

BRASSWORLD JOURNAL

Volume 1, Issue 2

August 2006



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The Say Hey Division

By Jonah Keri

Last season the National West nearly made history for being the first division ever to be won by an under-.500 team. The San Diego Padres squeaked above the breakeven point by year's end, but the division will still go down as one of the worst in MLB history.

Two months into the 2006 BrassWorld season, the Mays division is shaping up as the anti-NL West— one of the best collections of top teams in league history. All six teams ended the monthly of May comfortably over .500, a feat made more remarkable given that many of these squads have battled each other.



Rob Foulke's Mansfield Mounties lead the pack with an eye-popping 38-17 record (.691), the third-best mark in the league. Throw in Mansfield's strength of schedule and this is arguably the most impressive record in BrassWorld. Mansfield sports a balanced roster with several key contributors. Moises Alou has led the offense with a sky-high 1.020 OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging average). Placido Polanco (.915), J.D. Drew (.886), Cliff Floyd (.845) and Michael Cuddyer (.811) have also fared well. The Mounties have surged to the top of the division despite the slow start of Mark Teixeira, hitting just .248 AVG/.324 OBP/.472 SLG so far, well off his 2005 MLB numbers. Mansfield's strength has been its starting pitching, led by Mark Prior (6-2, 1.74 ERA), Andy Pettitte (10-1, 2.08) and Jake Peavy (7-0, 2.26), the best trio in the league. No-

name relievers Jay Witasick (0.59 ERA), Dan Wheeler (2.93) and Aaron Fultz (3.24) have provided smooth sailing for closer Jason Istringhausen (16 saves).

One game out of first sits Corey Weisser's Northwoods Moose (37-18, .673). Resembling the Blake Street Bombers Colorado Rockies edition of 1995, the Moose have relied on a powerful offense and stout bullpen to carry the load. Northwoods offers the counterpoint to Mansfield's top pitching trio, with the big bats of Travis Hafner (1.117 OPS), Miguel Cabrera (.962) and Jason Bay (.917). Billy Wagner, Francisco Rodriguez, Akinori Otsuka and Rudy Seanez have combined for 10 wins and 15 saves, with the Moose using frequent late-game heroics to win games.

The Aspen Rainmakers have been one of the league's biggest pleasant surprises (33-22, .600). Though lacking the power hitting of some of their division rivals (61 team homers, vs. 66 allowed), the Rainmakers have out-hit their opponents, with a .265 batting average to rivals' .253. The cavalcade of .300 hitters includes Sean Casey (.315), Jason Phillips (.329), Omar Vizquel (.329) and Marlon Byrd (.341). Erik Bedard has led a blistering start by several pitchers, with a 3-1 record, 2.34 ERA and just home run allowed in 35 innings pitched. Bobby Howry (1.59 ERA), Scott Eye (1.66), Bob Wickman (2.08), Ryan Franklin (2.40), Shigetoshi Hasegawa (2.61) have fared better in BrassWorld than you'd expect on paper. But slow starts by David Dellucci, Chris Reitsma, Ryan Freel and others figure to even out as well.

The Montreal McGaffigans and Maryland Mounders own identical 32-23 records (.582), good enough to lead two of the three other divisions, but incredibly tied for just fourth place in the Mays division. Montreal's struggles on the road have curtailed a strong start north of the border. Vladimir Guerrero has relived some fond Montreal memories so far this year, ranking among the Triple Crown leaders with a .354 average, 19 homers and 45 RBI— he's also put up a 1.070 OPS. Tony Clark (14 homers) and Jhonny Peralta (11) have fueled one of the biggest power surges of the early season. Roger Clemens, as expected, has been the ace of an up-and-down pitching staff, with a 6-2 mark and a 3.08 ERA. Bronson Arroyo (5-3, 3.84) and Giovanni Carrara (2.17 ERA, 37 IP) have been the biggest pitching surprises. Adam Dunn is in the running for biggest bust of the year for Jonah Keri's squad, hitting a miserable .185 with just five homers.

