authorities a chance to smugly herald the great changes they have initiated, before everyone gradually slips back into their old habits and the issue is forgotten again.

Take football as an example. Back in 2000, the authorities decided that goalkeepers were wasting too much time so a rule was introduced (to much fanfare) stating that goalies were only allowed to hold the ball for six seconds before kicking it up the field; any longer and the opposition received an indirect free kick. Oh how we laughed as the referee made a great show of counting down those six seconds, with the slightest indiscretion being met by a shrill toot on the whistle.

Eight years on, I had to check the laws of the game to make sure that it was still in there (and it is). I cannot recall the last time I saw a referee blow-up for an infringement of this rule, while time and again goalies merrily hold on to the ball for eight to ten seconds.

Is time-wasting a real issue in baseball right now? News of MLB's crackdown was announced on Wednesday and the longest game on that day (Red Sox versus the Royals) took just three hours and nineteen minutes to complete. Some games do last a good four hours or so, but they are the exception rather than the rule. One of the great joys of baseball is that the game is not played against a clock; therefore each contest can take on its own pace and rhythm.

Looking back at Wednesday, the shortest game took two hours and six minutes, as Oakland's Dana Eveland threw a ninety-five pitch complete game against the Rays. Should the players have strung it out for an extra hour just so the fans stayed in their seats longer? Of course not. Fans at the Coliseum didn't head home feeling short changed; the game was over in a relative flash because Eveland pitched a gem. If a high-scoring, tactical game lasts four hours then so be it.

Something tells me that Bud isn't a big fan of Test cricket.

I'm sure all baseball fans get a bit frustrated here and there at a batter who continually asks for (and is granted) time or a pitching coach who takes an age to get to the mound (the baseball equivalent of a player

substituted in injury time who slowly walks off the pitch, stopping to shake hands with anyone he can find on the way), but that could be dealt with by having a stern word with the most persistent offenders. Fussing about whether a game lasted fifteen minutes longer than it needed to seems to be a case of needless meddling.

Some would say that's what Bud does best.

Week Eight wrap-up

Despite their eight-game winning streak coming to an end on Friday, the White Sox (26-22) retain a 2.5 game lead over the Twins in the AL Central. The Tigers are 5.5 games back, but, after scoring fifty-three runs in their last five games, there are signs that they are heating up. The Red Sox (31-21) lead the way in the East with the Rays keeping pace, while the Angels (30-21) have a 2.5 game lead over the A's.

In the National League, the D-Backs (29-20) went 2 and 4 on the week and finally relinquished their position as the best team in the Majors. They still have a 3.5 game cushion over the Dodgers though; while the rest of the West continues to struggle (the Giants are third in the division despite being nine games below .500). The Cubs (29-20) and the Cards (30-21) share the top spot in the Central, with the Astros just one game back. In the East, the Marlins (27-20) have the Braves and the Phillies on their back. The Mets go two and five to slip below .500 and the tension is beginning to show in Queens, with Willie Randolph feeling the pressure more than most.

Week Nine: A Bruce Bonus

1 June 2008

The Jay Bruce fairytale shows no signs of letting up just yet. After impressing everyone during his first four games in the Majors, he surpassed himself last night in game number five by delivering a walk-off solo home run in the tenth inning against the Braves.

There's no doubt about it: the Reds needed a shot in the arm. Prior to their game against the Pittsburgh Pirates on Tuesday night, Cincinnati were looking up at the rest of the NL Central with a 23-28 record. Their 2008 season was beginning to look like a continuation of their disappointing form in 2007, despite the many changes that had been made in an attempt to avoid this fate.

The most significant change took place in the off-season when Dusty Baker was appointed as the Reds' new manager. His track record gave their fans reason to hope that it would pay immediate dividends. In his first year as manager of the Giants in 1993, he guided the team to a 103-59 season, a thirty-one win improvement on their '92 campaign. After taking San Francisco to the World Series in 2002, he jumped ship to the Cubs and immediately turned a 67-95 team into a NL Central division winner (88-74) before falling at the NLCS stage in their infamous loss to the Marlins. Could that Dusty magic work for a third time?

After just twenty-one games the answer appeared to be 'no' and Reds owner Bob Castellini decided to fire GM Wayne Krivsky on the back of a 9-12 start, replacing him with former Cardinals GM Walt Jocketty. The timing was a shock, but if the intention was to shake the roster out of its slumber then it failed to have the desired effect.

The same can be said for the decision to recruit Baker's favourite Corey Patterson to

man centre field and be the lead-off hitter. After forty-five games of hitting .200/.240/.352, Patterson was finally demoted to Triple-A this past week. Even the one certain bright spot for the Reds has failed to light up their season so far. Ken Griffey had only gone deep once since April 24th before number 599 went into the seats at the Great American ballpark last night. It seems like everything has been a struggle in Cincinnati.

Their hopes rest on an exciting crop of young players to lead this team to a brighter future. Jay Bruce was generally considered to be the top prospect in baseball and the Reds' decision to send him to Triple-A for more seasoning after Spring Training was called into question by many. Following Patterson's struggles and Bruce's domination of Triple-A pitchers (.364 and 10 homers in 184 at-bats), the Reds could no longer keep him down and his early impact has been astonishing. Johnny Cueto has struggled of late, but he has the potential to be an excellent big league starter. First baseman Joey Votto is hitting .293 with ten homers after his impressive showing in September last year and shortstop Paul Janish made his Major League debut on 14 May.

The biggest story of the season so far has been the outstanding performance of the Reds' twenty-five year old starter Edinson Volquez, who leads the Majors with a 1.46 ERA. Cincinnati had to give up Josh Hamilton (who is in MVP form) to obtain Volquez from the Rangers, but they were happy to make the deal in the knowledge that Jay Bruce was on hand to replace him in centre field.

The Reds are eight games behind the Cubs in the Central and the month of June may determine whether this team can make a run at the postseason this year. There have been many rumours of Griffey leaving the Reds once he has reached the 600 landmark and Adam Dunn's impending free agency makes him a prime candidate to be traded if the Reds are out of contention by the All-Star break. If that is the case, fans in Cincinnati will be left lamenting another lost season, but thanks to Jay Bruce and his friends they will at

least have genuine reasons to dream of better things to come.

Week Nine wrap-up

The Chicago Cubs (35-21) finish May with the best record in baseball. That's great news in itself, but when you consider that the last time this happened was in 1908 (i.e. the last time the Cubs won the World Series), you can understand the giddy excitement of their fans. The D-Backs (31-25) have come back down to earth, but their fast start still leaves them with a 3.5 game cushion over the Dodgers in the West. The current Marlins-Phillies series is a surprising top of the East battle. Florida's (31-23) victory last night enabled them to snatch the top spot back from the Phillies.

If the Cubs are getting excited in the National League, how must fans in Tampa Bay be feeling right now? They lead the American League with a 34-22 record, an unprecedented achievement in their short franchise history. The White Sox (30-25) have lost two in a row to the Rays, but they retain a two-game lead over the Twins who have dropped two to the Yankees. Elsewhere in the Central, the Royals snapped a twelve-game losing streak last night by beating Cleveland. The Angels (33-24) are showing no signs of relinquishing first place in the West as they hold a 3.5 game lead over the slumping A's.

Week Ten: Flaming fastballs and flying fists

8 June 2008

There are many parts of baseball that Brits need to become familiar with when they start watching the sport. Two that can take a bit of getting used to are the sight of pitchers deliberating throwing at a batter and bench-clearing incidents in which everyone runs on to the field to have a shoving match. More often than not, the two go hand-in-hand.

This was the case in Boston this week as the series between the Red Sox and the Tampa Bay Rays took a spicy turn. At the centre of it all was the long-held idea of ballplayers needing to 'protect' themselves and their team mates.

Part self-preservation, part saving face; it's a curious thing. Coco Crisp was the main instigator: hitting Akinori Iwamura with a forearm smash in response to what he felt was a bad block by Jason Bartlett earlier in the game. With the Rays incensed by Crisp's actions, James Shields didn't need anyone to tell him what he had to do in the following game. Shields deliberately threw at Crisp in his first at-bat as retaliation, following 'plunking etiquette' by throwing at his thigh rather than his head (for which he was universally praised). Crisp pulled the old 'I'm going to first base ... NO I'M NOT!' trick to get a few steps on Rays' catcher Dioner Navarro before charging the mound.

That was the cue for every player and coach to run on to the field in comical style, with lots of pushing and shoving and the occasional half-hearted punch thrown in for good measure. You can only hope that there was a little boy shouting "pile on" or "bundle" to cap it off. Such actions would be branded an "outrage" or a "disgrace" over here, but it's an accepted part of baseball custom that happens wherever the game is being played. [Even in the normally docile Netherlands.](#)

Suspensions are handed out and everyone puts it down as a part of the game.

Deliberately hitting a batter with the ball isn't quite so unfamiliar to British sports fans as our American friends may think. Cricket, seemingly the most genteel of games, has long involved the practice of shaking up a batsman with a short ball that ends up somewhere around his throat. We saw a prize example recently during the second test between England and New Zealand, when Jimmy Anderson caught Daniel Flynn with a nasty delivery at Old Trafford, leaving the Kiwi with two of his teeth rolling along the floor. It's an accepted tactic: if the batsman cannot show himself capable of dealing with such deliveries then he can expect plenty of the 'short stuff' to be coming his way.

However, there is a line beyond which the practice becomes unacceptable. The Bodyline series from the 1930s is the most infamous example of this and bowlers are now limited to one bouncer per over. It's okay to bowl at someone's head so long as you do it in the right way, just as 'backing up' your team mate by throwing at an opposing batter is fine if done within the unofficial rules of fair competition. Such sentiments might confuse a non-sports fan, but it's a case of the players regulating themselves.

Tempers can always boil over in the heat of the battle though and the Rays are becoming experts at antagonising their AL East rivals. Their games against the Yankees during Spring Training (what we would call pre-season 'friendlies') descended into incident after incident of tit-for-tat acts of aggression earlier this year. Poor Akinori Iwamura was one of the main victims in that battle as well, receiving a nasty gash on his knee when Shelley Duncan made a hard/dirty (depending on your viewpoint) slide into second base that sparked a mass brawl. Second basemen certainly don't have it easy.

Things are getting so heated that the Red Sox have started fighting among themselves, with Manny Ramirez and Kevin Youkilis being

involved in a dugout scuffle. That's the consequence of intense competition and the Rays must be delighted that they are in the thick of it after never even dicing with .500 before in their short franchise history. It promises to be a hard but fair battle in the AL East throughout the rest of the season. Compelling action, but not for the faint hearted: exactly how baseball fans like it

Week Ten wrap-up

The aforementioned AL East division race currently sees the Red Sox (39-26) on top by just half a game over the Rays, with the Yankees 6.5 games back and bottom with a .500 record (31-31). In the other divisions, the leaders have managed to separate themselves slightly from the chasing pack. The White Sox (35-26) have won five on the bounce in the AL Central, including two against the second-placed Twins, to earn a 4.5 game cushion. The Angels (39-24) are in even better form as they've won their last seven to build a 5.5 game lead over the A's (who have been the Angels' victims in the last two games).

The Cubs' 39-24 record ties them for the Major League lead with the Angels, although two losses to the Dodgers have enabled the Cardinals to get within 2.5 games in the NL Central. The Phillies (38-26) went 6-1 on the week to regain the lead in the East and open up a 3.5 game gap over the Marlins. In the NL West, the D-Backs (34-28) are unshakeable in first place as they lead the Dodgers by 4 games.

Week Eleven: 'The Natural'

15 June 2008

In some ways it was just one more home run, but for Ken Griffey Jr, his family, millions of baseball fans and a guy named Joe, it was much more than that. On Monday 9 June, Griffey struck a 3-1 curveball from the Marlins' starter Mark Hendrickson into the right-field seats at Dolphin Stadium. Bridging the gap between career home runs numbers 599 and 600 hadn't been easy, but it was worth the wait.

Somehow he was always destined for greatness. The son of a former Major Leaguer, Griffey was selected with the first overall pick by the Mariners in 1987 and he dazzled as a twenty-year old rookie two years later. He was blessed with the ability to make the difficult look easy: a trait epitomized by his seemingly effortless swing. It's no wonder that the section on MLB.com dedicated to Griffey's recent milestone moment heralds him as 'The Natural'.

However, something else is being implied by that title, whether deliberately or not. Barry Bonds is the son of a former Major Leaguer and was blessed with prodigious natural talent just like Griffey, but no one refers to him as 'the Natural'. Junior in many ways is the antithesis of 'BALCO' Bonds. One is the ever-smiling, wholesome athletic star; the other is a surly, muscle-bound drug cheat, or so the public images of the two will have it.

In recent years, Griffey's career has been greatly hampered by injuries. While the player himself and the Reds will curse that bad luck, the bigwigs at MLB are no doubt bemoaning those lost plate appearances as much as anyone. Even though he had never played a full 162 game season for Seattle (161 in 1998 was pretty close), it was only after he left the Mariners for the Reds in 2000 that the injuries really started to bite.

After playing 145 games in his first year in Cincinnati, Griffey played in just 554 out of a possible 972 games over the next six seasons. The 418 games he missed over that period amounted to two and a half seasons. When you consider that Griffey has averaged forty homers per 162 games over his career, he could well have been hitting number 700 this week instead. Factor in the tentative/rusty performances in games played by Griffey when returning from injuries, or playing through them, and it's very possible that he would have been closing in on the all-time home run record this season if fitness had allowed it.

We can only take this re-writing of history so far. Every player loses time to injuries and every player starts slowing down as age catches up with them. Bonds himself played in just fourteen games in 2005 due to a knee injury and would probably be adding to his total of 762 homers this season were he not sitting on the sidelines for various reasons. Still, it's fair to surmise that Bud Selig would have bothered to turn up if Griffey rather than Bonds had been the first player to hit career homer number 756.

What Bonds and Griffey *do* have in common is that their historic home run balls are valuable souvenirs. Only 16,000 people were in attendance at Dolphin Stadium, but a fair few were stationed in right field: the place where Griffey has launched so many of his home runs. A Marlins season ticket holder called Joe moved into that section of the ballpark in the hope of being in the right place and he ended up with the ball. Another fan is threatening legal action claiming that he had the ball ripped from his grasp. In preparation for such an event, this fan actually attended the game with his lawyer. Only in America ...

