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Midseason baseball roundup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Midseason baseball roundup
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The baseball season thus far has been a strange one, although perhaps no stranger than most. Normal is not a word that is often associated with baseball, or for that matter with most sports. Before the season started, the specter of steroids stalked spring training. Barry Bonds was written about almost as much as T.O. had been written about before the NFL season started last fall. Sports writers, sportscasters, and the fanatics on talk radio couldn't match the T.O. hysteria, but they gave it a good try.

The working assumption, reinforced by several books and the oft cited size of Barry's head, was that Bonds was the steroid king as well as public enemy #1. The threat to pass Ruth was regarded by many as something exceeding the collective evil of the 20th century. Oddly enough, when the magic mark was achieved by Bonds few seemed to notice or care. It was the journey that produced the outcry, not so much the achievement. Many just simply refused to acknowledge the significance of Bonds passing Ruth, as if it had not happened or did not count because somehow Bonds was unworthy.

Time no doubt will be the judge of the meaning of all of this.

Meanwhile the baseball began and the surprises mounted. Now at mid-season, the Yankees are not in first place in the AL East, the Tigers are in first place in the AL Central, and the Tampa Bay Devil Rays are not the worst team in baseball, even though they can still look like it on any given night. The Red Sox continue to win with the lumber and better defense than in years past. With Josh Beckett and Curt Schilling on a roll they could conceivably walk away from the pack. The Yankees are struggling with the problems of injury and age and are not likely to play in October. The Toronto Blue Jays remain the lurkers, capable of putting together a winning streak if they can get a solid and complete second half from A.J. Burnett.

In the AL Central, the Tigers are the surprise with their pitching much better than was anticipated. If it continues to shine they could win it all. The White Sox will have a lot to say about that as they continue to produce good pitching, timely hitting, and a reliable bullpen. Ozzie Guillen might be able to distract them, but more than likely he will keep the pressure

off his players and on himself, a much underrated part of last season's success. The Indians remain a disappointment with starting pitching not measuring up, while the Twins might be too far down to overtake the two teams in front of them.

In the American League West most of the first half of the season saw all teams playing over .500. Now, with the arrival of June, the Oakland Athletics are running together a string of victories and threatening to open a gap on the other pretenders. The Angels are fading, the Mariners are showing some life, and the Texas Rangers are hanging in there near the top.

Over in the National League there have been a number of developments of interest. In the NL East it now appears that the long run of the Atlanta Braves as division champion is over. Braves pitching, both starting and relief, has hit the skids. Even when the Braves get a decent start from the disappointing Tim Hudson and the aging John Smoltz, they have no bullpen in long relief, setup, or closer roles. Some will note the absence of Leo Mazzone and wonder what miracles he might have worked, but realistically only some diamond deity could salvage this staff. If that weren't enough, the young hitters like Langerhans and Francoeur have not replicated last season's roles as "young guns," while Chipper Jones is getting older and as a result his production numbers are down.

The Mets are not exactly a surprise, but their success has been augmented by Tom Glavine's discovery of the Fountain of Youth. Glavine is not only winning, but he is pitching deeper into the game than he has since becoming a Met, and his strikeout totals are among the highest of his career. All this has led to the re-expansion of his strike zone by the umpires who respect his surgical skills. With Glavine and Pedro, the Mets have opened a large, and possibly insurmountable, lead.

As for the Phillies, for the second year in a row they are apparently intent on clearing Larry Bowa of all responsibility for their previous failures. Every time they appear to be putting together a run they collapse into another period of dismal play.

The Florida Marlins, who will soon be relocating to more friendly climes, are an interesting project as for the second time in less than a decade they are undergoing a major makeover. A gaggle of young players with major-league potential are playing before a mass of empty seats, and often they are playing quite well.

In the NL Central all seems up for grabs. St. Louis has not run away with the division, impeded as they are by the injury to Pujols and compounded by injuries to the pitching staff. The Astros are still a possibility if Clemens pitches like he did last year, and if Pettitte and Lidge do the same. As for the Cubs, it is welcome back to the days of yore when all was over by the end of June. Cub fans can relax and enjoy their trips to Wrigley and not worry about such mundane matters as pennant races and winning. The major surprise in the Central is the Reds of Cincinnati and only time will tell if this is a mirage.

Out West, one bad team after another moves to show their inadequacies. At one point the Rockies and Diamondbacks seemed to be the class of the division. The Rockies still amaze every time their pitchers shut out the opposition at Coors Field. Something has been done there and nothing short of a Congressional investigation is needed to get to the bottom of it. As for the D'backs, L'affaire Grimsley seemed to send them reeling in such a manner that no amount of HGH will be able to cure.

The Dodgers are better than anyone thought they would be, the Padres are not as good as most expected, and the Giants resemble Barry Bonds' body, old and breaking down, but still capable of producing an occasional thrill. The only question seems to be which of these less than great teams will float to the top at the end of September to be eliminated in the first round of the playoffs.

How does a Tiger-Mets World Series sound?

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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