Bill Galanis' Maryland team has relied on one superstar to lead the team so far: Sandy Alomar Jr. OK, not really. But the team has few weaknesses, with Victor Martinez providing the best offensive punch of any BrassWorld catcher (.318/.374/.488), Scott Podsednik running wild on the bases (19 steals), Todd Helton hitting .332 with an astounding 25 doubles, and Reggie Sanders playing at an MVP level (.349/.407/.689). Cory Lidle (3.24 ERA), Jon Lieber (3.33) and Josh Beckett (3.41) lead a deep starting staff. Early "Where did THAT come from" leader Tony Graffanino is hitting .407, and Joe Borowski's 1.78 ERA is nearly 3 runs lower than his '05 MLB number.

Rounding out the Mays, the West Oakland Wolverines have to be the toughest last-place team ever. The Ziem Team's 30-25 record would be tied for first in the Cobb division. There's star talent here, with John Patterson off to a 5-3, 3.11 ERA start, Richie Sexson terrorizing opposing pitchers to the tune of .306/.435/.653 and Huston Street throwing in 12 saves and an amazing 42 punchouts in 30 innings of relief ace work. Todd Walker (1.038 OPS) and Kevin Mench (1.021) have been masterfully handled, the former staying away from lefty pitchers, the latter crushing them. John Smoltz has been the biggest hard-luck pitcher in the division, amassing a lowly 2-7 record despite a sharp 3.87 ERA.

The Mays division will see plenty of action outside its own division in June. Will the rest of the league defend its honor, or will the Say Hey division keep up its dominant play?

* * *

Note: The following appeared in the April 24th Wall Street Journal Print Edition (I know, I know it's copyrighted and probably illegal to reprint in its entirety here, but I'm not making money off of it and it's a humorous tale on a couple of levels. If the WSJ comes after BW for this reprinting yours truly will take the ensuing heat. ☺ Enjoy.)

Softball on the Mall Was Bipartisan Fun Till Politics Intruded

Congressional League Is Hit By Republican Secession: 'Welfare Bracketology'

By Brody Mullins

WASHINGTON— Starting this week, hundreds of young Capitol Hill aides will indulge in an annual rite of spring here by changing out of their business suits and heading over to the National Mall to play in the Congressional Softball League.

Amid all the partisan rancor of congressional politics, the softball league has for 37 years been a rare case of bipartisan civility, an opportunity for Democratic and Republican aides to sneak out of work a bit early and take the field in the name of the lawmaker, committee or federal agency they work for.

This year, the league will be missing something: a lot of Republicans.

During the off-season, a group of Republican teams seceded from the league after accusing its Democratic commissioner, Gary Caruso, of running a socialist year-end playoff system that gives below-average teams an unfair chance to win the championship.

The league "is all about Softball Welfare- aiding the weak by punishing the strong," the pitcher of one Republican team told Mr. Caruso in an email. "The commissioner has a long-standing policy of punishing success and rewarding failure. He's a Democrat. Whaddya' expect?" read another email, from Gary Mahmoud, the coach of BoehnerLand, a team from the office of Republican Majority Leader John Boehner.

The softball coup is a "reflection of how partisan and Republican this town has really become since Republicans took control," responds Mr. Caruso, a longtime Democratic aide who worked for congressmen in the 1980s and '90s. "Republicans come here and want to bash your head in. And if they don't get their way, they pick up the ball and go home."

The commissioner of the secessionist league is Anthony Reed, 31 years old, a legislative aide to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R., Ill.) and the coach of Denny's Grand Slam. Mr. Reed and a small group of unhappy coaches formed this new league and persuaded 110 of the 190 teams in the

old league to withdraw and join them. Not all the teams in the new league are from the Republican offices, but the rebellion was predominantly led by GOP teams, including Denny's Grand Slam, BoehnerLand, the 1040 Slashers, who represent Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas, and a team of staffers from the office of Republican Rep. Bob Ney of Ohio.