Griffey has said he would like the ball back and plenty of people are supporting this course of action as 'the right thing to do'. The ball has been valued at \$50,000 and the owner's intentions have not been made clear as yet. \$50k is not to be sniffed at, but hopefully he will come to a sensible

agreement with Griffey. Bonds' '756' ball was bought at auction for just over \$750,000 (£385k), so if things had panned out differently and this had been Griffey's all-time record breaking ball then the decision would have been even harder.

It would have been worth a whole lot more than \$750k to Bud Selig and MLB's public relations department though.

Week Eleven wrap-up

We've entered the second period of interleague baseball this weekend, but the divisions in both leagues are largely unchanged from this time last week.

The Angels (41-28) top the AL West, with the A's having closed the gap to 3.5 games. The White Sox (38-30) have retained their 4.5 game lead over the Twins in the Central, but the Tigers are starting to claw their way back. Although their five-game winning streak still leaves them seven games adrift of Chicago (and six games below .500), don't count out Detroit from making a run at the division during the second half of the season. It's a similar situation in the East where the Red Sox (43-28) lead the Rays by 1.5 games while the Yankees are beginning to find some form (and some fit players) and have moved within six games of the top spot.

In the National League East, the Phillies (41-29) enjoy a four game lead over the Marlins. The Central-leading Cubs have the best record in baseball at 44-25, although the Cardinals are keeping their rivals within touching distance thanks to their own impressive 41-29 mark. In the West, the Dodgers have lost four in a row allowing the D-Backs (37-32) to extend their lead to 5.5 games despite playing .500 ball over their last ten games.

Week Twelve: A change is as good as a win?

22 June 2008

It's not been a good week to be a Major League manager. The Mets, Mariners and Blue Jays have all been wielding the axe, leaving the remaining twenty-seven managers looking over their shoulders and wondering 'who's next'?

That we have waited until seventy-odd games have been played before the first GM 'relieved a manager of his duties' (a wonderful phrase) is actually a show of remarkable restraint in modern sports. Getting through the first month without one casualty was something of an achievement in itself, so the standard claims of 'GM panic' don't apply this time around. All three managers were clearly skating on thin ice.

Some thought Willie Randolph might not make it through the winter after the Mets' catastrophic collapse down the stretch last season. Although he did enter the 2008 season with his job intact, Randolph was a dead man walking with the Mets' hierarchy doing little to dampen the ever-rampant New York media speculation about his future.

The way Mets' GM Omar Minaya chose to sack Randolph was also strange to say the least and has drawn fierce criticism. The decision was made after New York beat the L.A. Angels 9-6 in the first of a six-game road trip and came after a six-game home stand during which the Mets went 3-3. Why Minaya couldn't have made the call before Willie and his crew had flown over to L.A. is a mystery, despite his attempts to explain himself at a press conference later in the week.

The whole affair has been somewhat reminiscent of the way Tottenham Hotspur undermined their former manager Martin Jol by meddling behind his back. In both cases, the Front Office/Board of Directors came out

of it with very little credit, although the Spurs example shows that if the next manager can bring some success, all is soon forgotten. Another similarity between the Mets and Spurs is that the managers were ultimately victims of the heady expectations placed on their teams. The other two managers sacked in MLB this week also fall into this category.

After their 88-74 record in 2007, the Mariners made some moves over the off-season to try and push their way ahead of the Angels in the AL West. Being 17.5 games behind L.A. nearly halfway through the season, and with the worst record in the Majors, fell a long way short of what was expected of John McLaren's charges and he paid the price for it.

Meanwhile, the Blue Jays have invested considerable funds over the last couple of seasons with the intention of competing with the Red Sox and the Yankees. A 35-39 record wasn't disastrous in the general scheme of things, but in the AL East it was only worth a place in the cellar and a 10.5 game deficit to the division-leading Red Sox. John Gibbons received his marching orders as a result, being replaced by former manager Cito Gaston, who led the team to their two World Series triumphs in 1992 and 1993.

While the buck may stop with the manager in both sports, unlike in football the results on the field cannot solely be placed at his door. The manager has to get the most out of the personnel available to him, but it is the General Manager's job to assemble the roster.

This was recognised in Seattle as Bill Bavasi was sacked from his position as GM prior to McLaren making way. It was Bavasi who decided to trade the M's best prospect, Adam Jones, along with four other players for Erik Bedard as the supposed last piece of the jigsaw. Now one of interim GM Lee Pelekoudas' main tasks is to find an acceptable deal to ship Bedard to another team and effectively start the team-building process again.

In Toronto, GM J.P. Ricciardi is claiming that he knows his team is better than its record suggests, but his decisions are being placed under the microscope. Ricciardi has made several questionable moves this season (signing Shannon Stewart and releasing Frank Thomas, to name but two) and his bizarre criticism of Reds slugger Adam Dunn makes you wonder whether he is now feeling the pressure. Don't be surprised if he makes way as well in the coming months.

Which leaves us with Omar Minaya. Having presided over the dog-end days of the mess in Montreal, the Mets' GM has been given substantial funds to pursue free agents and to build a World Series winner in New York. The team's failure to live up to expectations and his handling of Randolph's departure has put a bullseye well and truly on his back. A second-half surge and a run to the Fall Classic will surely take the pressure off. Missing out on October baseball for the second straight year will just as surely see Minaya clearing his desk. Like Randolph, McLaren, Gibbons and Bavasi, Minaya knows that all he needs to do is win.

If it only it were that simple.

Week Twelve wrap-up

The managerial change in Toronto hasn't had an immediate effect as the Blue Jays are mired in a seven-game losing streak and remain 10.5 games behind the first placed Red Sox (46-31) in the AL East. The Rays swept the Cubs during the week and have pulled to within just half a game of Boston, while the Yankees have dropped two to the Reds following a seven game win streak. The Twins have won five in a row and are now 2.5 games behind the White Sox (41-33) in the Central. The Angels have a 4.5 game lead over the A's in the West; the Mariners go 2 and 4 on the week to drop to a Major League worst 24-44 record.

In the National League East, the Phillies (42-34) have lost their last four allowing the

Marlins to close the gap again to just a single game. After the aforementioned sweep by the Rays, the Cubs (47-28) have rebounded by taking the first two games against their cross-town rivals. This keeps their 3.5 game lead intact despite the second placed Cardinals winning their last two against the Red Sox. The D-Backs (39-36) had a losing week in the West, but the Dodgers still sit 4.5 games behind them.

Week Thirteen: All good things must come to an end

29 June 2008

The Twins' ten-game winning streak came to an end last night as Manny Parra and the Brewers defeated them 5-1. While logic tells you that the run was always going to be halted at some stage, the confidence that developed in the Minnesota clubhouse must have made them think otherwise.

Winning is contagious. It's an old sporting cliché, but like most sporting clichés it contains a large element of truth. All sportsmen need to be confident to play at their best and in baseball, more than most sports, the strong performances of one or two players can lift the games of everyone else around them.

One moment a batting lineup can be slumping, the next it can be firing on all cylinders thanks to a couple of batters getting hot at the plate. Those extra runs give the pitching staff some breathing space, knowing that they don't need to hold the opposition to two runs or less to have a chance of winning the game.

And it works the other way too. Once the starting pitchers find their groove, the batting lineup doesn't have to press under the pressure of needing to score eight or nine runs.

When you look at the stats from the Twins' winning streak, the offensive numbers look good without making you fall off your chair in shock. The batting lineup hit .309/.368/.476 with ten homers during those ten games: impressive, yet not suggesting that they tore the cover off the ball. Overall they scored 63 runs and you would fancy your chances of winning a game if you averaged scoring six in each.

The pitching staff combined had a 2.10 ERA over the ten-game span and limited their opponents to a .240/.275/.343 batting line. Add in the unearned runs and teams only managed 2.5 runs per game against them. Again, that's a very promising position to start from if you want to reel off a number of victories in a row.

These are just averages though; the Twins didn't coast along winning 6-2 each time out. So how did they do it?

1) They swept the Nationals. 2-1, 11-2, 9-3 (combined score: 22-6).

Heading into the series, the Nationals were 29-42, dead last in the NL East but having just swept the Mariners in a three-game series. Seven strong innings from Livan Hernandez allowed them to edge a tight opening game 2-1 before the bats broke out in the second in an 11-2 victory, securing the series. The brooms were waving in the Metrodome as the Twins completed the sweep with a 9-3 win, Glen Perkins getting his third win of the season.

2) They swept the D-Backs. 7-2, 6-1, 5-3 (combined score: 18-6).

If the Nationals were seen as something of a soft touch, a sterner test was anticipated from the NL West leading Arizona Diamondbacks. The Snakes had cooled off since their blistering start to the season, but their 39-34 record was still good enough to give them a 4.5 game cushion over the second placed Dodgers and they had just won two on the spin against the A's.

The Twins struck seven runs off Randy Johnson in the first game of the series, while a six-run seventh inning was all the offense needed to win the second game. After five wins on the trot, even Brandon Webb couldn't halt the Twins' charge. They landed Webb with only his fourth loss of the year in the finale.

3) They swept the Padres. 3-1, 9-3, 4-3 (combined score: 16-7).

The Padres were bottom of the NL West with a 32-45 record, eight games behind the D-Backs and had lost their previous two to the Tigers.

Kevin Slowey and Jake Peavy started in the opener. With the score tied at 1-1, the Padres brought in Trevor Hoffman only to see Brendan Harris and Brian Buscher hit back-to-back jacks off the legendary closer. Joe Nathan went three up, three down in the ninth to earn save number 20. In game two, the Twins faced another future Hall of Famer in Greg Maddux. Glen Perkins gave up three runs in the first two frames, but the Twins came storming back, drawing level in the top of the third before strolling away with a 9-3 victory. The Twins once again gave their opponents a 3-0 head start in the third game. Justin Morneau homered as they battled back for a 4-3 victory.

4) They beat the Brewers 7-6 on Friday to make it ten.

Maybe those six runs conceded were the sign that this run was about to come to an end? A batting lineup can't keep producing all the time and if the pitching staff slips, your luck is going to run out.

The equation to win a game of baseball is simple: score more runs than the opposition. Whether the offense or the defense is more important than the other is a matter for eternal debate. You can't win without scoring any runs, but you have a much better chance of winning on a consistent basis if you don't have to score many each time out. Maybe we should put the Twins' winning streak down to the pitching staff more than the batters?

Or maybe we should put it down to them facing inferior National League teams?

Week Thirteen wrap-up

It's 'as you were' in the AL East, as the Red Sox (50-33) lead the Rays by 0.5 games, with the Yankees a further 4.5 games back. The Twins' streak has been counterbalanced recently by the White Sox (45-35) winning three in a row, so Minnesota still trail by 1.5 games in the Central. The A's have reduced the gap in the West by one over the week, as they now sit 3.5 behind the Angels (48-33).

The senior circuit as a whole has taken a pasting in interleague play. So far this season, the AL teams have won 141 of the 240 games played, but this hasn't had a big effect on the NL standings. The Phillies (42-34) lead the Marlins by one game in the East, while the Cubs (49-32) remain 3.5 ahead of the Cardinals in the Central. The one team on the move are the Dodgers, who have closed to within 2.5 games of the D-Backs (41-40) in the West, which surprisingly has been the least impressive division in the majors so far this season.

Week Fourteen: Bernadina in the Big Leagues

6 July 2008

Last Sunday was another memorable day in the history of Dutch baseball. Roger Bernadina made his Major League debut for the Washington Nationals, becoming just the sixth player to make his way from the Netherlands' Hoofdklasse to the pinnacle of the sport. The feat was celebrated by his countrymen, such as baseball writer Pim van Nes, but the rest of Europe can also take heart from this achievement, including the Great Britain national team.

Bernadina was hitting .323/.398/.474 in Double-A before making the two level jump up to the Big Leagues. It has been the culmination of over six years of hard work and development within the Nationals' minor league system (the Expos' system up until 2005), with the centre fielder having begun his career in America at the age of eighteen. Prior to the season, *Baseball Prospectus* described him in their 2008 Annual as "a fifth outfielder who can play centre well, but has that wee bit of pop that might create better job security".

With his ability to play in a number of fielding positions and above average speed on the bases (he had already stolen 26 bases at a 74% success rate for the Harrisburg Senators this year), the Nats believe he will be a competent substitute for Lastings Milledge while the former Met nurses a right groin injury on the DL.

Bernadina's rise through the baseball ranks is nothing new for the Netherlands. Pim van Nes notes that there are now forty Dutchmen playing professional baseball in America, ranging from Rookie league participants to the likes of Jair Jurrjens, Andruw Jones and Sidney Ponson at the Major League level. The first two both come from Curacao, as does Bernadina, which is an island off the coast of Venezuela that falls within the Kingdom of the

Netherlands. That they were not born and bred in the land we know as Holland rightfully makes little difference to the Dutch fans; however the fact that Bernadina is a product of the Hoofdklasse, their top domestic league, is clearly a source of great pride.

Bernadina was not expected to make the majors so soon, with Washington's GM Jim Bowden admitting that he "would not have been able to tell you that he would have developed this quickly" after being "overmatched" in Spring Training. His dramatic rise is exemplified by the fact that just ten months ago, he was starring for the Netherlands' national team in the European Baseball Championships. As you would expect from a top player, Bernadina really came to the fore when it mattered most. Unfortunately, that meant leading his team to a final day victory over Great Britain.

Team GB and the Netherlands matched up in what was effectively a 'gold medal' contest, after both teams had gone 4-0 in their first four games of a six-team round-robin tournament. Bernadina led off for the Dutch in the bottom of the first with a double, before scoring the first run of the game. They added another run to their total in the second inning before Bernadina led off in the third. He promptly hit a solo home run over the right-field wall to make it 3-0 and the Netherlands didn't look back from then on, winning the game 6-1.

The Great Britain pitcher who was victimized by the now Major Leaguer was Brian Essery. The right-hander can currently be found plying his trade for the London Mets in the National Baseball League, where he sports a 7-0 record and a 1.47 ERA. Earlier this season, Essery struck out fifteen when facing the Croydon Pirates in a seven-inning complete game. If the Pirates were feeling bad about their performance, they should remember that the person who struck them out had recently been facing a guy who is now playing on the biggest stage of all.

