



'Weekly' hit ground ball

2007 Edition

An alternative review of the 2007 MLB season, brought to you by
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Introduction

Like most things, it started out as a simple idea. While I enjoy writing about the many little stories that make up a season in Major League Baseball, I always feel a bit of a cheat if my blog is filled up with lots of little posts. So, the obvious solution was to keep a record of all the interesting moments that occurred over the course of a week and then put them all into one longer post, hopefully with a theme or flow to the content. A weekly feature was born: 'Weekly' hit ground ball (WHGB for short).

Fuelled by my enthusiasm, I didn't stop to think about what I was committing myself to. I soon learned that putting together such columns takes a fair amount of dedication. Once the series had begun, I couldn't just put it to one side. So possible entries to include were scribbled into my notebook every day and the best ones were picked out for my Sunday column. Seeing them all here together makes me glad I put the effort in.

WHGB was designed to keep a track on all of the moments of greatness, badness, madness and occasional sadness that each season brings. In retrospect, I picked a great year to write about. Barry Bonds's career home run record was an obvious talking point, but it seemed as though records were broken virtually every week by established players, while a host of new stars were making baseball fans sit up and take notice.

Reading through all of the posts as I put them together for this booklet brought back a lot of memories, many of which could easily have been lost among the headline-grabbing events. A true picture of the 2007 season shouldn't just contain Bonds, A-Rod, Glavine and their illustrious contemporaries. It should acknowledge the

players who remind you that the game isn't quite as easy as some make it look. And who would want to remember a 2007 without thinking of Trevor Hoffman's underwear, pizza flying in Boston, the Phillies' 10,000th loss, or the Mariner Moose's antics on an ATV?

Will I do it again in 2008? My answer at the moment would be no, but when spring training is drawing to a close and the excitement is building, there's a decent chance I will cave in and commit myself to it again. We shall see!

Style note

As you will see, my original plan was to write a column listing various "... of the week" topics. The restrictions this created became blatantly apparent by week four, so the format changed slightly. The emphasis was more on trying to link each topic to the next as much as possible, with the intention of making it a more enjoyable read. Hopefully this change was successful.

Acknowledgement should go to the many websites that prompted some of these stories, most notably mlb.com, espn.com and si.com.

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Week One

Sunday 1 April to Saturday 7 April.

This is the start of what will hopefully be a weekly feature (hence the name). My week will run from Saturday to Saturday, purely on the basis that I should always have time on a Sunday to write it as opposed to cobbling something together after getting home from work on a Monday evening.

Week to forget – J.D. Durbin. He made his first relief appearance for Arizona on Wednesday in Colorado. His pitching line finished like this:

IP=0.2,H=7,R=7,ER=7,BB=1,SO=1,HR=0, ERA=94.50

Anyone looking for a smack in the mouth might want to try telling Durbin that the humidior is making things easier for pitchers at Coors Field. Still, 20.1 scoreless innings will quickly bring that ERA down to 3.00.

Japanese player of the week – Dice-K this, Dice-K that. It would be annoying if not for the fact that he deserves all the attention. Having said that, I think Matsuzaka has earned enough plaudits this week so I'm awarding this honour to the Rays' Akinori Iwamura. This signing went under the radar somewhat, but it may turn out to be a great deal by Tampa Bay. Sure, Iwamura won't match his Japanese home run totals in the larger American ballparks, but he's a good all round hitter and an above average fielder at various infield positions. Iwamura finished his first four games with a .615/.706/.923 batting line with a home run. That's a very nice start to build on.

Hero/Zero of the week – A-Rod. I say week, that should really be Hero/Zero of the Yankees. If he does something wrong he

will be booed mercilessly. If he does something right, Yankees fans will cheer the success of their team and wait until they can boo A-Rod for something again. His walk-off, game winning grand slam yesterday against the Orioles was the third of his career and that makes him only the third player in MLB history to achieve this feat. Shame he's useless in the clutch really, isn't it?!

Largest serving of humble pie during the week – Jimmy Rollins had to force a big helping down. Jimmy said the Phillies were the team to beat in the NL East. The Braves agreed and promptly helped themselves to a sweep in Philadelphia to start the season. Meanwhile the Nationals have made it clear that they in fact hold the rights to being the team to beat in the NL East and are taking legal advice to see if they can sue Rollins for damages.

Nice inside-the-park homer though Jimmy. Always a great sight.

Biggest influence of the week – the weather. Yes, a Brit writing about the weather is to be expected. Several teams have seen their season start with a stutter due to games being postponed. The baseball season fixture list is congested as it is, so some teams will be facing several double-headers. The Mariners and Indians in particular ...

Sneaks of the week – Jose Lopez and Mike Hargrove. Okay, that might be a bit harsh: they were only doing what was best for their team and the conditions looked terrible. However getting a game postponed in the fifth inning, one strike away from the game being an official result, was pushing it a bit. You don't need me to tell you that the Mariners were losing at the time.

Play of the week – I could pick an example of tremendous baseball skill because there have been plenty to choose from, but how can you ignore Xavier Nady's home-run tip? I can just hear Kenneth Wolstenholme on commentary:

“Dunn hits one to deep right-field, Nady's going back to the wall, some people don't think it's going over ... it is now!”