Mr. Reed says the secession had nothing to do with partisanship and everything to do with how the old league was run.

Congressional aides have played softball on the Mall for decades in a handful of leagues. Before the coup, two main leagues existed for Capitol Hill aides- a Senate league, which includes mostly teams from Senate offices, and the Congressional Softball League, which is open to teams mainly from House lawmakers, executive-branch agencies and Capitol Hill restaurants.

The congressional league is a relaxed affair: No umpires call balls and strikes, so batters don't have to swing until they get a pitch they like. Fields are open to the public, so most teams dispatch an intern or junior aide to reserve a field several hours before game time. And after games, teams often head to a bar to recap the game over chicken wings and pitchers of beer.

The league allows any team to enter as long as it pays a registration fee. Dozens of non-Capitol Hill teams play each year, including a formidable crew of security guards from the Smithsonian Institution. (While working for another publication, this reporter pitched for the Roll Call Edit-Orioles.)

About 26 years ago, Mr. Caruso, who is now a 55-year old Democratic political consultant, started a year-end tournament to decide the championship.

As in most traditional tournaments, teams in the Congressional Softball League are ranked from first to last based on their records during the regular season. Most sports tournaments reward good play during the regular season by setting up a playoff system that allows the best teams to play only lower-seeded teams until the final rounds. The No. 1-ranked team, for example, would play the worst team; while the No. 2 team would play the second-worst team, and so on. The theory is that this way top teams won't eliminate each other in early rounds.

In contrast, Mr. Caruso's tournament gives every team a decent chance of making it to the final rounds of the playoffs by allowing teams in the first round of playoffs to play opponents with similar records. Mr. Caruso's team of Democratic press secretaries, called the Yellow Journalists, has won the championship twice.

Many Republican teams say the system punished good teams by making them play other good teams early in the playoffs. "What's the regular season for?" asks Mr. Reed, the commissioner of the new league. "It's very irritating to teams like ours who are 12-0."

Near the end of last season, Mr. Reed and a few dozen other coaches emailed Mr. Caruso to complain about the playoff system.

The email prompted a barrage of partisan back-and-forth. One note to Mr. Caruso said that the top teams "are being screwed by your Softball Welfare Bracketology." Mr. Caruso responded by

saying the Republicans were suffering from “election campaign withdrawal.” In an Aug. 16, 2005 email, Mr. Caruso wrote: “I prefer to call your seeding proposal to favor the few at the top opposed to the many below them as ‘special rights for your agenda to wage class warfare’ on the more relaxed teams.”

Mr. Caruso’s response prompted the Republicans to begin organizing their own league with a more traditional playoff system. “It’s competition, you know. We are not here to encourage people, we are here to pick the best team,” wrote Matthew Skipper, the coach of the team formerly known as the Yeas and Neys, after Ohio’s Mr. Ney. When Mr. Ney stepped down from the chairmanship of the House Administration committee in January amid a Justice Department corruption probe, the team changed its name to the Committee on House Domination.

Not all the teams in the new league are Republicans. A few Democratic squads withdrew from the league and joined the rebellion, including Mass’s Asses, a team of Democratic aides from Massachusetts. “Come 6:30 on Thursdays, we just want to play ball,” says Kenny Ames, the team’s coach. We’ll play Republicans, Democrats, socialists, conservatives and the Green Party- anyone that can put together a team.”

Other teams in the new league include traditional Republican powerhouse Fat, Drunk & Awesome from the House Homeland Security Committee, the Lawn Wranglers from the offices of several Texas Republicans and Moderately Sober, from the office of centrist Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R., N.Y.).

“It’s pretty well known that most of the competitive teams and most of the fun teams are Republican,” says Bob Honold, the captain of one Republican team. “Maybe we are just more talented people.”