Two other members of the Netherlands team that played against Great Britain are in the Minors at the moment. The British pitchers held Yurendell DeCaster to an 0 for 4 performance that day, but *Baseball Prospectus* claims that “there are worse utility players in the major leagues” and he is currently on the Nationals’ Triple-A roster, hoping for a chance to prove himself.

Team GB had less luck in containing the Angels’ Double-A prospect Hainley Statia, who went 3 for 4 and batted in two runs. *BP* states that “Statia may be the best glove man of the Angels’ many shortstop prospects” and highlights him as a player capable of supplementing his impressive defense with a decent batting average, plate discipline and speed.

Team GB is also represented in the Minors, most notably by Mike Nickeas who is currently playing for the Mets’ Triple-A team. Nickeas was born in Canada and isn’t a product of the British league, but his father is British and that makes him more of a local than some of the stars on our other national sports teams.

So the next time an ill-informed Brit tries to tell you that baseball is just an American game, let them know that us Europeans are more involved with the sport than they think.

Note: a PDF copy of my scorecard from the Great Britain-Netherlands game can be found [here](#).

Week Fourteen wrap-up

There may be people out there waiting for the Rays to fall apart and for normal order to be restored in the AL East. If so, they’re going to have to keep on waiting. The Rays (54-32) have won six in a row (and nine of their last ten) to take a four-game lead over the Red Sox and they now have the best record in all of baseball. The Twins have won four in a row to keep within one game of the White Sox (50-37) in the AL Central, while the Angels

(52-35) took two from three in a mid-week series against the A’s to extend their lead in the West to five games.

In the National League, the D-Backs (43-45) hold on the top spot in the West may be about to come to an end. Despite a thrilling come-from-behind 6-5 victory against the Brewers on Thursday (having been 5-0 down entering the bottom of the ninth), they have been unable to keep the Dodgers from closing to within half a game in the standings. The Cubs (52-36) lead the Cardinals by 2.5 games in the Central, while the Phillies (48-40) have stretched their lead over the Marlins in the East to 3.5 games.

Week Fifteen: Are you feeling lucky?

13 July 2008

Professional sportsmen are generally terrible at watching the game they play. Position players in baseball are used to taking the field virtually every day once the season begins, so coping with the frustration of kicking their heels on the sidelines can't be easy. As such, this past week must have been a nightmare for Johnny Damon.

The Yankee outfielder was placed on the DL last Sunday with an injury to his left shoulder, suffered during a scarcely believable play in which Kevin Youkilis managed to hit a linedrive on top of the thin left-field wall at Yankee Stadium. Damon went to snag it, only for the ball to pop out of his glove, roll along the top of the wall and then fall to the safety of the warning track. Damon hadn't been part of such a moment before (has any other outfielder?) and the after-effect was a completely new experience for him too. In the thirteenth year of his Major League career, Johnny Damon finally landed on the disabled list for the first time.

Injuries are an occupational hazard for ballplayers, yet some are affected by them more than others. It's rare to find a professional sportsman who doesn't look after himself and prepare properly nowadays, so it's difficult not to conclude that some players are simply lucky or unlucky. Damon has always played the game with an all-action style: leaping for spectacular catches and crashing into outfield fences. You would have thought this would make him more prone to injuries, but he's been able to escape them up until now.

His Yankee team mate Hideki Matsui had a similar 'invincible' reputation. The Japanese star played in 1,250 consecutive games for the Yomiuri Giants before playing in 518 straight for the Yankees at the start of his career stateside. His streak of 1,768 consecutive

games ended on 11 May 2006 in his fourteenth professional season after he suffered a broken left wrist. Since that point, he's made two further trips to the DL, including his current stint due to a left knee injury.

While some players earn a reputation for avoiding injuries, others have a hard time staying on the field. In virtually every article about the Cubs' acquisition of Rich Harden this week, his injury-riddled past has been highlighted. Harden has been on the DL six times in a little more than four seasons. Concerns over his ability to stay healthy were compared to the consistent workload that CC Sabathia has been able to handle in his Major League career. The Brewers' new ace has been on the DL only twice, in both cases due to a strained right oblique muscle. The odds on Milwaukee getting more starts out of their new recruit than the Cubs do over the rest of the season are high.

Harden is the latest in a lengthening line of players departing Oakland and it was the roster's inability to turn up to work each day that made GM Billy Beane start a rebuilding process. The A's have already placed someone on the DL on eighteen occasions this season, after losing a combined 1,259 player games to the DL in 2007. Eric Chavez and Bobby Crosby have been two of the serial offenders over the last couple of seasons and few Oakland fans are shocked that both are currently banged up yet again. The only surprise is that the A's haven't added a 'Fragile: Handle with care' warning on to their uniforms.

Harden has been able to take the mound in his last eleven scheduled starts, but some Cubs fans are concerned that Beane has traded him now because he knows his luck is about to end. They remember what happened to Mark Mulder when Oakland traded him to their NL Central rivals, the Cardinals, just before Christmas in 2004. After starting thirty-two games in 2005, Mulder has only started twenty-one games since and seventeen of those came in 2006. His return from rotator cuff surgery this week lasted a mere three

batters before he had to leave the field in pain having re-injured his shoulder. Sadly, it looks like he may have pitched his last game.

Johnny Damon may not be enjoying his enforced absence from the Yankee line-up at the moment, but at least he will be returning soon. Not all players are so lucky.

Week Fifteen wrap-up

This time last week, the Rays (55-38) were riding a six-game winning streak. Now they are mired in a six-game losing streak, allowing the Red Sox to close within half a game in the AL East. Meanwhile the teams are in a holding pattern in the Central and the West, with the White Sox (54-39) leading the Twins by 1.5 games and the Angels (56-38) leading the A's by five.

In the NL East, the Phillies (51-44) had opened up a 3.5 game lead seven days ago, only to go 3-4 on the week. That's not a terrible record, but the Marlins went 6-1 and the Mets 7-0 (part of a current eight-game winning streak), allowing both to close within half a game. The Cubs (57-37) have put some distance between themselves and the chasing pack in the Central, for the time being at least; they are 5.5 games in front of the Cardinals. The D-Backs (46-46) were finally caught by the Dodgers in the West, but they were unable to overtake them and Arizona have now squeaked out a two-game lead to hold on to that top spot.

Week Sixteen: All Star Rules (not) OK

20 July 2008

As yet another extra inning came to an end, bleary-eyed British fans watching this week's All-Star Game would have been forgiven for wanting the pulsating contest to draw to a close. When Michael Young's sacrifice fly finally won the game for the American League after five hours and forty minutes, closing in on seven in the morning UK time, plenty of Major League managers and general managers would have been sighing with relief as well.

MLB treated us to a fifteen-inning thriller, full of incidents and memorable moments, but once again we had to witness Bud Selig looking uncomfortable in the stands at an All-Star Game. Thankfully a result was achieved just before managers Clint Hurdle and Terry Francona were forced to send position players to the mound; however it was a close run thing. Just six years removed from the 2002 All-Star farce, it's incredible that we almost ended up in the same situation yet again: the game being declared a tie because the teams had run out of pitchers.

There have been seventy-nine MLB All-Star Games since the first at Comiskey Park in 1933. This year's contest was the eleventh time play has been extended into extra innings and in five of those cases the game only lasted one or two further frames, so this is far from a common event. Still, Selig made a couple of rule changes after 2002 to deal with the issue and his claims that the result on Wednesday morning showed that they work is debatable.

To reduce the risk of teams running out of pitchers, the All-Star rosters were increased to include thirty-two players. Before and after the game, Selig stressed that the onus was placed on the managers to make sure some players were kept in reserve in the event of extra innings. In fairness to the Commissioner,

you could point to several incidents where Hurdle and Francona were overzealous with their in-game substitutions. The Giants' closer Brian Wilson was replaced with Billy Wagner after getting two outs in the eighth, despite pitching well. It seemed a case of over-managing when Hurdle made the call and, with Wagner subsequently giving up a run to tie the game at 3-3, it was easy to question the move. Francisco Rodriguez also pitched just one-third of the ninth inning so that he could make an appearance before Mariano Rivera's arrival. Several potential pitching innings were lost as a consequence of these moves.

However, we can hardly blame the managers for using all of the assets at their disposal. If you are bringing sixty-four players to the All-Star Game, the managers will naturally want to give as many of them as possible a chance to get on the field. That is one of the reasons why the second major rule change that was implemented, awarding the winning league home field advantage in the World Series, is a complete load of nonsense.

Terry Francona brought both A-Rod and Jeter out of the game while an inning was in progress so that they could receive an ovation from their hometown fans. The Red Sox manager earned widespread praise for his respectful handling of the situation, which goes to show that fans are more interested in the event as a whole than the final outcome of the match. This year's game was a gripping contest, but was that due to a burning desire to win home field advantage or was it simply a case of professional athletes wanting to do their best in a marquee event? I'm inclined to believe it was the latter.

Selig's pride is unlikely to allow it, but changes should be made to stop another All-Star Game from ending in disarray. The game should be limited to a pre-defined number of potential extra innings (two should be adequate) so that managers aren't put in the situation of sending valuable pitchers out there on short rest (as happened with Webb and Kazmir). If the game is tied after eleven innings then end

the game with honours even or, if you must have a winner, give the edge to the league whose representative won the Home Run Derby the night before. Most importantly, accept the fact that it's an exhibition, albeit one played in a very competitive spirit, and take away the ridiculous 'home field advantage' rule. If there's a fear that this would reduce the meaning of the event, reduce the roster sizes so that the best position players stay out there for most of the game.

It may seem strange to call for sweeping changes after such a great game, but it so nearly could have ended differently. We shouldn't need to wait until a young star like Evan Longoria blows out his arm when pitching an emergency inning before realizing that.

Week Sixteen wrap-up

The Rays (57-39) slipped to a seven-game losing streak last week, but they've rebounded strongly to re-take the lead in the AL East by 1.5 games over the Red Sox. In the Central, the Twins are being linked with various hitters to add some more punch to their lineup. Having closed to within 0.5 games of the White Sox (55-41), their ability to make a deal or two before the deadline could determine who wins the division. The Angels (59-38) have no such worries in the West. With their closest rivals, the A's, trading away their best players to build for the future, L.A.'s eight-game lead is unlikely to come under serious challenge.

The Mets' winning streak ended at ten, but it was enough to help pull them to within a game of the Phillies (53-45) in the National League East. The Marlins are just another half a game back, so this could be a three-horse race for the rest of the season. Three teams are certainly in contention in the Central, where the Cubs (57-40) still lead the way despite having their advantage cut to two games over the Cards and three games over

the Brewers. The D-Backs (48-49) lead the Dodgers by one game in the West.

Week Seventeen: Will I stay or will I go? Don't ask me!

27 July 2008

Rumours are swirling, e-mails are pinging into Inboxes and the phone lines are jammed. The thirty Major League GM's are weighing up their options with the trading deadline, 21.00 BST this coming Thursday (31st), looming large. Fans are looking on helplessly hoping that the GM of their favoured team makes a splash. Many of the players involved are looking on helplessly as well.

It's something of an oddity for British sports fans to get used to, but it's an accepted part of the business that ballplayers can be moved to another team on the other side of America without their consent. That leads to the strange situation where some players are sitting in their clubhouse right now, reading the rumours of their imminent departure and waiting to be told which plane they need to catch.

Recent rumours of a possible trade between the Rockies and the Phillies have left outfielder Shane Victorino hoping that he doesn't have to leave Philadelphia. The trouble is, he doesn't get a say in the matter so he may be calling Colorado home by the end of next week.

Victorino's problem is that he hasn't yet reached the point where he has earned the right to veto a trade, either through demanding a partial/full no-trade clause when signing a free agent contract or by acquiring 'veteran' 10-5 rights.

The Padres are staring at a lost season and would probably be keen to obtain a prospect or two in exchange for Greg Maddux; however he has a full no-trade clause and if a proposed deal isn't okay with him (e.g. it means moving away from the West Coast), it's not going to happen.

Ray Durham also had the power to block the Giants' attempts to move him on as he is a 'ten and five' player (ten or more seasons in the Majors and five with his current team). San Francisco were able to find a deal that suited the veteran though. Durham is now a Milwaukee Brewer and while he may have to settle for a bit-part role (the Brewers have made it clear that they still see Rickie Weeks as their starting second baseman), that figures to be a lot more fun than playing out the string with a struggling Giants team.

As well as the allure of the Brewers being play-off contenders, Durham also didn't have to go far to meet up with his new team mates. The two teams were playing each other at the time of the deal, so Durham could just pick up his belongings and switch clubhouses.

Fans always demand loyalty from their players because their emotional attachment to the game makes it hard for them to see it for what it really is: a hard-nosed business. Players know this to be true, occasionally learning their lesson the hard way. Bronson Arroyo accepted what he claimed amounted to a home-town discount when signing a new contract with the Red Sox back in January 2006. The reward for his loyalty was to find himself being traded to Cincinnati only two months later, his affordable contract no doubt making him an attractive proposition for the Reds. Arroyo is now hoping that he won't be moved on again.

The saving grace for the players is that they will be paid the same whatever happens and sometimes the trade works out in their favour, even if it takes a few years for their luck to turn around. Xavier Nady was looking forward to possible play-off glory with the Mets two years ago, only to be traded on the deadline day to the Pirates. The drop from the top of the NL East to the bottom of the NL Central would have been painful, but Nady has got on with his job and after his trade to the Yankees was completed yesterday, he has now experienced the other side of a trade by a contender.

So while we're scouring the websites wondering who is going to end up where over the next few days, it's worth remembering that some of the players are doing the exact same thing.

Week Seventeen wrap-up

Here come the Yankees. An eight-game winning streak (and counting) has drawn them to within one game of the Red Sox and they will be level if the Bronx Bombers win the series finale between the two teams tonight. However, the Rays (61-42) still top the East by two games. In the Central, the White Sox (59-43) have a 3.5 game lead over the Twins who seemingly aren't too bothered whether they make the play-offs or not, keeping Francisco Liriano in Triple-A and remaining silent on the trading front despite their obvious need for another bat. Meanwhile the Angels (64-39) are under no pressure to make a move, coasting along as they are with a 10.5 game cushion in the West.