Week Two

Sunday 8 April to Saturday 14 April.

Sunday is here again and that means it's time for another edition of WHGB. It's Jackie Robinson day and the world of MLB will pay their respects to the man who did so much to break down the colour barrier, and was a great baseball player to boot. The number 42 will loom large over the day's proceedings, but I will resist the temptation to stretch this post to 42 points.

Home run of the week – Josh Hamilton provided many journalists with a great spring training story. The former number one draft pick was perceived as a complete bust following his battles with drug addiction. When the Cubs plucked him from the Rays via the Rule 5 draft and sent him to the Reds, sports reporters were able to write about Hamilton's attempts to try and get his life back on track. Few probably thought he would make the Reds' roster and carry on the story, but he did and he has. Hamilton is hitting .308 and got his first Major League home run on Tuesday against the D-Backs. A real fairytale moment for him and his family.

Nice Guy of the Week – From a guy who's turned his life around, to someone who seemingly can't shake off the past. That loveable chap Jose Guillen was at it again on Tuesday. He was thrown out of the

Mariners' game against the Red Sox after getting into a slanging match with former team mate Brendan Donnelly. I say team mate, but I'm not sure if mate is really the right word. Maybe he's just misunderstood?

Home stand of the week – Who else could I choose but the Cleveland Indians, who started their home season at Miller park during the week. Miller park in Milwaukee of course. Great credit to the locals for turning out (the first game against the Angels had an attendance of 19,000) and good thinking by the Brewers/Indians for setting ticket prices at a reasonable rate. The organisers of the Cricket World Cup would do well to take note. Cleveland finally saw some baseball on Friday, although only 17,000 attended. The fact that temperatures were around 0 degrees centigrade during the game just might have had something to do with it. And everyone's worried about global warming?!

Pedestrian hater of the week - Walking back to happiness? Not for Oliver Perez that's for sure. Perez followed up a great first start of the season by walking two batters and hitting another while the bases were loaded, bringing in three runs for the Phillies. In just 2 2/3 innings he managed to walk seven batters. The Phillies have struggled out of the gate, but someone should tell Perez that sometimes you can be too kind.

Jeckyll and Hyde performance of the week - While Perez played Jeckyll and Hyde in two starts, Carlos Zambrano pips him to this award by doing it in five innings against the Reds. 5-0 up going into the fifth, two runs of which were courtesy of his own two-run homer, and seemingly cruising, Zambrano gave up five hits, a walk, a HBP and four runs without getting anyone out and leaving two men on. Will Ohman probably didn't endear himself to

Big Z by walking the next two batters to add two more runs to his ledger before Wuertz came in and made them look even worse by striking out three batters straight. Just when you think you've got the game sussed, it comes back and bites you.

Fantasy day of the week – Carlos Lee went deep not once, not twice, but three times against the Phillies on Friday. Combine that with three runs, three hits and six RBIs and you've got a 42 point day in the Fantasy Baseball UK competition. No stolen bases unfortunately (just to split a few hairs). Although Carlos doesn't look the most nimble of athletes, he steals more bases than you would think. While it provides an easy target for baseball doubters, I love the way all shapes and sizes can perform in MLB. Good for you Carlos. He's going to have a great season for the Astros although I'm not sure I would have given him a six-year contract. I guess Houston had to stretch to secure his signature. They were able to protect themselves a bit though as according to the Cot's Baseball Contracts site it does include a "nominal weight clause"!

Injury of the week – You don't need me to tell you that the Cards could not afford to lose Chris Carpenter for any length of time. Much as I love watching Adam Wainwright's 12-6 curveball, the Cards' pitching staff doesn't look good right now. And with Albert Pujols starting the season slower than a Molina family sprint-race relay team, Jocketty, La Rusa and Duncan will really have to work some of their much-fabled magic to keep this team in contention.

Birthday of the week – It's a weekend of anniversaries as Sports Illustrated reports that Boston's Wally the Green Monster celebrated his ten year birthday at Fenway yesterday. The star-spotters among you will be excited to learn that the guest list included Bernie Brewer, Billy the Marlin,

Friar Tuck from the Padres, alongside the mascots from the Boston Bruins and Celtics. SI didn't say that Paris Hilton was there, but I can't imagine her wanting to miss out on a party.

Computer game-style advert of the week – After MLB.tv's initial PONG effort, yesterday I watched their Pacman advert break clip for the first time with glee. Space Invaders and Asteroids are surely just around the corner (the games that is, no need to head for the bunkers).

Week Three

Sunday 15 April to Saturday 21 April.

WHGB always tries to look at the funnier side of the game and this week there has been plenty of topics to choose from. Week three was the week of Pizza and the Phillies.

Science lesson of the week – The aerodynamics of a slice of pizza had never really caught my attention until the Pizza Patriot day game at Fenway. After a Boston fan booted a catch from a pop-up into the stands, a fellow supporter decided to chuck a large slice of pizza at him. I'm no expert, but I think the pointy end enables it to cut through the air with remarkable ease. It certainly glided in a graceful arc and you have to credit the guy's accuracy. It landed up "sauce first" for maximum effect, as the commentators on NESN explained (more on them in a moment). Continuing my physics lesson, I would surmise that this is because the sauce side is heavier and therefore it naturally spins and falls down that way, just like when you drop a bit of toast and it always lands on the buttered side. If anyone decides to test this theory (i.e. by chucking a pizza slice fifty times and recording how often it lands sauce side up) do let me know how you get on, but don't

send me the bill.