Mr. Caruso will remain the commissioner of the old league, now only about one-third its size last year. “It used to be that softball was one of the few things in Washington that both parties agreed on,” he says. “Now that is coming to an end, too.”

* * *

Future BW'er on the Rise

Proud Papa Mike Swanson passed along news of his son’s growing prowess on the diamond...

From The Duluth News tribune:

All-Lake Superior Conference

First Team

Hermantown -- Kyle Bolander (jr); Codie Chesney (sr); Duluth Central -- Dean Bauers (jr), Noah Pauley (jr); Two Harbors -- Jeff Adams (sr), Casey Morsette (jr); Cloquet -- Paul Kolodge (sr), Reid Ellingson (jr); Proctor -- Dan Solarz (sr).

Second Team

Proctor -- Dan Carlson (sr); Superior -- Brady Arneson (jr), **Mike Swanson (soph)**; Duluth Central -- John Hanna (jr), Ryan Olson (sr); Hermantown -- Justin Baker (jr), Riley Geissler (sr); Duluth Denfeld -- Troy Thompson (sr), Derek Anderson (jr).

* * *

We Can All Relate

The following were four successive strips from the newspaper comic *Heart of the City*.





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NATIONALS DESTROY AL IN 13 RUN ROMP

Roberts and Young Share Jackie Robinson Award

The Nationals whipped the Americans 13-5 in Michigan to take the latest installment in BRASSWORLD's All Star Game.

The first two hitters in the NL lineup, Brian Roberts and Michael Young, both went 4 for 4 to lead the offensive juggernaut. Vlad Guerreo and Miguel Cabrera also had big nights at the plate as they each went 3 for 5.

A nine-run ninth destroyed any chance the AL had of keeping the game competitive. Pinch hitter Bill Hall was a force in the inning as he led off the frame with a gap double and then later smacked a two-run homer. Not bad for one inning of play. Jason Varitek, Guerrero and Moises Alou also contributed two-run hits in the inning.

On the mound, newly installed Montreal ace Pedro Martinez picked up the W by striking out six through three innings while allowing a single run.

The AL pitching was noteworthy for the fact that of the six pitchers Manager Henry Vance called upon, it was only the last two used- Aaron Heilman and Joe Nathan- that could exit their outing unscathed.

Roy Halladay was bombed for four runs by the Americans in his two-thirds of an inning. Included in this mini-barrage was a 2 run blast from Derrek Lee- his second home run of the contest.

Lee was the main AL contributor as his homers plated three of the five runs scored by the Americans.

Next year the game will shift back to an AL park.

Thank you to Bill and Henry for playing the game.

[Box Score at end]