In the NL East, the Mets (56-48) have followed their cross-town rival's lead and catapulted themselves to the top of the division. New Yorkers shouldn't get overconfident just yet though: the Phillies and the Marlins both sit only a single game behind them and I believe the Mets have something of a recent history when it comes to collapsing down the stretch. The Cubs and the Brewers (both 60-44) are locked together in the NL Central in what should be a great race over the next two months, albeit one that may end up with both making the postseason. The D-Backs (52-51) retain their one-game lead over the Dodgers in the West, although in this case the loser will not have the wild card to fall back on.

Week Eighteen: Watch out for the brooms

3 August 2008

With a 162 game regular season, teams quickly learn not to dwell on individual results. A poor performance can be put right the following day, so long as the bad memories are banished before the next game starts. Similarly, a team that revels in a win for too long can be undone by their own complacency. 'Keep an even keel' is the motto Major Leaguers live by.

Sweeps, however, aren't quite so easy to forget; particularly four-game sweeps involving the top two teams in a division race. There's no doubt that when waking up this past Friday, you would have preferred to have been a Cub rather than a Brewer.

Chicago headed into Milwaukee for a four-game series against the Brewers on Monday just a solitary game ahead of their rivals at the top of the NL Central. While it may have been only the final week of July, the series was played in an atmosphere reminiscent of a crucial clash at the end of September. Nobody thought the results of the four games would have a decisive impact on the standings, but both sides recognised that an opportunity to deal a psychological blow was there for the taking.

As the home team, the onus was on the Brewers to win the series and they must have been confident when looking at the way their starting rotation was aligned. Their newly acquired ace CC Sabathia would take to the mound in the opener to be followed by their other ace, Ben Sheets, in the second game.

When the Cubs took the first game 6-4, thanks to plating two runs in the top of the ninth off reliever Salomon Torres, and then earned a straight forward 7-1 victory in the second behind Carlos Zambrano, Milwaukee were left shell-shocked.

Momentum can be a powerful force and now it was fully behind the Cubs: two games, two wins, coming against the Brewers' two best pitchers. A 7-2 victory on Wednesday night, in a game shown live on Five, secured the series victory and left the result of the final game virtually a foregone conclusion. Chicago took their brooms out and swept away with a comprehensive 11-4 win. A one-game slither of a lead in the division standings had become a five-game cushion in just four days. The reeling Brewers didn't know what had hit them.

It called to mind that fateful five-game series between the Yankees and the Red Sox back in mid-August of 2006. New York strolled into Boston and swept them over an incredible four days that will live long in the memory of Yankee fans. The Bronx Bombers extended a 1.5 game lead at the top of the AL East to a 6.5 game lead before the Red Sox knew what was happening. The Red Sox never recovered for the rest of the season, suffering injuries to key players like David Ortiz and Manny Ramirez along the way, and the Yankees won the division by ten games before losing in the division series to the Tigers.

ESPN reported at the time that the Yanks "celebrated in the dugout as if they'd just clinched a play-off berth" after that final victory against their bitter rivals. As it took place a good three weeks earlier in the season than this other celebrated sweep, the Cubs wouldn't have been looking to October just yet when walking off the field at Miller Park on Thursday. Lou Pinella likes to tell everyone "not to get too giggly" and his players will be heeding his advice, especially after they were brought back down to earth with a bump on Friday, being shut out in a 3-0 loss at Wrigley against the Pirates.

Meanwhile the Brewers licked their wounds and took out their frustration on the Braves, blasting them 9-0 on Friday and beating them 4-2 last night. The Cubs' five-game cushion is already back down to four.

August could be a key month for both teams as they provide ample opportunity to get some wins on the board. Milwaukee have a favourable schedule during the month, including three games each against Cincinnati, the Astros and the Padres, four against the Nationals and six against the Pirates. The Cubs will play nineteen of their twenty-eight games during August at Wrigley Field, where they hold the best home record in the National League at 40-15.

How the two teams navigate their way through August could have a strong bearing on the importance of their three-game series in Chicago in mid-September and the three-game series in Milwaukee to end the regular season. It's possible that both might have made the postseason by that final series (as division winner and as the NL wildcard). If so, it will not be a meaningless affair thanks to the sweep of this past week. The Cubs will look to drive home their advantage heading into the play-offs; the Brewers will spy a chance for revenge.

The four-game sweep can be put to one side for the moment, but it will re-emerge in September to add to the drama of what should be a fascinating battle.

Week Eighteen wrap-up

The trading deadline passed with relatively little fanfare, but the players who have changed address have generally started well with their new teams.

Jason Bay has had a solid start in his first two games replacing Manny Ramirez in left field for Boston, but the Red Sox still trail the Rays (65-44) by three games in the East. Ken Griffey Jr surprisingly moved to the White Sox (61-48) and batted in two runs during his debut on Friday night. Their lead over the Twins in the Central has shrunk to just half a game though and while Minnesota didn't add any new parts via a trade, they have improved their team by finally re-calling Francisco Liriano from Triple-A. The Angels (69-41)

didn't need to make any changes, but they had a chance to obtain Mark Teixeira and they took it. With the Rangers sitting 12.5 games behind in the West, it's a move firmly with October in mind.

The one big addition to the National League was, of course, Manny Ramirez. He launched his first home run in a Dodgers uniform last night and helped to bring L.A. to within two games of the NL West leading D-Backs (57-53). In the Central, the Cubs' (66-45) four-game lead over the Brewers has already been noted, but we shouldn't forget the third-placed Cardinals who are just one further game back and whose winning record of 62-51 would be good enough to top both of the other two divisions in the league. In the East, the Mets went 2-4 on the week to fall from first to third. The Phillies (60-50) rise to the top again with the Marlins and the Mets 1.5 and 2 games back respectively.

Week Nineteen: The Pirates' near-perfect new pitcher

10 August 2008

Of all the players who were traded in recent weeks, a cast including CC Sabathia, Rich Harden, Mark Teixeira, Ken Griffey Jr and Manny Ramirez, you wouldn't have expected a pitcher acquired by the Pittsburgh Pirates to be stealing the headlines.

Jeff Karstens is making Pirates GM Neal Huntington look pretty clever at the moment.

The right-hander got off to a promising start with his new team on the first of August. His debut came in a day game at Wrigley Field, facing a Cubs team that had just swept the Brewers in a four-game series in Milwaukee. Karstens pitched six scoreless innings, holding the potent Chicago lineup to just five hits and setting up a 3-0 victory for his team. With his next start scheduled for 6 August against the Diamondbacks, the Pirates would have been more than happy for a repeat performance. What they received was far beyond their expectations.

There are many news items that you wouldn't expect to see flashing back at you on the home page when logging on to MLB.com during the evening. 'Carl Pavano is welcomed back with open arms by the Bronx faithful'. 'Clemens and Canseco join forces to launch a new chain of drug stores'. 'Selig admits his mistake and scraps interleague play'. The likelihood of seeing any of the above is slim to none, but prior to last Wednesday you probably would have said the same thing about a story that *did* appear: Jeff Karstens was pitching a perfect game heading into the seventh inning against Arizona.

Having retired the first twenty-three batters in order, Karstens' bid for baseball immortality was broken up by a Chris Young double down the left field line with two outs

in the eighth. The Chase Field crowd rose to their feet and applauded, as much in appreciation of the opposing pitcher's efforts than the relief of finally seeing one of their players get on base. And arguably the most impressive part of Karstens' performance was still to come. After the deflation of seeing the perfect game slip from his grasp, he kept his composure and pitched the final 1.1 innings to record a two-hit complete game shutout.

Two starts for the Pirates, two wins and no runs conceded over the fifteen innings pitched. As far as first impressions go, Karstens couldn't have done any better.

The Pirates acquired Karstens in a trade that saw Xavier Nady and Damaso Marte head to the Yankees. In the media's eyes, it was primarily a transaction centred on who the Yankees received; the four players that went in the other direction were something of an afterthought.

The reaction was understandable in Karsten's case. He hadn't been overly impressive in his brief Major League forays with the Yankees during 2006 and 2007. Last year in particular was a bit of a nightmare for him, having a comebacker break his right leg and putting up an 11.02 ERA. At 6-4 with a 3.80 ERA over twelve starts, he hadn't been dazzling in Triple-A this year either, but the Pirates saw something in him that made them believe he could contribute to their club. Two games in and they have to be happy with how things are going.

If we're being honest, Karstens isn't a strong bet to maintain this startling form. Pitchers who can't miss bats with regularity in the Majors have to accept that they will be unceremoniously knocked about every now and then. Even in these two most recent starts, Karstens only struck out six batters combined over the fifteen innings and his Major League strikeout ratio of 3.36 K's per nine innings doesn't bode well. Extreme groundball pitchers can get away with a low strikeout rate, indeed such pitchers are quite happy for the batters to put the ball in play.

Karstens is no Brad Ziegler though; with close to fifty per cent of the opposition's plate appearances ending in a flyball being belted off his pitching.

Despite these facts, Pirates fans shouldn't be too pessimistic. Karstens' track record prior to these two games suggests that he's a back-of-the-rotation starter, possibly a handy long relief option out of the bullpen, and every team needs a pitcher or two like that on their team. Accept him for what he is and you won't be disappointed. The fact that he isn't the type of pitcher who will shutout teams too often doesn't diminish the impact of his first two starts. If anything, it makes them all the more enjoyable. It's great to see the top pitchers in the game performing outstanding feats, but it's just as fun to witness a less-heralded player having his moment in the sun.

What's more, this time last year the Pirates, under the leadership of former GM Dave Littlefield, traded for the washed-up and expensive Matt Morris. Signing Jeff Karstens is a definite sign of progress, whichever way you look at it.

Week Nineteen wrap-up

Cleveland (65-51) were able to take full advantage of a White Sox loss to the Red Sox last night. The Tribe beat Kansas City to leapfrog into first place in the AL Central, leading Chicago by half a game. The Rays (70-46) maintain a 3.5 game lead over Boston in the East, while the Yankees have lost their last two games against the Angels to fall back to 7.5 games out. With those two victories, the Angels (73-43) have extended their lead in the West to fourteen games. Needless to say, none of their division rivals are seriously in the running for the wild card. Boston have the fourth postseason spot at the moment, leading Chicago by two and the Yankees by four.

There has been little significant change in the senior circuit over the last seven days. The Phillies (63-53) are continuing to hold off the

Mets and the Marlins by one game and two and a half games respectively. The Brewers have won their last four, but they still trail the Cubs (70-47) by four games in the Central, with St Louis a further two games back. The D-Backs (59-58) have lost their last four to allow the Dodgers to close to within half a game in the West. The Brewers hold the wild card right now, with the Cardinals (2 games back), the Mets (3.5) and the Marlins (5) putting up a fight.

Week Twenty: Money talks

17 August 2008

CC Sabathia's stunning form since joining the Brewers has had many people speculating on how much money one team will have to spend to secure his services as a free agent over the upcoming offseason. While the figures pale in comparison to the bounty coming CC's way, several teams have been dipping into their pockets this week and parting with substantial sums for potential stars of the future.

This past Friday was the deadline for most of the amateur players drafted in June to either agree a deal with their team, or wait another year before they can re-enter the amateur player draft. While some teams quickly came to an agreement with their first round selection(s), most notably the Tampa Bay Rays and this year's number one pick Tim Beckham, some players left it right to the last minute before signing on the dotted line and a few didn't sign at all.

The sums on offer reflect the fact that there are only a limited number of top prospects each year. Pedro Alvarez (draft pick number 2), Eric Hosmer (number 3) and Buster Posey (number 5) each agreed deals worth around the \$6m mark with the Pirates, the Royals and the Giants respectively on the deadline day. Pitcher Aaron Crow and his advisers wouldn't budge from their high asking price (some say their starting figure was around \$8m-\$10m) and therefore he will be pitching in Missouri this year rather than joining the Nationals' system as a number nine pick. Time will tell whether Crow made the right move or not.

In most cases, the higher you pick, the more money you are going to have to spend. This has a knock-on effect in regards to deciding which player(s) a team will go for.

The general idea of the drafting order is to allow the worst teams to pick first, affording them an opportunity to obtain the best players to make themselves competitive in the long run. The trouble is, the worst teams often are those with the least amount of money. If a player wants a signing bonus you can't afford, there's not much point in wasting your first round pick on him; therefore the order in which players are drafted does not necessarily provide an accurate guide as to their sheer ability (accepting that this will be a subjective judgement in any case).

For example, Rick Porcello was the twenty-seventh pick in the 2007 draft and few would argue that there were twenty-six more talented players than him available. However, he made it clear that it would take a lot of money to make him sign a contract and therefore team after team let him go by. The Detroit Tigers happily snagged him late on in the first round and agreed a deal worth more than \$7m.

Some would say that this is not fair. Major League Baseball itself clearly sees such scenarios as going against the spirit of the draft, hence the so-called 'slotting system' which is supposed to guide teams as to how much they should be paying for players, depending on how high they are drafted. As [explained](#) on MLB.com, these recommendations are regularly ignored and the system is of limited usefulness. There are no real penalties for exceeding the recommendations; therefore teams won't think twice about doing so if that allows them to sign a player they really want.

Whether it's fair or not, no team can be blamed for taking that stance under the current system. In relation to the Porcello signing, Tigers GM Dave Dombrowski stated "there are cases we think are special talents and circumstances where you make a decision that you think is best for our organization. I think our first responsibility is to try to put a winning product on the field. You're always concerned about your own [team]". Few could argue with those sentiments. The low

payroll teams may well like to be able to sign the top young players for below their market value, but the Players union won't agree to that anytime soon and nor should they.

In these revenue-sharing times, even the small market teams are not short of a few million dollars to spend. There will always be another team that can spend more than you, but that doesn't mean you can't compete. It really comes down to how serious the owners are about winning, rather than toddling along as a mediocre team, pocketing their revenue-sharing money while bemoaning the greater wealth of others.

In recent years, the Rays have approached the task of selecting the overall number one pick with the mindset that they would take the player they considered to be the best available and, within reason, would be prepared to pay the going rate to complete the signing. This year, they wanted Tim Beckham so they selected him with the number one pick and quickly came to an agreement on a \$6.15m deal (about £3.3m). They've endured some miserable Major League seasons while directing money to their farm system, but now they are in the catbird seat with an enviable crop of exciting young talent that looks set to challenge the Red Sox and the Yankees in the AL East for many seasons to come.