Commentators of the week – It has to be the guys at NESN. If you haven't heard them, search for "red sox pizza" on Youtube and click the four minute clip. The helpless giggling when they come back from the advert break is probably the best bit, but they throw in a few good lines as well. Suggesting that the guy will be sentenced to "ten to life" was a particular favourite, especially as they then cut to the evidence sitting on the wall. However, I have to call one part of their analysis into question. They seemed to be at a loss as to why he threw the pizza at all, claiming it was an unprovoked attack. Not so. The Red Sox fan committed the cardinal error: he spilt his pint and he dropped the catch. Sacrificing your pint to make the catch is allowable. Letting the ball go to save your beer is probably the noble thing to do. But, as any cricket fan will tell you, spilling both the beer and the ball is completely unacceptable. A schoolboy error if I ever saw one. You can wipe the pizza stains off your jacket mate, but the stain of shame will never go away.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" moment of the week - Charlie Manuel is a man under pressure and as everyone knows (more science for you) unless the pressure is released slowly it will eventually build and build until it bursts out. After another defeat on Tuesday night, Manuel lost his temper with radio host Howard Eskin. Following a few verbals, Manuel decided to play "Challenge Charlie" and told Eskin to meet him at his office, stating: "I don't like what you've been saying about me for three years and I'm gonna' drop your ass right there"! Two coaches allegedly had to hold Manuel back.

"The Kevin Keegan" award – Charlie walks away with two awards this week. For the non-Brits, Kevin Keegan was a football (soccer) manager who publicly cracked

under the pressure of a title race with Man Utd. Keegan, always a man who wore his heart on his sleeve, infamously was recorded on a radio interview gradually losing his composure until, on the verge of tears, he proclaimed: "I would love it if we beat them, LOVE IT!". Manuel's threats of violence were worthy of a laugh, but it was his reaction to Eskin's statement that he just wanted was to see the Phillies winning that reminded me of Keegan. Manuel's reply was to scream out loud "we're going to win!". There's something about such desperation that somehow makes it funny.

When good closers turn bad – Mariano Rivera is undoubtedly a future Hall of Famer, but his start to 2007 will probably be left off his resume. In his first save opportunity of the season he gave up a walk-off three run homer to the A's Marco Scutaro. On Friday he was sent in by Joe Torre for save opportunity number two, this time against the Red Sox. You know the rest: his second blown save and second loss of the season was the end result. Meanwhile, Rivera's former set-up man, Tom Gordon, isn't exactly making Yankees fans wish they had kept him when he left for the Phils (them again) before the 2006 season. On the same night as Mo was blowing-up in Boston, Gordon was getting hammered by the Reds to also record his second blown save of the season. Charlie Manuel stated after the game that he would not be used again on Saturday, but fortunately he wasn't needed ...

Fantasy performance of the week – Cole Hamels has sneaked in at the last moment to grab this award with his performance last night against the Reds. Nine innings, fifteen strikeouts and a win gives you fifty-nine points in FBUK. And in the real world that one win counts for a lot considering the Phillies' start to the season. All those Manuel fearing radio hosts should also say thanks to Hamels for cooling down Charlie

for one night at least.

Play of the week – It's the Phillies again. Cole Hamels was terrific, but even in a great outing you often need a little bit of luck to go your way. With two on and no one out in the fifth inning, the Phils turned a 5-4-3 triple play to shut the door on the Reds. "That's a double play ball" said the commentator. Charlie may be after him for being so pessimistic.

Pet event of the week – Finally, away from the Phillies and Pizza stories, Friday was Dog day at Shea Stadium. Apparently they hold a twice-yearly event to raise the profile of animal shelters (and to raise a bit of money as well). One bloke was a bit overenthusiastic, claiming that his Chihuahua would "like to challenge Jose Reyes to a race" and that "he'd like to teach Reyes something about speed." Pushy parents are one thing, but pushy dog owners? He'll be on Pup Idol next.

Week Four

Sunday 22 April to Saturday 28 April.

A standard week in MLB, with heroes and zeroes, success and failure, and a bit of comedy thrown in for good measure. Trevor Hoffman accounted for more of it than he would have liked, although he gets bonus points here as his mother was born in England (and it's fair to say his career has been half-decent to say the least).

Top bombing – the week started with the Red Sox showing the Bronx bombers how it is done. Four jacks in a row, including two that went completely over the Green Monster and out into the streets below (Mike Lowell's was marginally the best as it looked the hardest pitch to go deep on). It was one of those great sporting moments when the momentum seems to carry a

team along. You think they can't do it again then, tho and behold, off goes another. Great entertainment for non-Yankees fans.

"We're experienced veterans, not old" - David Wells and Randy Johnson created a nice piece of history on Tuesday. At a combined age of eighty-six, Wells and Johnson became the oldest lefty starter pairing in MLB history. Thirty-nine year old Trevor Hoffman recorded the save to prove that age is no barrier to success, at least for the time being anyway.