2006 BRASSWORLD ALL STAR GAME

AL	AB	R	H	BI	NL	AB	R	H	BI
Soriano, 2b	2	0	0	0	Roberts, 2b	4	3	4	0
Giles, ph-2b	3	1	1	0	Polanco, ph-2b	2	0	0	0
Matsui, cf	2	0	0	0	Young, ss	4	1	4	2
DeJesus, ph-cf	2	0	0	0	Halladay, p	0	0	0	0
Lee, 1b	4	2	2	3	Street, p	0	0	0	0
Ward, ph	1	0	0	0	Carrasco, p	0	0	0	0
Rodriguez, ss	4	0	1	0	Hafner, ph-1b	1	0	0	0
Berkman, lf	2	1	1	0	Pujols, 1b	4	1	1	0
Wright, 3b	2	0	0	0	Pettitte, p	0	0	0	0
Chacin, p	0	0	0	0	Bush, p	0	0	0	0
Giambi, ph	0	1	0	0	Fultz, p	0	0	0	0
Willis, p	0	0	0	0	Wagner, p	0	0	0	0
Heilman, p	0	0	0	0	Turnbow, p	0	0	0	0
Hall, ph-c	1	0	0	0	Guerrero, rf	5	2	3	2
Jenkins, rf	4	0	2	0	Cabrera, 3b	5	2	3	1
Larue, c	3	0	1	2	Bay, cf	3	0	0	0
Nathan, p	0	0	0	0	Abreu, cf	2	0	0	0
Zambrano, p	1	0	0	0	Alou, lf	3	1	2	1
Carpenter, p	0	0	0	0	Figgins, lf	2	0	1	0
Ramirez, ph-3b	2	0	0	0	Varitek, c	3	1	1	2
					Martinez, ph-c	2	0	2	1
					Martinez, p	0	0	0	0
					Hall, ph	2	2	2	2
					Clemens, p	0	0	0	0
					Vizquel, ph-ss	3	0	0	
	33	5	8	5		45	13	23	11
AL	100	004	000	5 8 1					
NL	109	012	00X	13 23 0					
AL	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	Att: 28,166		
Zambrano, L	2	7	5	5	1	0	T: 3:07		
Carpenter	2	7	5	5	3	1	2B: Larue, Young, Cabrera, Hall		
Chacin	1	2	1	1	0	0	Guerrero, Varitek, Martinez		
Willis	1	3	2	2	1	0	HR: D. Lee-2, Hall		
Heilman	1	2	0	0	1	0	SB: Rodriguez		
Nathan	1	2	0	0	2	0	E: Wright		
NL	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO	LOB: AL-7, NL-9		
Martinez, W	3	2	1	1	0	6	DP: AL-2, NL-2		
Clemens	2	0	0	0	1	3	GIDP: Lee, Ramirez, Pujols, Varitek		
Halladay	2/3	4	4	4	2	0			
Street	1/3	0	0	0	1	1			
Carrasco	1	0	0	0	0	0			
Pettitte	2/3	2	0	0	0	1			
Bush	1/3	0	0	0	0	0			
Fultz	1/3	0	0	0	0	0			
Wagner	1/3	0	0	0	1	0			
Turnbow	1/3	0	0	0	0	0			

Tales From The Trade Deadline

By Jonah Keri

If the 2006 trade deadline is any indication, Major League Baseball has nothing on BrassWorld.

Big names such as Dontrelle Willis, Roy Oswalt, Barry Zito and Alfonso Soriano were all bandied about in MLB circles in the days leading up the July 31 non-waiver deadline. In the end, though, none of those players were traded, and few impact names changed addresses.

That wasn't the case in BrassWorld. A total of 17 trades took place, many of them coming in the final, frenzied moments before the deadline. Those deals, combined with three notable trades in June, made for some exciting water cooler debate— and could play a big role in sorting out the league red-hot pennant chases.

While Willis stayed put in MLB, he found his way to the top team in BrassWorld, San Bernardino, as part of a blockbuster trade. After inheriting the top team in the league from outgoing owner Tom Fish, new skipper Chris Metz added reinforcements. The deadline deal saw San Bernardino acquire Willis and Bobby Abreu for \$11 million, 1st- and 3rd-round draft picks in 2007, and 1st- and 2nd-round picks in 2008. Major League Baseball stipulates that all trades involving a cash exchange of more than \$1 million must be approved by the commissioner. Metz had no such restriction, thus placing himself in the driver's seat for a World Series run.

The beneficiary of Metz's largesse was Bob Loose, the new owner of the Santa Barbara franchise. Like Metz, Loose wasted little time diving into BrassWorld's trade waters. He first acquired Melky Cabrera and his rock-bottom contract, along with Min pitcher Garrett Mock, in a deal that sent Julio Lugo to Montreal. His next trade saw Mark Teahen and Trot Nixon head to Annadale for Abreu. That deal seemed a head-scratcher for a team on the fringes of contention. But the subsequent trade of Abreu and Willis to San Bernardino improved Santa Barbara's future outlook considerably.