Drafting the best young players is an expensive business, but that doesn't stop the smaller market teams from competing if they are willing to work with the current system and pay the going rate. And that going rate has just turned several young prospects into millionaires.

Week Twenty wrap-up

The Rays (74-48) still lead the Red Sox by 3.5 games in the AL East, with the Yankees having dropped back a bit to 9.5 games out. The Twins and the White Sox have been swapping places all week and they currently sit level at the top of the Central with identical 69-53

records. The Angels (76-45) are looking towards October already, leading the Rangers by 15.5 games in the West. Boston leads the Central pairing by 1.5 games in the wild card race; the Yankees are 6 games behind and will feel they still have a chance at keeping the postseason streak alive.

The Mets (67-56) have won five on the spin to give them a two-game lead over the Phillies in the NL East, with the Marlins just a further 1.5 games back. The Brewers have been on a good run of form lately, but they still haven't been able to gain ground on the Cubs (75-48) in the Central. In the West, the D-Backs (64-59) picked up Adam Dunn during the week and, while he has started slowly, his new team has won three in a row to lead the Dodgers by one game. Milwaukee leads their Central rivals the Cardinals by two games for the NL wild card.

Week Twenty One: Instant replay is on its way

24 August 2008

Thursday was a momentous day in the history of Major League Baseball. After years of saying it would never happen, baseball, the most traditional of all North American sports, finally agreed to the use of instant replays to help officiate games. It was a day that somehow seemed inevitable, even though baseball has generally resisted radical change in the past.

The use of instant replays already has been accepted by many other sports. All of the other three major North American sports use it to varying degrees. Tries in both codes of rugby have been awarded or turned down by a video referee for several years now. Cricket, probably the sport most similar to baseball in this context, is constantly trialling new ideas to increase its use for a wider range of decisions. If they can find a way to integrate instant replay into their sports, why not baseball?

Its adoption can largely be attributed to the level of TV coverage that is now devoted to sports. Every game is covered by a host of TV cameras and every incorrect decision is highlighted instantly. Game-changing calls are occasionally blown, leaving millions of people sitting in front of their TV screens knowing conclusively that the wrong decision has just been made. Meanwhile, the game carries on regardless. While human error will always be a part of the sport, at some point allowing blatantly incorrect decisions to stand, when they could easily be reversed within thirty seconds, begins to hurt the credibility of the competition.

Instant replay had been knocking on baseball's door for a while and it was only a matter of time before something enabled it to come crashing through. Three incorrect home run calls in quick succession during May, most notably a Carlos Delgado home run that was

called 'foul' on an ESPN Sunday Night game, proved to be the breaking point. At the MLB Owners' meeting last week, Bud Selig announced that instant replay for disputed home run calls could be utilized before the end of this season.

The move is certainly not welcomed universally. As with anything, the devil will be in the detail: deciding to use instant replay is one thing, agreeing on exactly when and how is quite another.

Monitors are being installed in all thirty Major League ballparks, which will apparently lead to an umpire leaving the field to review a play. That immediately calls to mind the hilarious farce that is the NFL instant replay charade, where the ref goes into his little booth to review the play in question. The system used in cricket and rugby, where the officials on the field simply instruct the video umpire/referee to review the call and to tell them the decision, is quicker and generally less ridiculous, but perhaps American TV execs prefer the spectacle of the officials making a grand departure to Stage Left?

News broke on Tuesday that the Umpires union still had severe concerns about the operation of the instant replay system and they consequently refused to take part in a conference call about its introduction. Fears that the situation might provoke unwanted division in the game, and possible strike action, were thankfully put to rest a couple of days later with the announcement that an agreement had been reached between all parties. However, that is unlikely to be the end of the matter.

Football is another of the few sports yet to embrace technology and the most common explanation for this is the fear that introducing it for a limited purpose (whether the ball crossed the goal line or not) will open the floodgates. If you use it for one thing to 'get the decision right', how do you justify not using it for other situations that could prove just as crucial in the context of the game (e.g. whether a player was offside or not)?

There's no doubt that it could be a slippery slope. In the WGN broadcast of the Nationals-Cubs game on Friday, commentator and former D-Backs manager Bob Brenly raised the possibility that the day could come where technology is used to call balls and strikes. The QuesTec system already does exactly this for the purposes of evaluating the performances of umpires, so from a technical standpoint it is feasible. Whether it would ever be accepted is debatable, and Brenly was playing devil's advocate with his suggestion, but it illustrates the point that once you have adopted technology, there may be no turning back.

The WGN broadcast also raised another interesting point. In response to a survey conducted during the game, only 52 per cent of those who replied were in favour of using instant replay. Broadcaster Len Kasper introduced the survey saying that he thought he knew what the result would be and seemed genuinely surprised that there wasn't overwhelming support for instant replay. Still, he remarked that the first time the system made an important call in favour of the Cubs, their fans would be 100 per cent behind it and it's hard to disagree. Self-interest always comes first.

It does go to show that the announcement on Thursday is not an end to a long-running saga, but the beginning of one. While instant replay is designed to make clear-cut decisions, anyone who thinks it will reduce controversy is kidding themselves. If anything, it will only produce more. There are interesting times ahead, that's for sure.

Week Twenty One wrap-up

Tampa Bay (79-49) have increased their lead over the Red Sox in the AL East. The Rays now have a 5.5 game cushion thanks to a 5-1 week. The Angels (78-50) continue to coast along in the West, with the Rangers now sitting sixteen games back. The Twins (74-55) and the White Sox are probably going to be locked together the rest of the way in the Central, swapping places every few days or so.

Minnesota hold the top spot today, half a game ahead of Chicago. The Central also figures to have a say in the wild card. Most people assumed Boston would take it, but they now have only a half-game lead over the White Sox. The Yankees are five games back and it is possible that we could have a postseason without both the Red Sox and the Bronx Bombers. That would be bad news for the media networks.

In the National League, the Cubs (79-50) continue on their merry way despite the nervousness that seems to be affecting their fans (a 100 year wait for a World Series will do that to you, I guess). They lead the Brewers in the Central by 4.5 games. In turn, Milwaukee have a 3.5 game lead over St Louis in the wild card, so the Central pennant race might not be such an important race to win. The Mets (72-58) have a 1.5 game advantage over the Phillies in the East, while the D-Backs (68-61) have a three game lead on the Dodgers in the West.

Week Twenty Two: One month to go

31 August 2008

Five months ago, the thirty Major League teams were getting ready for the 2008 season with hopes, dreams and great expectations of what the year may bring. On the final day of August, those teams are now facing the reality of what their season may amount to. For some, September will be a thirty-day period that they want to get over and done with as soon as possible. For others, the coming month could end in triumph and lead to even greater glory.

The Tampa Bay Rays have undoubtedly been the story of 2008 so far. Most people predicted that they would have a successful year, but that this would mean recording their first winning season while falling in line behind the Red Sox and the Yankees. 2008 would be a stepping stone for greater things in '09 and beyond. Well, the Rays decided that they had already waited long enough. They have a decent cushion at the top of the AL East and, with their two main rivals not firing on all cylinders, it's unlikely that they will let their excellent first five months go to waste.

If the Rays have been the team of the AL, the Cubs have been the kings of the senior circuit. In contrast to Tampa Bay, Chicago were expected to be the NL Central leaders at this point in the season and they haven't disappointed. On paper they were strong in all aspects: batting, starting rotation and their bullpen. Add in a sensational rookie season from Geovany Soto, the rousing success of Ryan Dempster's move back to the rotation and the inspired addition of Rich Harden and there's really no reason why this team cannot go on and win the World Series. Except, of course, for the weight of that 100 year wait.

It's a great time to be a baseball fan in Chicago as the south-siders are defying the pessimistic predictions that, at best, put them as the third best team in the AL Central. Their

2007 campaign was a disaster, ending with a 72-90 record, and the ageing core of the batting lineup seemed more likely to slip backwards than to power the team forwards. What we didn't count on was the stunning form of Carlos Quentin, an off-season master-stroke of a trade by Kenny Williams. The former D-Back has been the catalyst for a White Sox resurgence. After stuttering a little in July, they've had a good August and have put themselves in a position ahead of the final month that few thought possible.

The same could be said for the other team battling for the AL Central. In fact, the Twins' challenge is even more unexpected than Chicago's. Consider their build-up to the 2008 season: finishing with a 79-83 record in '07 and then losing the face of their franchise (Torii Hunter) and arguably the best pitcher in the game (Johan Santana) over the off-season. The expectation was that this team would go from mediocre to bad, but manager Ron Gardenhire has once again proved the doubters wrong.

The fortunes of the White Sox and the Twins are linked to the two biggest disappointments of the 2008 season. The pressing question in the AL Central prior to the season was whether Detroit or Cleveland would win the division? Neither side could have envisaged being out of the running by the All-Star break, but that's the position both teams found themselves in. They won't be able to make amends over the rest of this season either. Cleveland raised the white flag at the start of July when trading away CC Sabathia, writing the season off and looking to the future. Meanwhile the Tigers are in a bit of trouble: an expensive 'win now' team that isn't winning now and might not win for a few years to come due to the way they have largely gutted their farm system.

The Braves were another team who began the season with high hopes and then traded away various players when they knew all hope had gone. With Teixeira in the lineup and Smoltz, Hudson and Glavine in the rotation, they started the season with the belief that they

could challenge the Phillies and the Mets in the NL East. Unforeseen injuries (all three of those starters are on the shelf) and the faltering form of Jeff Francoeur shattered their dreams even before the All-Star break.

Which all leads us on to Colorado. After making the World Series last year, the Rockies appeared to be primed to go deep into October yet again. Troy Tulowitzki's early season injury and the mystifying collapse of last year's pitching hero Jeff Francis were two of the main reasons that they had a terrible first two months (20-36). Partly due to an improvement in their own form and partly due to the D-Backs and the Dodgers seemingly not wanting to win the NL West, the Rockies have at least given themselves an outside chance of storming through in the final month. Of all the teams that have disappointed so far, the Rockies are the one team who could still turn their season around. And they know a thing or two about getting hot in September.

So, five months in and it's becoming clear which teams have exceeded their pre-season expectations and which have failed to live up to them. There's still one month left though and, while several teams already know their fate, that leaves plenty of opportunities to change the course of a season.

Week Twenty Two wrap-up

The first couple of days of the 'instant replay' era haven't produced any reviewable moments, but no doubt there will be some controversy as teams fight for division crowns and wild cards over the next four weeks.

The Tampa Bay Rays (83-51: 4.5 games ahead of Boston), the Angels (83-52: 18 games ahead of Texas), the Cubs (51-5: 5.5 games ahead of Milwaukee) and the D-Backs (69-66: 3.5 games ahead of Los Angeles) will all be hoping that any instant replay calls will not impact their current marches to October.

The Mets (75-61) only lead the Phillies by a single game in the NL East, although they appear to have shaken off the Marlins for the time being at least. The White Sox (76-59) currently occupy the top spot in the AL Central, with the Twins just half a game back. Minnesota trail the Red Sox by 3.5 games in the AL wild card race and the Yankees look like they may now have fallen out of contention after Boston won two of three in the final series between the two sides at the current Yankee Stadium. The Brewers hold what should be a comfortable 5.5 game lead over the Phillies and the Cardinals in the NL wild card, although they will be weary of stumbling down the stretch after last year's disappointment.

Week Twenty Three: The case of the missing error

7 September 2008

Wednesday's historic instant replay home run call marked the first use of the new technology brought into the game as an acknowledgement of the difficulties faced by umpires today. However an official scorer might dispute the notion that umpires have the most difficult job in the game. At least an umpire has three colleagues to lean on. Except for the World Series, where a panel of three take on the task, the official scorer carries the weight of making scoring decisions on his own shoulders. Bob Webb's shoulders have needed to be broad this week.

CC Sabathia's attempt at pitching a no-hitter against the Pirates last Sunday was broken up by Webb's debatable call that ruled a soft grounder back to the mound by Andy La Roche should stand as a single rather than an error against the pitcher.

The Milwaukee Brewers were united in their belief that the official scorer had botched a straightforward decision. Manager Ned Yost voiced his disgust, stating "whoever the scorekeeper was absolutely denied Major League Baseball a nice no-hitter right there" and adding "that's a stinkin' no-hitter that we all got cheated from". The use of the word "cheated" was no doubt a product of the immediate emotional aftermath, but it suggested this was no simple mistake and that the decision was completely irrational.

If Webb had gone crazy for a moment, perhaps his addled mental condition was brought about by a seemingly innocuous two-word phrase that has caused many a scorer a sleepless night or two? 'Ordinary effort' is in some ways the baseball equivalent of football's 'offside' law. In both cases everyone concerned (players, managers, supporters, media pundits etc) generally believes that the matter is easy to understand. We all know what ordinary effort is, just as we all know

when a player is gaining an advantage from an offside position.

Yet in both cases the decision always involves a judgement call, an element of the play that requires interpretation rather than merely establishing a fact (such as deciding if the ball crossed over the goal line/went over the outfield fence). Such complexities needn't worry those of us not responsible for making the actual decision; we can see what we want to see and let our bias take charge. That option isn't open to a scorer. They have to use their training and experience to make what they believe to be the correct call in line with the rules/laws of the game.

BaseballGB's own Joe Gray knows this only too well. As the Southern Scorers' Commissioner for the British Baseball Federation, Joe is well placed to offer an insight into the factors that Webb may have taken into consideration:

"Sabathia had time to make the throw if he'd fielded it cleanly, but I think the fact that his body had started to turn as he went to barehand it (he didn't realize just how much time he had to get the out) meant that it was not a routine play. For this reason, it could legitimately be scored a hit, although in my opinion it is (just) an error".

The element of doubt raised by Joe supports the view of MLB's scoring review committee that the ruling was not 'clearly erroneous'. For this reason, they came to the conclusion that the ruling should stand after the Brewers submitted an official appeal against the original decision (as was their right).

The scoring review committee didn't take into account the fact that the play broke up an attempt at a no-hitter. It had no reason to because this is immaterial when strictly applying the rules of the game, but it's a factor that a lot of on-lookers brought into the equation. There's an unofficial 'rule' within the game that a team's first hit should be a clean one, just in case it's the only hit the pitcher gives up that day. This particularly

applies when the play in question occurs during the middle of the game (in this case the fifth inning).