With friends like these ... - Jake Peavy had good reason to be a bit peeved on Wednesday night. Peavy pitched seven astonishing innings against the D-backs, giving up only two hits, no runs and striking out sixteen. As he sat down with a 2-0 lead he could be forgiven for thinking his fourth win of the season was in the bag. Sadly for Peavy, after Scott Linebrink gave up a run, Trevor Hoffman came to the mound in the ninth and promptly conceded two runs to blow the save and lose the game 3-2. I doubt "sorry" makes much difference when you're sitting in the clubhouse after something like that.

Appreciate this – It was a rough week for Hoffman (am I the only person who loves the fact that this great closer who strides out to "Hells Bells" is called Trevor? A good old English name if I ever heard one), starting with the blown save mentioned above. Friday night was Trevor Hoffman appreciation night in San Diego. You just knew something bad would happen to him and sure enough he let another save opportunity slide. The fact that this was the first time in ten years that he has blown two save opportunities in a row tells you two things: one, that this really was a bad week for him, and two that he's had plenty more good ones than bad in his career. Most players would settle for that when they hang up their spikes.

“Can we have a refund?” award of the week – Hands up who thought Jeff Weaver would follow up his World Series heroics with a strong performance this season? Weaver took another loss last night and is now 0-4 with a 18.26 ERA on the season. It's always important to get off to a good start with your new team. For all the “Weaver watch” fondness, this can't be considered a “good” start. Let's hope Five's support for Curtis Granderson doesn't have the same effect.

“On yer head son” - Chris Duncan has a touch of slap-stick comedy about him, largely due to his enthusiastic but limited performances in the outfield. He excelled himself this week though, having to be scratched from a start because he smacked his head while leaving his apartment. The knock to his noggin, which left him with twelve stitches, was predominantly caused by his height: 6ft 5. As a guy who isn't quite that tall (i.e. take a foot off) it's hard to have much sympathy. Still, I can appreciate the fact that he came into the game on the same day as a pinch-hitter and got a double.

“Saturday night's not alright for streaking” - You would normally believe the opposite, but in this case we are talking about baseball streaks and several came to an end last night. The Tribe and the Pirates saw their winning streaks halted (six and five games respectively), while both the Astros and the Yankees stopped their losing streaks at seven games with victories yesterday. No need to guess who will be the happiest to see their runs come to an end.

Bad news of the week – Bad news for some players at least. Former Mets employee Kirk Radomski has pleaded guilty to supplying performance enhancing drugs to “dozens” of Major League players. ESPN

report that he could be facing up to twenty-five years imprisonment, so it's safe to say that there will be plenty of incentive for Radomski to help the Mitchell investigation as a means to reduce his sentence. Many are already suggesting that this could be the big source that really uncovers the “truth” behind the insinuations and circumstantial evidence that has plagued MLB's (and Congress's) attempts to put together some hard facts. This story isn't going to go away any time soon and another bloke will make sure of that.

“He's not going away either” - Barry Bonds continued along his quest to make Bud Selig squirm by hitting three more homers on the week, taking his season total to eight and his career total to 742. At his current rate (eight in twenty games) it's probably going to take him around 35 games before he takes the record away from Aaron. Give or take a few rest days, the first full week of June looks to be the projected time. From June 8 to 13, the Giants have six games at AT&T Park and considering San Francisco is arguably the only place where the record breaking feat will be met with joy, I would fancy it to happen then. As the first three of those games are against my Oakland A's, I sense the script may have been written. Have you booked your flights yet Bud? I hear the North Pole is nice that time of year.

Week Five

Sunday 29 April to Saturday 5 May.

The week began with the tragic death of St Louis pitcher Josh Hancock. Baseball paid its respects to their fallen friend by showing exactly why so many people dedicate their life to the sport.

Troy Tulowitzki turns three - Wow! That's all you can say about it really. Only the

thirteenth unassisted triple play in Major League history and it's not hard to see why it's such a rare feat. Tulo caught a Chipper Jones liner for the first out, stamped on second to get Kelly Johnson and then tagged Renteria for out number three. He even threw to first base as well for good measure, but sadly his attempt to be the first player ever to get four outs in an inning fell down on a slight technicality. Nice try though.

Event of the week – The Phillie Phanatic celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday on Sunday night and basked in the adulation of his adoring public. Indeed, it was the fifth largest crowd ever to attend a game at Citizens Bank Park. It was an Egyptian themed celebration, although I've yet to find any decent explanation as to why. Maybe I'm thinking too much about it?

Super saver – Mariano Rivera hasn't been his normal lights-out self so far this year, but his performance on Thursday against Texas will help him get back on track. After a rain-out on Wednesday, the Yanks and the Rangers played a double header and Rivera logged a save in each. Two saves in a day is pretty good going and it's the fifth time in his career that he has achieved the feat.

Award winning pitching - So, a Red Sox pitcher from Japan won the AL Rookie of the Month award for April. You would have had short odds on that before the season started, but it was "no Dice" for anyone who put money on Matsuzaka. The signing of Hideki Okajima over the winter was overlooked by many and most of those who noticed rather unfairly described it as merely a case of the Red Sox bringing in a compatriot to help Dice-K settle in Boston. Okajima has had an excellent month coming out of the bullpen, in particular enjoying his five appearances against the Yankees, which is always likely to endear

you to the folks in Beantown.