Following the lead of Abreu and Lugo, Carlos Lee was another notable player dealt in both MLB and BrassWorld. In one of three Annadale trades made in July, owner Robert Smith sent Lee and stingy reliever Scot Shields to Alaska. Lee and Shields were willing to overlook the 24-hour daylight and resulting sleeping problems, though, as Alaska also projects as a strong playoff contender. In return, owner Chris Blake sent young talents Neil Walker, Gavin Floyd and Kelly Johnson to Annadale.

The third of Annadale's three trades for the month saw the Anteaters acquire young reliever Jose Capellan, along with Jorge Posada, \$1.2 million and 2nd- and 3rd-round 2007 draft picks for Jason Varitek and Torii Hunter. Montreal owner Jonah Keri sought to supplement Dave Roberts' production in center field while also adding arguably the best catcher in the 2005 set to his roster. Keri was one of the league's busiest owners in June and July. Stockpiling players for next year, he added Kelly Shoppach, Mike Lamb, Boof Bonser, Adam Lind and Eddy Martinez-Estevé in four separate deals.

Gotham City's Wayne Foulke acquired Jose Molina for Martinez-Esteve. Said Foulke: "GCG mgmt felt the team needed little or no improvement heading into the postseason— we added Molina because Dougie Mirabelli was low on PA. No major moves planned... no money in the budget."

Keri also added to this year's roster, acquiring eight likely 2006 contributors in all. One deal with Taggart sent Chris Resop, Greg Miller and D'Angelo Jimenez out of town, in exchange for David Bell, Sal Fasano, a 3rd-round 2007 pick and \$750,000. Montreal's biggest trade saw Pedro Martinez, Todd Jones and Mark DeRosa join the McGaffigans. In return, Keri shipped Jake Westbrook and Nate McLouth to Virginia near the end of June.

In a possible landmark case for Bill Simmons' famous Ewing Theory (<http://proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?id=1193711>), Bardos' Virginia team put up an incredible 20-6 record in July— *after* the departure of the team's ace, its closer, and a solid utility infielder.

"Oddly, after trading Pedro, the Pats had their best month of the year 17-5. Just when we thought we were out of the race; not able to predict what can happen."

Virginia, Montreal and Maryland head into August deadlocked for the final Wild Card spot in the National League. Bill Galanis' Mounders helped their cause, picking up Cliff Politte and Julio Franco in two separate trades, strengthening their bullpen and bench. Maryland also added Shawn Chacon, upgrading the starting rotation.

"I needed pitching, Chacon was advertised, I responded, dealing with Lenny was easy," said Galanis. "Chacon upgrades my rotation and bullpen for the last two months, Halsey and Maine (while marginal prospects with some usage next year; in fact, Halsey will be very respectable, if he keeps pitching like this) were not cornerstones for my team for the long-term, and Lenny was looking to both replace innings for this year and get some help for the future. Voila."

"With respect to Franco, someone advertised they needed pitching, Redman is not part of my long-term plans, I didn't need his innings for this year and his card was no better than Trachsel and Liriano (guys I had in reserve, before I traded for Chacon), so I traded him to dump his salary," Galanis continued. "The manager who acquired Redman did not want to part with picks or prospects, so we settled on Franco, who allows me to sit Helton occasionally vs. lefties (and avoid overusing Helton). So, Chacon replaces Redman in the rotation (upgrade) and fills in on long-relief whenever possible to save the rest of my pen. His salary is roughly half of Redman's for this season. Franco is a bench player for two months that I picked up in dumping Redman's salary, and he costs just a bit more than Halsey and Maine combined. Neither guy I picked up is a stud who will put me over the top, but they are upgrades that will allow me to continue to be a pest, and I could absorb the cost."

Plum Island was the other contender that made multiple deals in an effort to beef up for the playoffs. Henry Vance's team acquired Kyle Farnsworth, Magglio Ordonez, Chris Gomez, Matt LeCroy and Jamie Walker as it looked ahead to October.

Teams can still trade within their own conferences in August. Look for a few more moves before the Aug. 31 deadline, as playoff races heat up in both leagues.