Then again, distinguishing between a hit and an error can only be as straightforward as Ned Yost seemingly believes it to be if the same criteria are used all of the time. Who's to say Yost wouldn't have been more than happy to see that play go down as a hit (and therefore not an error against Sabathia) if the Pirates had already recorded several hits beforehand?

Such complications and contradictions will ensure that the debate will continue despite the final ruling having been made, but there are three things we can be certain about: 1) Webb spent the rest of the game praying that another Pirate recorded a hit, 2) the job of an official scorer is far from easy, and 3) CC will still get a ton of money in the off-season, no-hitter or not.

Week Twenty Three wrap-up

We have to start in the National League West this week. The Dodgers (72-70) have stormed to the top of the division on the back of a seven-game winning streak, four of which have come against the D-Backs (and two against Brandon Webb). L.A. have a half game lead, while the Rockies are in third place, 5.5 games back and not without hope.

In the Central, the Cubs (86-56) still lead the division despite suffering a six-game losing streak. The Brewers are now just four games back and their 4.5 game lead over the Phillies in the wild card race means that they are a strong bet for a play-off place regardless of how the Central turns out. The Mets (79-62) are two games ahead of the Phillies in the East.

In the American League, the Angels (85-56) went 2-4 on the week, but it has made little difference to their inevitable walk to the West division title. The Rangers are still sixteen games back and the Angels' magic number is

down to five. The White Sox (80-61) received a hammer blow as Carlos Quentin looks to be done for the season thanks to a wrist injury; however they've responded to the news by winning three on the bounce and they retain a 2.5 game lead over the Twins in the Central.

The Red Sox have cut the Rays' (85-55) lead in the East down to 2.5 games and the league leaders suffered a harrowing thirteen inning defeat to the Blue Jays yesterday (Toronto have now won seven on the spin). As with the NL Central, the top two teams are battling to win the division while knowing that the loser stands a strong chance of making October anyway: the Red Sox lead the Twins by 5.5 in the AL wildcard race.

Week Twenty Four: The Angels rule the West

14 September 2008

The Los Angeles Angels were celebrating on Wednesday as they became the first team to win their division in 2008. The AL West was secured after a 4-2 victory over the Yankees was followed one hour later by the Texas Rangers' defeat to the Mariners. With their magic number first reduced to one and then to none, the party could begin in Anaheim.

However the speed at which they've achieved this feat makes it difficult to evaluate just how well the Angels have played. Are they overrated or underrated?

When you compare them to the other postseason hopefuls, the Angels are in a great position. They have the best record in baseball, which is a decent indicator that they may be the best team in the Majors. At the same time, the Angels were able to wrap up their division with a full seventeen games still to go. MLB.com [notes](#) that it was the fifth quickest clinching of a division since the Majors expanded to a 162 game season. No other team was even close to celebrating a division title while the Angels were spraying champagne over each other. The next best were the Cubs who finished the day with a magic number of 13, sitting 4.5 games ahead of the Brewers in the NL Central.

The evidence suggests that the Angels are a dominating juggernaut, primed to sweep everyone else out of their way in October.

Hang on a minute though. All the Angels have done so far is win the AL West. Even accepting that they won it at a canter, it's still not the most notable achievement in the world when you consider the competition they were up against.

Or should that be *lack* of competition?

The A's were the team challenging the Angels in the first half and in many ways that summed up the division. After trading away the likes of Dan Haren and Nick Swisher over the off-season and publicly declaring themselves to be in 'rebuilding' mode, no one expected Oakland to be in with a shout. The A's finished June with an impressive 45-37 record and they trailed the Angels by just 3.5 games, but GM Billy Beane didn't let a good first half sway him from his long-term vision. Rich Harden and Joe Blanton left for the National League and the A's waved the white flag while stumbling to an 18-37 record during July and August.

The Angels rode off into the sunset with a 19-6 July (including a 4-1 record against the A's and a 6-0 record over the Red Sox), by which point they led the Rangers by 12.5 games. Texas have occupied second place in the West ever since, although they have never looked like putting the Angels under any sort of pressure. Ten and a half games back is the closest they've come, which really isn't close at all.

It was predicted that Oakland and Texas were always going to be left trailing in the Angels' wake this season. The team that was supposed to be battling with L.A. for the division crown were the Seattle Mariners. It's probably best for all concerned that we don't dwell on the Mariners' season. Let's just say it hasn't quite gone to plan.

So if we're being honest, the Angels have essentially won a division by beating three mediocre/poor teams. The unbalanced schedule has also given them ample opportunity to inflate their win-loss record thanks to a 27-16 record against their division mates.

The facts might be accurate, but the perception of them being overrated 'average Angels' is misleading. It's hardly L.A.'s fault that the rest of the AL West fell apart; they could only beat what was put in front of them. And the Angels are not the only team to take advantage of weak opposition. The Rays have

beaten the Orioles in ten of their thirteen contests so far this season, while the White Sox have a satanic .666 winning percentage from their thirty games against the Indians and the Royals.

And then you look at their roster. A batting core of Teixeira, Guerrero, Hunter and Anderson, with a solid supporting cast including Figgins, Matthews Jr and Rivera to name but three. An imposing starting rotation even without Kelvim Escobar, who has been on the disabled list all season. A bullpen topped off by Francisco Rodriguez, the single season save record holder following his 58th last night against the Mariners. The Angels certainly don't lack game-changing players.

They may have won an easy division, but that doesn't diminish the fact they are a very solid team. Even if they are not quite the unstoppable force that their rapid division victory might suggest, do not underestimate the Angels' ability to win a second World Series in six years.

Week Twenty Four wrap-up

The Angels (91-57) are on a four-game winning streak, increasing their lead over the Rangers to 18.5 games and making a statement that they are not about to become complacent despite already having the division sewn up. The rest of the play-off hopefuls would love to be in that position. Instead, a combination of wins, losses and rainouts has meant that the other seven postseason spots are still up in the air.

The Red Sox have cut the Rays' (88-58) lead in the East down to two games, although both teams have a strong chance of making October as Boston are five games ahead of the AL Central leaders in the wild card race. That means the race for the AL Central crown is a true all-or-nothing affair. The White Sox's (81-65) doubleheader against the Tigers was rained out yesterday, while the Twins (82-66) won two against the Orioles to pull themselves level at the top of the division.

The Cubs' (88-58) series in Houston is being moved to Milwaukee today due to Hurricane Ike causing havoc in the Lone Star state. Chicago have not played since Thursday, but they've maintained their six-game lead over the Brewers because the latter have once again been unable to take advantage. A couple of weeks ago, Milwaukee fans would have turned up at Miller Park to cheer on the Astros against the Cubs, but Houston had won six in a row prior to being halted by the weather. This means they are now just 2.5 games behind the Brewers in the NL wild card race, with the Phillies being closer still at two games back. Philadelphia trail the Mets (83-64) by 2.5 games in the East, while the D-Backs have collapsed in the West as the Dodgers (77-71) continue their great form to lead the division by 4.5 games.

Week Twenty Five: Yost is toast

21 September 2008

With only two weeks of the season left to go, the Brewers shockingly sacked manager Ned Yost last Monday. While a poor September had caused a growing number of Milwaukee fans to question Yost's decision-making skills, few expected him to be fired at this late stage. Teams that are tied for the wild card midway through September just don't make such major changes. Until now, that is.

It was an unprecedented move, but these are unprecedented times for the Milwaukee Brewers. Deep-seated frustrations have combined with a never-ending barrage of blunders and beatings to leave the organization dazed and confused. Why sack Yost at this particular moment? 'Why not?', seems to be the answer. If some of the criticisms of the manager were not so valid we would be able to see this as a case of insanity brought about by desperation. As it is, we can more fairly describe the move as one made by a group of people who are thoroughly fed up with finishing nowhere.

The Brewers haven't made the play-offs since 1982. That's eighteen long years of watching October baseball from the outside, a current drought longer than any other team in the Majors. Embarrassment turns to anger turns to sadness.

This year's story of early promise followed by bitter disappointment is all too familiar for the Brewers. They spent 121 days in first place in the NL Central during the 2007 season, but didn't occupy the top spot when it mattered most. August proved to be Milwaukee's undoing last year, as they struggled to a 9-18 record over the month to let the Cubs back into the contest. Although they regained their composure and made a fight of it down the stretch, you sensed that the Brewers were always on the back foot after seeing their strong position slip away.

That experience, and the constant reminder of 'seventeen years and counting' pounding in their heads, compelled the Brewers' owners to act at the halfway stage of this season. They decided to do everything in their power to put this run of despair to an end. And what more could they have done than completing the blockbuster trade for CC Sabathia on 7 July?

The owners agreed to give up a top prospect in Matt LaPorta to make it happen. They were prepared to find an extra \$5 million to pay what remained on Sabathia's contract, taking the team's payroll to an ["all-time high of \\$90 million"](#) in the process. It was a clear statement of intent: this is the year we make the play-offs and give the Milwaukee fans something to celebrate.

Sabathia has been outstanding, but the Brewers have still found a way to fall apart. No wonder they lashed out by kicking Yost to the curb.

Milwaukee held a four-game lead over the Phillies and the Astros in the NL Wild Card race prior to a four-game series against Philadelphia last weekend. The Phills promptly erased that deficit completely by sweeping the series; the double-header on Sunday putting an exclamation mark on proceedings. While the Brewers were feeling sorry for themselves, the Cubs were mocking them. Carlos Zambrano threw a no-hitter against the Astros and did so in Milwaukee's own stadium; the series having been moved to a neutral venue due to Hurricane Ike.

Enough was enough. Ned Yost received his marching orders and Dale Sveum took over as the last roll of the dice. A three-game series in Chicago gave the Brewers a great opportunity to draw a line under their recent run of misfortune and to begin their charge to the finishing line. What happened?

Game one: CC Sabathia was handed his first loss in a Brewers uniform.

Game two: the Brewers won, but they also lost. Ben Sheets lasted just twenty-four pitches before leaving the game injured with a 'cutting' sensation in his elbow. He then revealed that he had been struggling with pain in his pitching arm for a couple of weeks and it looks doubtful he will make his final two scheduled starts.

Game three: the Brewers blew a 6-2 lead in the bottom of the ninth and lost 7-6 in extra innings. Most depressingly, Milwaukee committed suicide in the top of the ninth, running their way into two needless outs and failing to add a few more (as it turned out, much needed) insurance runs onto the scoreboard.

Their season just went from bad to worse.

This should have been the Brewers' year to make the play-offs and, for all of the recent turmoil, they still have an outside chance. With Sabathia and Sheets hitting free agency in November, Milwaukee fans will be praying that they make the most of the opportunity. Eighteen years is a long time to wait for a postseason appearance and they could be waiting even longer.

Week Twenty Five wrap-up

Two more teams officially qualified for the play-offs last night, leaving five spots to be decided over the final week of the regular season.

In the AL, the Rays (92-61) have guaranteed themselves at least the wild card and, with a 2.5 game lead over the Red Sox in the East, they will be looking to get there by winning the division. The Red Sox (90-64) have a 6.5 game lead over the late-surging Yankees in the wild card race and look certain to mount a strong defence of their World Series crown. With the Angels (95-59) having won the West over two weeks ago, the only true battle in the final week comes from the Central division, where the White Sox (85-69) have a 2.5 game lead over the Twins.

In the NL, the Cubs (93-60) won their second straight Central division title last night and in the end it has been a cakewalk for them: they lead the Brewers by ten games. The Dodgers (81-74) have a 3.5 game lead over the D-Backs in the West, which is a strong, if not insurmountable, position to be in. Arizona will need an L.A. collapse to make the postseason as they have officially been eliminated from the wild card race. So that leaves two positions for (probably) three teams: the Phillies, Mets and Brewers. The Phillies (87-68) have a half-game lead over the Mets (86-68) in the East, while the Mets hold a 2.5 game advantage over Milwaukee (84-71) in the wild card standings.

Week Twenty Six: All the fun of the 'fair'

28 September 2008

Baseball fans have enjoyed a compelling play-off race during the final week of the regular season, one in which two postseason places are still to be decided heading into the final day (and it might not even be the final day).

But for some people it hasn't been worth watching. The Yankees' Hank Steinbrenner has tried to dampen the excitement by railing against the current divisional structure. Like a five-year old who has been told he can't stay up late and watch TV, Steinbrenner has been jumping up and down and screaming "It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair".

Hank has taken objection to the fact that a team in the AL East can miss out on the play-offs even when they have won more games than a team in the NL West (for example, a team that happens to be led by the Yankees' former manager). Steinbrenner wrote: "The biggest problem is the divisional setup in Major League Baseball ... I didn't like it in the 1970s, and I hate it now. Baseball went to a multi-division setup to create more races, rivalries and excitement. But it isn't fair".

There's an obvious rebuttal to this comment: no doubt Steinbrenner thought the system was fair when the Yankees were winning rings.

Let's go back to the year 2000: the last time the Yankees won a World Series. The Bronx Bombers captured the AL East crown with just eighty-seven wins that year, three wins less than the total managed by the Cleveland Indians, who finished second in the Central and missed out on the wild card by one game to the Mariners. In the National League, the divisions were won by teams amassing ninety-five wins (Braves and the Cardinals) and ninety-seven wins (the Giants) respectively. The Yankees didn't have to face any of the NL

division winners in the World Series, instead they took on the Mets in an all New York Fall Classic. The Mets qualified for the postseason via the NL wild card, but they still won seven more regular season games than the Yankees.

So no doubt Hank wasn't really celebrating when Mike Piazza flied out to Bernie Williams to end Game Five and to secure a 4-1 series victory. When everyone else is proudly boasting about the Yankees' twenty-six World Championships, Hank politely reminds them all of the unfairness of the divisional system and puts an asterisk against the year 2000 win.

Or maybe not. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then "fairness" is often in the eye of the backside.

Steinbrenner would probably argue that the NL teams were able to take advantage of weaker opponents (most notably the Phillies, Cubs, Expos and Pirates) to inflate their win totals that year. There may be some truth in that, but if you accept the argument then you can't simply compare teams based on the number of wins. However, Steinbrenner does exactly that: "What if the Yankees finish the season with more wins than the Dodgers, but the Dodgers make the playoffs? Does that make the Dodgers a better team? No". Make no mistake, if the Dodgers had won ninety-five games this season, Steinbrenner would have still found reason to belittle the achievement (i.e. "they were beating weaker teams than the Yankees had to face").