A Fantasy Owner's nightmare – It's fair to say that wins are not necessarily the truest indicator of how a starter is performing, but there's no doubt that picking them up is important. Wandy Rodriguez had a tough night on Thursday. He threw seven decent innings against the Reds and left the game with a 4-2 lead, giving up just two earned runs and striking out eight. Sadly for Wandy, Chad Qualls gave up three runs in the eighth to leave him with a no decision, although the Astros did go on to get the win. Watching your win slip away through no fault of your own is always tough, but consider this: Rodriguez has now gone seventeen starts without being credited with a win stretching back into last season. And if that wasn't galling enough, as a result of blowing the save in the eighth but seeing the offense regain the lead in the bottom of the inning, Qualls ended up with the "W" instead. Sometimes life is just not fair.

"I'm a travellin' man" – Ryan Langerhans has had a strange week. On Monday he had to say a quick goodbye to his team mates in Atlanta after he was traded to Oakland. On Tuesday he met up with his new team mates and went 0 for 2 against the Red Sox in Boston. He repeated the trick on Wednesday, adding in an error for good measure. Not long after the game had finished, Langerhans was informed that he had been traded yet again. And to the Nationals. So he was traded twice in three days without getting a say in the matter, never actually set foot in Oakland, and ended up at arguably the worst team in baseball right now. Only four more seasons 'till you reach free agency though Ryan!

Trying to look clever is never clever – Langerhans was at least able to witness a lesson in humility in one of his games for Oakland. The A's second baseman Mark Ellis hit a screaming drive down the left field

line at Fenway on Tuesday night, but his progress was initially halted by some quick-footed fielding. Fortunately for Ellis the ball was not snaffled by a Red Sox infielder, but by a Red Sox batboy. Unfortunately for the batboy, the ball hadn't gone foul. The "what have I done wrong?" look he gave when sitting back down was the icing on the cake for the less charitable among us.

It's a hitter's game – There might not have been much charity on display for that batboy, but the pitchers in the Bronx on Friday were generous to a fault. The Mariners and the Yankees combined for thirty-six hits and twenty-six runs. It is often said that good pitching will always beat good hitting. I guess there wasn't much good pitching on display that night.

Nearly perfect – In one of those strange incidents that baseball (and life in general) seems to throw up from time to time, the Saturday match-up between the M's and the Yanks was an entirely different affair. Chien-Ming Wang was perfect through seven and a third innings before Ben Broussard went deep with a solo shot. On the other side, Jeff Weaver wasn't quite so perfect, although it could be considered an improved display for him. Weaver only gave up six runs in five and two-thirds, and edged his ERA down to 15.35.

Pitching is tough – Walking batters with the bases loaded is never a nice feeling, as Wil Ledezma will testify after going through it last night. Still, everyone is taught not to sulk and to remember that there's always someone worse off than you. Step forward Levalle Speigner of the Nationals. He managed to walk in three runs against the Cubs, "helping" his side to their twenty-first loss of the season in just thirty games.

Professional of the week – For all of the great performances out on the field over the last seven days, this award has to go to

MLB.com's Peter McCarthy. McCarthy presents the Daily Rewind during the week and on Friday he passed on the news that Carl Pavano may require Tommy John surgery, adding that the twelve to eighteen month lay-off would endanger the chance of Pavano ever pitching for the Yanks again. Somehow McCarthy said this without laughing or adding a sarcastic comment. That's a true professional if you ask me.

Week Six

Sunday 6 May to Saturday 12 May.

Today is Mother's day in America and that means macho baseball players waving pink bats in the air. Of course, it is all in the name of raising the awareness of breast cancer and to raise much needed funds at the same time. Sportsmen are often the target of negative stories (not always unjustified), so it's great to see so many of them using their positions of influence in such a positive way. And on that positive note, we take a look at the week that was.

Bad week for the Blue Jays – There has been a fair amount of brash talk and bold moves from the Blue Jays over the past eighteen months or so, but the signs are that Toronto's efforts to recapture former glories are destined to fall short. B.J. Ryan has had Tommy John surgery this week and will be out for the rest of this season at least. Some may call it bad luck, yet giving a lucrative five-year deal to a closer with such violent mechanics was a risky move. The loss of Roy Halladay, who had his appendix removed on Friday, for the next six weeks certainly was bad luck. When Troy Glaus pulled up lame trying to run out a ground ball later that night, it was as if someone was trying to tell the Blue Jays something.

Pinch hit of the week – Ryan Howard has had a slow start to the season and spent most of the week nursing an injury, but on Wednesday night he showed his star quality in spades. The Phils were three runs down against the D-Backs with the bases loaded. Howard was called off the bench to pinch hit. The first ball he faced was dispatched into the right field seats for a grand slam. Unfortunately for the Phillies (and for some Fantasy owners) the cameo performance was ultimately followed by a move to the fifteen-day DL.

Good things come to those who wait? - When the Yankees missed out on Matsuzaka, they wasted little time in going after another Japanese pitcher: Kei Igawa. It was as if they had gone out to the auction with money in their pocket and, despite missing out on their main target, were determined not to come home empty-handed. You always tend to regret such purchases. While Dice-K is settling in nicely, Igawa is finding life much tougher. After initially being demoted to the bullpen, Igawa was sent down to the Minors this week to try and find some form. With Roger Clemens and Phil Hughes set for the rotation in a month or so, whether there will be a space for him to return to is in question. He was signed to a five-year deal so has plenty of time to try and turn things around. Patience is not usually a quality associated with New York, but you would think that even the Yanks couldn't just shrug off a \$46 million investment in a player (\$26 million posting fee and a \$20 million five-year contract). Stranger things have happened in the Bronx though.

Barry who? - Mr Bonds may be second all-time in the home run list (at time of writing), but has he ever hit two homers in one inning? No he has not; however his team mate Bengie Molina did so on Monday against the Mets. I hope Bengie offered to give Bonds some advice when he

sat down again in the dugout!

Weaver watch – It's sad to say this, but the Mariners may actually prefer to pay Weaver to be on the DL rather than to pitch right now. Jeff has been sidelined by tendinitis in his right shoulder; not, as was first thought, as a result of a neck injury caused by constantly turning around to see where his pitches were ending up. He always seems like a nice guy when interviewed, so hopefully the injury was the cause of his struggles and he can come back and be effective. If not, well he's still getting \$8 million this year so he's not having it too bad.

Shock of the week – Curt Schilling was moved to make a public apology on his blog after coming out with some very blunt comments about Barry Bonds in an early morning radio interview. First he said that Bonds had admitted taking steroids, then he linked this “cheating” with the way Bonds had cheated on his wife and cheated on his taxes. Terry Francona suggested that the Big Schill would do well to “zip it” in future. It would certainly make for a quieter life, but also a much less funnier one.

Any colours you like - San Diego hosted a Seventies night on Friday with the Padres decked out in a fetching combo of bright yellow and brown. Call me colour blind, but I thought they looked great. They beat the Cardinals 7-0 although this was less due to St Louis being bewildered by the “interesting” colour scheme and more down to Jake Peavy being on the mound.

Beware of “the Barber” - Cabin fever set in for the Mets during their stay in San Francisco with Carlos “the Barber” Beltran mowing the mops off his team mates one by one. As the week progressed, even the Mets' GM Omar Minaya succumbed to the razor, but Jose Reyes did his best to keep hold of his beloved locks. Resistance is

always futile in these cases and sure enough he had his hair cut on Saturday. MLB.com reported that, when told he and Reyes now looked even more alike, Willie Randolph declared: "I'm better looking than he is." You can't argue with your manager, so Reyes will have to take that on the chin.

Why is everyone laughing? – Seeing a player suffer an injury should never be fun, but there are occasions when it's hard not to laugh. Every cricketer has a chuckle when a batsman is hit in the box, for example. Justin Morneau didn't suffer that particular indignity; however he left yesterday's game against the Tigers with a broken nose after a Nick Punto thrown ball bounced off the turf and clonked him in the face. The Twins have been scuffling recently and can't afford to lose their AL MVP for any time. Something tells me most of the comments from his team mates won't be overly sympathetic though.

Week Seven

Sunday 13 May to Saturday 19 May.

Welcome to this week's edition of "Weekly" hit ground ball. We're nearing the end of the first period of interleague baseball, bringing us such mouth-watering local rivalries as Pittsburgh playing Arizona and Colorado taking on Kansas City. Still, even the latter will be more exciting than yesterday's "dream" F.A. Cup final.

The "bus" effect – Wandy Rodriguez's win-less streak was highlighted here a couple of weeks ago, so it was good to see him finally get the monkey off his back with a "W" last Sunday. As is so often the case, Wandy then followed this up last night with his second win in a row. The record books may tell you this makes it two wins in his last nineteen appearances, but we'll let him call it a run of two wins in two.

As one streak begins, another streak ends - Jake Peavy had struck out at least ten batters in his four starts prior to his Wednesday night game against the Reds. His streak was then snapped by Cincinnati, striking out "only" five and not factoring in the decision. Was this change in fortune due to some mechanical problems for Peavy, great at-bats by the Reds, or by me adding him to my fantasy team? I can't shake the feeling that it could have been the latter (this is why I refuse to pick any of my A's) so I humbly apologize to Mr Peavy and the Padres organization.

Let's go to Disneyland! - In an effort to widen their fan base throughout Florida, Tampa Bay staged a three-game series against the Rangers at Disney's Wide World of Sports (also the Spring Training base for the Braves). The Rays were happy with the way it panned out as attendances increased from one game to the next and the general reaction was very favourable, prompting the possibility that they may repeat the event next season. It also helped that the Rays swept the series: not losing does wonders for your popularity. Credit must go to the Rays' Front Office for being proactive, going to the fans rather than waiting for the fans to come to them. The venture also showed that the team is moving in the right direction. They certainly wouldn't have been able to stage a series in Disneyland without constantly being described as a "Mickey Mouse" ballclub in years past.

Welcome home – While the Rays left their home for a few days this week, Barry Zito returned to Oakland for the first time since his off-season switch across the Bay to the Giants. Zito came bearing gifts, giving up seven walks, as the A's tagged him for seven runs in four innings while going on to win the series opener 15-3. Zito received a mixed reaction from the A's crowd, although if he keeps pitching like this I'm sure he will

be welcomed back time and again with open arms.