MLB uses an unbalanced schedule, which makes comparing teams from different leagues and divisions a less-than exact science. Unless the leagues and divisions were scrapped completely, and all thirty teams played each other the same amount of times, that's always going to be the case. You would only have a completely "fair" result if you then didn't go to a play-off scenario and just awarded the championship to the top team, a prospect nobody in baseball would be in favour of.

Steinbrenner's latest comments should be put into context. The Yankees have missed out on the postseason for the first time in thirteen years, despite having a payroll nearly five times larger than the team that has beaten them to the AL East division title. It's eight years since they last won a World Series: a lifetime for a team that expects to win it every year. Their former manager, who walked away from a badly-handled contract offer during the off-season, is heading to October with his new team. Add in the fact that Hank and his brother Hal are trying to stamp their mark on a franchise dominated by their father for many years and it's not difficult to see why he might be a bit touchy at the moment.

His comments aren't completely without merit either: many neutrals would agree that the Yankees are a better team than the Dodgers. The problem is, there really isn't a perfect system out there. Steinbrenner stated that the move to divisional play was designed "to create more races, rivalries and excitement" and in this respect the change has worked. That's enough reason to keep the status quo, regardless of whether it allows people to claim the system is unfair when they fail to achieve what is expected of them.

Week Twenty Six wrap-up

When you head into the final day of the season not knowing whether it will be the final day of the season, you know it's going to be exciting. The Mets and the Brewers have identical records (89-72) and would need to be separated for the NL wild card by a tie-breaker scheduled for Monday if they both get the same result today.

The American League Central is even more complex. The Twins have a half-game advantage heading into the final day of the regular season, but the White Sox have played one game less. If the Twins win and the White Sox lose, the contest is over. Any other combination of results will lead to at least one extra game (the White Sox making up their

postponed game against the Tigers on Monday).

The other six spots are already settled. The Phillies (91-70) tied up the NL East last night, joining the Cubs (97-63) and the Dodgers (84-77) in the post-season. The Rays (96-65) clinched their first ever division title, ensuring that the Red Sox (94-66) will take on the Angels (99-62) in the ALDS.

Filling in the gaps

The end of the regular season, the Division Series and the Championship Series

The Mets did it again. In another final day meltdown, they lost to the Marlins 4-2 while the Brewers beat the Cubs to win the NL wild card.

The White Sox did win their game on Sunday 28th, meaning that the Tigers' miserable season wasn't over yet. They had to make up the postponed game and it was little surprise that the White Sox prevailed, competing as they were against a team that frankly just wanted to pack up their belongings and forget about the game for a while.

With the two teams level at the top of the AL Central after 162 games, the Twins and the White Sox met in a single game showdown to determine who would win the division and go on to face the Rays in the ALDS. In a classic pitching duel lasting just two hours and twenty minutes, Chicago beat Minnesota 1-0 thanks to a solo home run by Jim Thome.

Only eight teams make it into the postseason in MLB and each one always has a genuine reason to be confident of winning the World Series. Even the weakest team of the eight on paper can rise above the rest in a short format series, so hopes and expectations are never higher than when your team has got over the biggest hurdle: the 162 game (or 163 in Chicago's case) regular season.

However, the format guarantees that four teams will be brought crashing back down to earth quickly.

After playing their extra game to make it to October, the White Sox were sent packing by the Rays in four games. The Angels clinched their postseason place first and were the only team to get into three digits in the win column, but that counted for nothing as the Red Sox promptly eliminated them in the

division series round for the second straight year (this time by a series score of 3-1).

The Brewers dug deep and finally broke their postseason drought. It's difficult to know whether the decision to sack Ned Yost had any real impact, but their joy was short lived in any case as the Phillies defeated them 3-1 to ensure their return to the play-offs was a brief one.

Yet no one hit the ground harder than the Cubs. They were sure that this was their year; it was written in the stars. The one hundredth anniversary of their last World Series triumph was destined to be marked by the end of the Curse of the Billy Goat. Apparently, they were so certain that a ticker-tape parade around the north-side of Chicago was just around the corner that they forgot to turn up for their NLDS against the Dodgers. L.A. swept them aside in three games, outscoring them 20-6.

Ouch!

The Championship series round began with many parts of the Media salivating at the prospect of a Red Sox-Dodgers Fall Classic. Manny Ramirez facing Boston in a team containing several other former Red Sox (Lowe and Garciparra) and led by former Yankee manager Joe Torre? The storyline possibilities were endless. Much like the Cubs' 'inevitable' march to World Series glory, it proved too good to be true.

Even though Manny continued his astonishing form at the plate (he batted .533 in the series with two homers and seven runs batted in), the Phillies capitalised on their home field advantage by taking the first two games at Citizens Bank Park. The Dodgers won the first game back in L.A. to make it interesting, but the Phils were able to head home with the series wrapped up after winning the next two to take the series 4-1.

The ALCS produced some scintillating drama, with the series going back and forth before the game seven decider. Initially it looked like game two would be seen as the crucial

contest. The Red Sox had taken the opener at Tropicana Field and the Rays were staring at the prospect of dropping the first two games in their own backyard. A sacrifice fly by B.J. Upton allowed pinch-runner Fernando Perez to score the game-winning run in the eleventh inning of game two to level the series at 1-1 and they subsequently battered Boston into a major hole.

The Rays smashed the Red Sox in games three and four at Fenway (by a combined score of 22-5) and looked set to coast to a series victory when they were up 7-0 in the seventh-inning stretch of game five. Boston had other ideas and mounted a stunning comeback to win the game 8-7 before levelling the series at 3-3 with a 4-2 victory in game six.

So it all came down to game seven. The Red Sox had the momentum, but the Rays had home field advantage and Matt Garza on the mound. The righty gave up just one run over seven innings and his team mates did the rest, plating three runs to continue the Rays' Cinderella season.

World Series – Game One

Counting down the minutes – 23 October 2008

It's 01.25 in the morning here in the U.K. and game one of the 2008 World Series is about to begin. Jonny and Josh have their tuxedos on, the lineups have been announced and the Backstreet Boys have warbled their way through the Star Spangled Banner.

Jonny's score out of 10 for their effort was a 6 ("it was at least in tune"), while Josh (who claimed not to want to "kick a has-been band when they're down") gave them 5.5. I would go for 5 (Dave Lengel's shirt gets a 2).

The early hour can't diminish the excitement; the energy of the Rays crowd is vibrating across the Atlantic and it won't be long before Jimmy Rollins is blinded by several thousand flashbulbs - as if Scott Kazmir's fastball isn't tough enough to hit already. The cowbells are clanging and I'm sure there are a few Phillies white towels twirling in the air somewhere (not to be confused with white flags, that's for sure).

It's the underdogs against the underdogs. Scott Kazmir against Cole Hamels. Carlos Pena against Ryan Howard. Evan Longoria against Chase Utley. David Price (possibly?) against Brad Lidge. Joe Maddon against Charlie Manuel.

It's the 'never had a winning season before' Rays against the 'one World Series in 125 years' Phillies.

It's the highlight of the baseball calendar and it promises to be a fantastic way to top off what's been yet another great MLB season.

Enjoy the game.

Phillies win Game One – 23 October 2008

Whether you were watching it live in the early hours of the morning in the U.K., live in the evening in the U.S., or via a recording, game one of the 2008 World Series more than kept your attention. The Phillies beat the Rays 3-2 and, while it might not have been the most smoothly played game you will ever see, the fact that the score was close throughout ensured that it was still a gripping contest that bodes well for the rest of the series.

As the popular saying goes, 'baseball is a game of inches' and a tight game such as this one always makes the seemingly small moments stand out that little bit more than normal. Joe Maddon's decision not to bring the infield in with Shane Victorino on third base during the top of the fourth inning ultimately meant that the Rays cheaply conceded what became the winning run. However, every tactical decision is easy to make with the benefit of hindsight and allowing the score to go from 2-0 to 3-0 while still in the first half of the game was essentially a judgement call that didn't work out in Maddon's favour.

Victorino also made a judgement call when standing on third base with the other bags occupied and one out in the second inning. He tested B.J. Upton's arm and was thrown out at the plate to end the inning on an '8-2' double play. Again, as it was early in the game you could understand the decision, but if the Phillies had gone on to lose then that aggressive play ends up being seen as reckless. History is always written by the victors.

The big talking point has been another seemingly small moment: Carlos Pena being picked off by Cole Hamels in the sixth inning. In this case it wasn't a questionable decision by a player or manager (although some could

argue why the relatively slow-footed Pena was trying to steal second), but by the umpires. The Rays [were convinced](#) that Hamels had stepped towards home plate and therefore committed a balk, with Maddon stating after the game that he “thought it was clearly a balk” and Pena himself stating “In my opinion, it was balk all the way”. If it was, and balks are often far from the easiest decisions to make, then the umpires missed it and a potential rally (man on second with no outs) was killed. Add in the fact that it wiped out Ryan Howard’s error to let Pena reach base in the first place and you can definitely call it a momentum changer.

The Phillies took advantage to win a game that was played out by two aggressive teams possibly feeling the nerves that a World Series must surely inspire.

Chase Utley started the scoring with a two-run homer in the first inning, but the early blow didn’t provoke a run-fest. Apart from a ‘get over’ curve that Carl Crawford put into the right field seats, Cole Hamels made few mistakes while stifling the Rays in another excellent postseason start. The heart of the Rays order - Upton, Pena and Longoria - went 0 for 12, with Upton in particular looking out of sorts after his blistering form at the plate against the White Sox and the Red Sox in the two previous postseason rounds.

Scott Kazmir also looked lost early on. While he should take some credit for battling even though he was clearly far from being at his best, the Phillies will think that they should have done more to pad their lead by taking advantage of the Rays’ starting pitcher. They stranded eleven base runners and on another night that might have come back to haunt them.

Still, the Phillies have the luxury of a perfect closer waiting in the wings. Brad Lidge’s

three-up, three-down ninth inning meant that he has now converted forty-seven consecutive save opportunities this season and is 6 for 6 so far this postseason. The Rays might hope that the run has to come to an end at some time, but they really need to devote their energy into making sure that Lidge doesn’t get any more opportunities to shut the door on them.

It all amounted to an intriguing opener for viewers of Five to enjoy. And what a diverse cast we are: Brits working in Russia, a Swede watching in Spain, even a guy who had been sacked from his job the previous day but could find a silver lining in being able to watch the baseball rather than working a night shift.

All will no doubt be tuning in again tonight to see what game two brings. Winning game one of the World Series has been a big advantage for teams in recent history. Add in the fact that the series will shift to Philadelphia for game three and it’s clear that this is pretty much a must-win game for the Rays. ‘Big game’ James Shields is charged with leading the fight back, while Brett Myers looks to push the Phillies to within two wins of a World Championship.

World Series - Game Two

Rays tie the series at 1-1 – 24 October 2008

The last five teams who won game one of the World Series have all gone on to lift the trophy, so the Tampa Bay Rays knew that a victory in game two was essential in their attempt to stop the Phillies from continuing this streak. Thanks to some good fundamental baseball by the home team and the continuing struggles of the Phillies with runners in scoring position, the Rays earned a 4-2 victory to level the series at 1-1.

Game two followed the opener by being another close game in which the team that took a first inning lead was able to hold on to the advantage throughout. This time it was the Rays who put two runs on the scoreboard in the bottom of the opening frame.

The first run came when the number three batter Carlos Pena hit the ball to the right side of the infield to bring home Akinori Iwamura. This would have been a tailor-made double play had Jayson Werth not committed an error during the previous at-bat, allowing B.J. Upton to reach second base on a single. Instead of being forced out at second, Upton was able to advance to third and then scored on a groundout by Evan Longoria. It was a case of two runs coming off two productive outs to take advantage of a fielding error; one team executing the little plays well and the other making mistakes.

That first inning set the tone for the rest of the game. None of Tampa Bay's seven hits went for extra bases, but they made them count by playing a classic game of 'smallball' to manufacture runs and to make timely defensive plays to kill any potential Philly rallies. Nobody panicked when a suicide squeeze attempt by Jason Bartlett rolled foul in the fourth inning; the batter simply put

down a perfect safety squeeze on the very next pitch to allow Cliff Floyd to trot home from third to give the Rays a 4-0 lead. When the Phillies threatened in the fifth inning, Rocco Baldelli made a great defensive play to catch Chase Utley's fly ball and then double off Jayson Werth at first base to end the inning.

It was a stark contrast to the Rays' performance in game one and no player exemplified this more than B.J. Upton. The young centre-fielder went 0 for 4 in the opener while trying to pull the ball into row Z of the left field seats, leaving five runners stranded in the process.

His approach in game two was completely different: twice going the other way with pitches on the outside half of the plate (something that particularly impressed Five's pundit Josh Chetwynd). Perhaps it was a case of Upton trying too hard to make something happen in game one and simply getting back to basics? He isn't well known for trying too hard, as shown by a poor effort to run out a double-play in the seventh inning (something that Five's other presenter Jonny Gould was particularly *unimpressed* by), but it would be natural for a young player to be pressing at the plate on such an important occasion.

While the Rays learned from their game one mistakes, the Phillies did the exact opposite. They once again left eleven runners on base, getting the lead-off batter on board six times and only driving him home on one occasion. This solitary success came in the top of the ninth following a lead-off double by Carlos Ruiz, their third such hit of the game. The Phillies are 1 for 28 with runners in scoring position over the first two games and there's no doubt that they will lose this series unless that changes quickly.

Looking at the probable pitching match-ups prior to the series beginning, the Phils only appeared to have the advantage in game one. Cole Hamels' brilliance meant that their failure to capitalize on run-scoring opportunities did not come back to bite them in the opener. Brett Myers was solid enough in game two, giving up four runs over seven innings, but solid isn't good enough when your offense keeps letting chances pass them by. Both of the Phillies' probable starters in games three and four, Jamie Moyer and Joe Blanton, are likely to produce a Myers-type performance at best rather than a Hamels-type performance so the offense will have to raise their game.

For the Rays, James Shields was effective without really dominating the Phillies' lineup. He kept the score close and let his team mates do the rest. The rookie David Price continued to impress, not least with the way in which he recovered from a shaky start. Although he gave up two runs, one coming on Eric Bruntlett's pinch-hit homer in the eighth, he made his pitches when he needed to, particularly when striking out Ryan Howard to end the seventh and then getting the same player to groundout to Iwamura to end the game.