The height of pitching – Major League history was made at the Arizona-Colorado clash on Tuesday. Randy Johnson (6ft 10) and Jason Hirsh (6ft 8) combined to become the tallest starting pitcher match-up in history, at 162 inches. Both used their height to good advantage as well, putting in decent starts for their respective teams

The height of arrogance – Johnson and Hirsh may stand tall in stature, but Lastings Milledge stands taller than anyone else, in his own mind at least. Milledge has earned himself a reputation as, how shall we put it, a cocky little git. He memorably received a note on his locker during his time in the Majors last season stating “Know your place, rook. Your teammates”. Milledge has spent this season in Triple A so far, but it's not been a case of “out of sight, out of mind”. He has upset the Mets hierarchy this week by releasing a rap song containing allegedly offensive lyrics. Sounds like an all too familiar story of high on talent, low on brains. Let's hope someone can set him on the right track.

Good stories as well! – From one not so great example, to a ballplayer doing something worthwhile. Nick Swisher is hardly the quietest player yon the circuit, but that doesn't make a bad person by any stretch. Swisher has been growing his hair for nearly a year and (thankfully) he chopped off his locks yesterday. However, this was not a vain exercise in fashion. Swisher's grandmother died from cancer in 2005 and the hair has been given to a cancer charity that turns human hair into wigs for women living with the illness. Good to see a positive story about a sportsman doing something for others.

Player of the week – There are always several worthy candidates for this award, but few could begrudge Kevin Kouzmanoff from getting the nod this week. Before last Sunday, Kouzmanoff was hitting a paltry .115/.175/.207 on the season. Not good in anyone's book, but particularly worrying for a young player who had been acquired at the start of the season. During the week, Kouzmanoff raised his batting average by .068, his OBP by .077, and his SLG by 91. Those of you doing the maths will work out that this still only amounts to a .183/.252/.298 batting line, but things are heading in the right direction. His batting line for April was .113/.171/.183 whereas so far in May it is .333/.395/.545. It would have been easy for him to buckle under the pressure of his early struggles, so his fight back deserves a lot of credit.

Week Eight

Sunday 20 May to Saturday 26 May.

Death threats, losing streaks and record breaking feats. It's just another week in Major League baseball recorded here in a distinctly Braves-influenced “Weekly” hit ground ball.

Dukes of Hazard – Just when you thought things were finally going well, it all came crashing down. Elijah Dukes spent his Minor League career proving that he was good enough to be a Major Leaguer on the field, yet also proving to be a whole heap of trouble off it. Coming into 2007, it seemed as though the Rays thought their only option was to promote him to the big leagues and hope that this provided the impetus for him to turn his life around. Sadly that doesn't appear to have been the case. Dukes' wife filed a restraining order against him this week after he reportedly threatened to kill her. While this is a very

serious issue, I have to admit that his response to reporters who wanted to speak to him about it did make me laugh. Dukes didn't have time to answer their questions, explaining: "I've got to go. I've got a video game to finish"! Nice to see he has got his priorities in order.

The Reds are feeling blue – Josh Hamilton has provided a great "feel-good" story (until he went on to the DL) and Ken Griffey Jr has been showing us that beautiful home run swing with increasing regularity. So there have been some bright spots in Cincinnati so far, but to say it has not been a good start to the season for the Reds would be an understatement. They have now lost nineteen of their last twenty-three games and, at 18-32, have the worst record in the Majors (yes, even worse than the Royals).

The Reds' desperate state was graphically illustrated when their bullpen somehow managed to concede eight runs in the tenth inning against the Pirates. It was commonly thought that the NL Central would be a weak division this season and that a team like the Reds might be able to put together a half-decent season to make the play-offs. It doesn't look likely right now.

Losing in St Louis – While we're on the subject of the weak NL Central, the reigning World Series champs are not exactly defending their title with honour (although some would say that this is fitting). They have problems all over the roster, but their starting pitching has been particularly poor. Anthony Reyes was the hero in Game One of last year's Fall Classic. Baseball has a way of turning a hero to zero in a short period of time though. Reyes is currently 0-8 so far this season with an ERA of 6.08. His eighth loss came on Friday night and it tied him with the lead for most losses by a starter so far this season. That he tied his team mate Kip Wells for this dubious

honour tells its own sad story for the Red Birds.

"It was twenty years ago today ..." – If Reyes wants some advice about dealing with an extended period without a win, he would do well to call Jamie Moyer. On Friday night, Moyer picked up a win against the Braves to improve his season record to 5-3. What made the win special was that he hadn't won a game against Atlanta for twenty years, when he was pitching for the Cubs in 1987 (Reyes was five years old at the time). In fairness to Moyer, he has spent virtually all of the period in between playing in the American League. That he has had such a long career despite not possessing great stuff is remarkable. Tim Hudson's description of Moyer's performance on MLB.com, "He's still throwing that slop up there ... but it's tough to hit", might not be particularly flattering, but it is pretty accurate.

"Where did you get that hat?" - The "golden sombrero" is one of the many idiosyncratic terms in baseball. For the uninitiated, a golden sombrero is referenced when a player strikes out four times in a game. Andruw Jones went one better last Sunday, whiffing five times to earn himself a platinum sombrero to go alongside the platinum contract he will receive when he's a free agent at the end of this season.