There were two strange umpiring moments in game two, although neither really counted for much. While Phillies fans will point to the missed hit-by-pitch on Jimmy Rollins in the ninth as a potential rally-killer, their team had done little to suggest that they would have capitalized on it anyway. As for the walk/checked swing call on Rocco Baldelli, the right decision was made even if the home plate umpire signalled it in an unconventional way.

The Rays had to take game two after losing the opener and they did just that. The series will resume in Philadelphia on Saturday night

after a rest day, allowing the Phillies to ponder their run-scoring woes and allowing British fans to catch up on some sleep.

World Series – Game Three

Game Three thriller – 26 October 2008

The switch back to GMT has never been more welcome than it was this morning to British baseball fans.

An hour and a half rain delay meant that the first pitch of game three of the World Series wasn't delivered until just gone three in the morning BST, but by then the clocks had been turned back an hour. Although it was still 5.47 in the morning by the time the game had finished, fans could head back to bed knowing that they had witnessed a classic game as a walk-off infield single gave the Phillies a 5-4 win and a 2-1 series lead.

The Rays had split the first two games at home due to playing fundamentally-sound baseball, but their discipline went out of the window in an incredible ninth inning. The Phillies' lead-off hitter Eric Bruntlett was hit by a pitch and then made his way to third on a wild pitch and a throwing error by Dioner Navarro. As a consequence of these mistakes, the Rays had little choice but to intentionally walk the next two batters and employed a five infielder/two outfielder defensive shift to try and stop the winning run from scoring.

Carlos Ruiz was not to be denied by the unconventional defensive alignment. So often we see a player not famed for his bat coming up with big hits in the postseason (Yadier Molina's blast in the NLCS against the Mets back in '06 being a classic example) and Ruiz, who hit just .219 during the regular season, has now added his name to that list. His solo home run in the second inning gave the Phils a 2-1 lead and his infield single in the ninth allowed the winning run to score.

It marked the end of a tough loss for the Rays, who had battled back brilliantly from what appeared to be a hammer blow in the sixth inning. With B.J. Upton on second, Evan Longoria clubbed a long drive down the left field line in the top of the inning which everyone, including the cameraman, expected to see come down in the seats. However, a strong wind halted its path and the ball landed in Pat Burrell's glove instead.

While Longoria was still contemplating how he hadn't just given his team a 3-2 lead, Chase Utley and Ryan Howard hit back-to-back jacks to plunge the Rays into a 4-1 hole. After reducing the deficit to 4-3 in the seventh, they were able to tie the game in the eighth inning thanks to the base-stealing exploits of Upton and an error by Ruiz. Unfortunately for the Rays, the Phillies' catcher was able to atone for his mistake to win the game for the home team later on.

It was a mixed night for the two catchers. Jimmy Rollins came around to score the opening run in the first inning for the Phils and his progress around the bases was aided by what has gone down in the record books as a wild pitch by Rays' starter Matt Garza, but what was really a poor attempt by Navarro at blocking the ball. Josh Chetwynd, a former catcher, provided some excellent analysis of the poor technique employed on the play, as he has throughout the series and indeed ever since he joined the Five team.

While the back-and-forth nature of the game made it compelling viewing for us, it did mean that Jamie Moyer was denied the 'W' that his performance arguably deserved. His final pitching line doesn't look anything special, but it was a real gutsy effort from a guy who had been pounded in his previous two postseason outings and then pounded by an endless stream of comments questioning whether Charlie Manuel had taken leave of his senses

in allowing him back out on the mound for such an important game. It's always a lot of fun to see a pitcher like Moyer having success in the Big Leagues and even more so in his first World Series game at the age of forty-five.

Game four certainly has a lot to live up to. Joe Blanton, another guy who is easy to root for, will be on the mound for the Phillies, while Andy Sonnanstine looks to help the Rays even up the series once again.

The weather forecast for Philadelphia is more positive for this evening, so it's unlikely that we will see another rain delay tonight. That's good news as it means less time for British fans to try and keep awake before the action gets going (a 00.10 start, don't forget), and less time for mischievous people to alter Jonny Gould's Wikipedia entry.

World Series - Game Four

Phillies blast past the Rays in Game four – 27 October 2008

The Phillies are now one win away from their second World Series championship after thumping the Rays 10-2 in game four.

It was a score line that accurately reflected their dominance and they will head into game five full of confidence that they can wrap up the series at home. If the Rays are to stop them, they will need to greatly improve their level of performance. Although the first three games of the series were close affairs, this one was anything but.

The Phillies' starter Joe Blanton deserves to grab the headlines after a terrific pitching performance and a stunning home run that caught everyone by surprise, not least the player himself.

Blanton's 5-12 record with the A's in the first half of the season made many people question Pat Gillick's decision to trade three prospects to obtain the righthander mid-way through July. It was a move that provoked a great deal of sneering on the behalf of some experts who predicted that Blanton would be smashed into submission in his new homer-friendly home. However his 4-0 record and 4.20 ERA over thirteen starts helped the Phillies make the postseason and he has now played a big part in edging his team towards the big prize.

Blanton's blast went down well with the crowd in Philadelphia, but it has been the return to form of two of their established hitters that has really turned this series in their favour. Ryan Howard and Jimmy Rollins went 2 for 19 in the opening two games, with both of the hits being delivered by the former in their game two loss. Getting back home to

Philly has proved a great tonic, as they have gone 9 for 17 in games three and four. Howard had looked out of sorts, being bedevilled by slow breaking balls on the outside part of the plate, but it was only a matter of time before he broke out of his slump. A solo shot yesterday seemed to do the trick and he belted two more in game four, the first of which was a three-run bomb coming seconds after MLB International commentator Dave O'Brien had stated that the Phillies had not "had a big hit" up to that point.

Two players don't make a team, but it's hard not to draw comparisons between the Howard-Rollins partnership and the Pena-Longoria duo. While the Phillies' pair have recovered from an early malaise, the Rays' pair are mired in an 0 for 29 slump. Longoria has been unlucky with two well-hit balls so far in this series, yet that can't disguise the fact that he is pressing at the plate and seems to have lost the stroke that proved so devastating to the White Sox and the Red Sox. If one or both don't re-find their swings quickly, this series won't make it to a game six.

The Rays had a bad night in virtually every way possible. Andy Sonnanstine struggled by falling behind hitters and was part of yet another umpiring mistake in the first inning when the third base umpire missed Longoria's tag on Rollins after Sonnanstine had opted to get the lead runner rather than go for the inning-ending double play. It doesn't excuse the umpire's bad call, but Sonnanstine made the wrong decision and didn't deserve to get out of the jam.

He was extremely fortunate to only concede one run in that situation and his luck didn't last much longer. Indeed, the Rays' luck was summed up by the normally dependable Akinori Iwamura being charged with two

errors, the second of which was a bit harsh on the Japanese star. The solo home runs by Carl Crawford and Eric Hinske, the latter having only just been added to the roster in place of the injured Cliff Floyd, were the only bright spots on an otherwise miserable night.

However, it was far from miserable for the Phillies. They are now in the perfect spot: a 3-1 lead with Cole Hamels pitching a potential series-clinching game five at Citizens Bank Park. The Rays need to recover from a poor game four and to break Hamels' run of excellent postseason starts if they are to take this series back to Florida. That's going to be a tall order, even though the Rays have already proved they have the stomach for a fight.

That fighting spirit will be put to the test tonight. The Phillies are on the verge of clinching the World Series in front of their home crowd and opportunities like this don't come along too often.

World Series - Game Five

World Series left in limbo – 28 October 2008

Never underestimate MLB's ability to surprise. We entered last night's game knowing that it could be the decisive contest in this year's World Series. It still might be. We just don't know when it's going to end.

The decision-making process that saw game five suspended is being debated all over the internet. I instinctively expect Bud Selig to mess things up, so I'm a little uneasy about the fact that I think he (just about) got this one right. There's an argument that the game shouldn't have been started in the first place. It probably would have been postponed if the weather forecast for today had been positive, but more rain is predicted so the decision to give it a go was understandable.

Undoubtedly, it was correct that the Phillies weren't handed the World Series trophy on the back of a shortened game. Carlos Pena's single to tie the score at 2-2 seemed to make things a bit easier, although Selig has stressed that even if the score had remained 2-1 he would have suspended the game and there was never a question of a result being declared. It's a shame we didn't all know that before the game got underway and it looks like the players weren't entirely clear on the matter either.

Anyway, the decision has been made to suspend the game and that it will resume whenever "weather conditions are appropriate", according to the Commissioner. That's a wonderfully vague way of scheduling such an important encounter. What does it mean for British fans?

Well, the current intention is to try to play the rest of game five tonight from 00.20 GMT. If the Rays win, although no definitive decision

has been made as I write this it is probable that the travel day will be wiped out and that games six and seven (if necessary) will be played as originally scheduled on Wednesday and Thursday night (the early hours of Thursday and Friday for us).

However, the prospects of play tonight in Philly aren't good. Different weather forecasters are predicting slightly different things, but they all state that some rain is expected and it seems unlikely that they will head out on to the field if there is a significant risk that they might have to come off yet again. Most importantly, Selig has made it clear that game five **will** be played in Philly. If we have to wait several days for a clear evening then that's how long it will take.

All we can do is keep a check on the MLB website this evening and go from there. If the game can't be completed tonight, the schedule gets torn up completely.

The uncertainty can't be avoided, but it's still disruptive whether you are a player trying to prepare for one of the biggest games of your life, or you are a British baseball fan trying to combine the competing interests of work, sleep and watching baseball games played in the early hours of the morning.

The Phillies win the World Series – 30 October 2008

The 46,000 people who turned up at Citizens Bank Park last night only got to witness three innings of baseball, but they will have been the best three innings imaginable for Philly fans. The home team prevailed 2-1 on the night to win the historic 'three day' game 4-3 and to secure just the second World Series in the franchise's history.

As expected, even though it was a shortened format, there was no shortage of memorable moments. Chase Utley's inspired defensive

play in the seventh inning will be replayed constantly on TV sets in Philadelphia throughout the off-season. The Rays' third base coach Tom Foley certainly won't enjoy seeing it again, as Utley completely fooled him with his fake throw to first that resulted in Jason Bartlett being hung out to dry at home plate. However the play should be credited as a moment of genius by the second baseman, rather than a blunder by Foley.

Charlie Manuel was also made to look like a genius by Geoff Jenkins, who led off the night with a double that eventually saw him being bloomed home by Jayson Werth. Rocco Baldelli, a guy who deserved a great moment as much as anyone, gave the Rays hope with his solo shot to tie it at 3-3, but Pedro Feliz's run-scoring single knocked the stuffing out of them even before Brad Lidge walked to the mound. He completed a perfect 48 from 48 save season to spark scenes of wild jubilation in Philadelphia.

The three-inning dash was a unique way to bring the season to a close, but it's something that I hope we will not see repeated for a long time.

In many respects you can say it was the same for both sides: they each entered the night knowing what they needed to do. Still, psychologically it was a fantastic position for the Phillies to be in. All they had to do was win a three-inning contest and they would be World Champions. The Rays on the other hand had just three meagre innings to save their season. Add in the Phillies' home field advantage and Tampa Bay were stuck in a desperate situation.

But that is not to say the Rays were simply a victim of circumstances. Philadelphia thoroughly deserved to be crowned as the champions, both through their season as a whole and particularly their performance

throughout the Fall Classic. Had they taken more of their numerous chances in the first two games, they might have pushed the Rays aside with a 4-0 sweep. Their pitching was outstanding, especially the NLCS and World Series MVP Cole Hamels, and their offense did enough to get them over the line.

Unfortunately the Rays really didn't do themselves justice during the World Series, putting on a display reminiscent of the Tigers in 2006. Detroit's lacklustre performance two years ago was widely attributed to the long break they had between sweeping the A's in the ALCS and beginning their series against the Cardinals, who had been embroiled in a seven-game battle royale with the Mets.

In this case, it was the Rays who went the distance in the Championship Series round so following that line of thinking they should have been at the top of their game. Virtually every year there is a debate on whether it's better to have a rest or to keep on playing prior to the World Series, but this shows that there is no rhyme or reason to it. Regardless of the preparations, the team that plays the best in the World Series games will take home the trophy and this year that was the Phillies.

By any measure, the Rays have had a phenomenally successful season. Their talented young roster will have learned a great deal from the experience and there's every reason to expect them to be back for another shot next year. The same can be said for the Phillies. Pat Burrell is their only notable player out of contract and he has indicated that he would be keen to stay.

The Phillies' main off-season question will be whether they can come to an agreement with Ryan Howard, even just on his 2009 salary (a multi-year deal looks very unlikely). The slugger received a record \$10m via arbitration last year and even if 2008 had been an

average year for Howard, he probably would have banked a slight raise on that figure. As it was, he helped the team to a World Series win while leading the Majors in homers and RBIs and he may possibly add a second NL MVP award into the mix as well. So, I'm guessing he will be looking for something around \$14m/\$15m and the Phillies will be anxious to avoid losing another arbitration case to him due to the disruption that can cause (both with the player himself and in terms of the payroll budget). With a World Series ring presentation on the horizon, they'll have a hard time arguing against his case. Phillies fans will tell you that's a very small price to pay for success.

From a neutral's point of view, it was a shame that we once again couldn't get to at least a game six in the World Series. The last five series have included three 4-0 sweeps and two 4-1 victories, but I'm not convinced that there is any great fundamental reason for this.

Every team in MLB is capable of sweeping another (even the Nationals can win seven in a row - [it's true!](#)) and even two completely equal teams might not produce a close series during a first-to-four format. Flip a coin seven times and it may come up heads on four occasions and tails on three. Try it again and tails may win 6-1*. While a seven-game contest would be preferable, the fact that we could just as easily get a four-game sweep is yet another part of the unpredictable and exciting nature of MLB.

And this year's World Series undoubtedly produced some exciting moments. The U.S. TV ratings might not reflect this, but for some of us seeing two 'unfashionable' teams competing in the Fall Classic is a real treat rather than a real turn-off. It was a great end to another great season and the 2009 edition can't come quickly enough.

** = These two coin flip examples were the product of a genuine scientific experiment (although I wasn't wearing a long white lab coat and safety goggles, which might invalidate the results for the purists out there).*