A double ton – John Smoltz reached a milestone on Thursday by earning his two hundredth career win. He reached the figure after beating his good friend Tom Glavine and the Mets for the third time this season. Glavine himself is only five wins away from the three hundred win mark, so he will be hoping to reclaim the bragging rights in the near future. Of course, what sets Smoltz's achievement apart is that he has also lodged over 150 saves during his stint as a closer.

"You're outta here!" - Smoltz had an action-packed week. He was thrown out of the game against the Phillies last night, despite not actually playing (he argued with a call by the first base umpire from the dugout). Still, Smoltz has learned from a master. Bobby Cox was thrown out of the game arguing the same play and this put him just one ejection behind the all-time record held by John McGraw. Cox has amassed 130 ejections during his career and considering he suffered the same fate on Friday, the odds are that the record will be equalled and passed before too long. Bobby is a great character as well as being a great manager, so I hope he continues to be ejected from games for many years to come.

Week Nine

Sunday 27 May to Saturday 2 June.

It has certainly been an ill-tempered week in MLB, with a large dose of ejections, beanings and brawling. It's all here in this week's decidedly anti-Yankees edition of "Weekly" hit ground ball.

Mr Popular strikes again - A.J. Pierzynski won himself a few more friends in Minnesota this week by seemingly trying to maim the Twins' reigning American League MVP, Justin Morneau. A.J. took a strange route to first base while trying to run-out a ground ball, stepping on the inside corner of the bag rather than the outside. Of course, the inside corner was where the exposed back of Morneau's foot was situated. When he did it the first time, Morneau was not too impressed. When he repeated the trick in his next at-bat, Twins manager Ron Gardenhire went berserk. Pierzynski protested his innocence after the game and it's hard to imagine that a ballplayer would deliberately try to injure a colleague in such

fashion. That some could question his innocence says a lot about the reputation A.J. has created for himself.

"Eject, eject eject!" - Last week we noted the outstanding ability of Bobby Cox in regards to getting ejected from games. The rest of MLB decided to follow Bobby's lead and spent most of the week getting in to slanging matches with the umpires. Gary Sheffield and Josh Bard were both thrown out on Thursday, with Sheffield causing some more controversy by chucking a bit of his bat somewhere in the region of the umpire and then stating that he would expose "a conspiracy" if he was charged for it. We shall wait and see. Joe Torre is having a tough time of things at the moment and his frustrations boiled over on Friday in the heat of the Yankees-Red Sox rivalry. Jim Leyland forgot to take his medication last night and blew his top against the Indians and Justin Verlander followed soon after (despite not playing in the game). Finally, Lou Piniella finished off a miserable week in Chicago by getting ejected for the sixtieth time in his career last night. I will leave it to MLB.com to paint the scene:

"[Piniella] threw his cap, and got nose to nose with third base umpire Mark Wegner, yelling. Piniella kicked some dirt on Wegner's shoes, and home plate umpire Bruce Froemming stepped between the two.

Piniella got in a couple more kicks, booting his cap twice into shallow left".

Is there a funnier sight than a Big League manager throwing a tantrum like a five-year old? Probably not. Off to the naughty step, the lot of you!

"With team mates like this ..." - More on that bad week in Chicago. Carlos Zambrano is known for being a fiery guy, while Michael Barret lived the American

dream by slugging Pierzynski in the face last season, so seeing a few sparks flying between the battery mates may not be the biggest surprise in the world. Still, it's always a bit shocking to see two "team mates" having to be pulled apart in the dugout (and then to be pulled apart in the clubhouse to end "Round Two"). Despite their off-season "spendathon", things are not going well in Chicago right now. Cubs fans can at least take some comfort from the White Sox, who are currently scuffling along as well.

Bad blood between the Yankees and the Red Sox?

- Who would have thought it? They set the tone to their latest series on Friday night by combining for five beanings. Kevin Youkilis was the last man to be hit and was certainly the maddest after the event. Not that this should be surprising. While facing constant post-game questions about his reaction, particularly on the basis that Scott Proctor was not intentionally trying to hit him, Youkilis asked the throng of reporters: "Have you guys ever had a ball thrown at your head?" A fair question if you ask me.

Never laugh at another's misfortune, unless it's the Yankees

- Whether it's right or wrong, there's something about the Yankees that makes their misfortunes enjoyable for the rest of us. Just when you start thinking that this attitude is a bit childish, the Yanks do something to remind you why it's sometimes justified. A-Rod was up to his usual cheap tricks this week, yelling out loud while running the bases and causing Howie Clark to let a pop-fly fall to the ground. The smirk on A-Rod's face was not too dissimilar to the infamous Cristiano Ronaldo wink, although it's unlikely that A-Rod will be able to rebuild his image quite like Ronaldo has done (depends whether you admire a married man going around to strip clubs and visiting hotel rooms with mystery blondes I guess!). It wasn't quite

the equal of his bush league antics in the 2004 ALCS, but it was another log on to the burning fire of dislike that A-Rod has an incredible knack of fanning simply by being A-Rod.

Play of the week - While the Yanks resorted to cheap shots, Aaron Hill showed them a bit of cheek himself by stealing home plate. It doesn't happen all that often and is a great sight so long as it's not against your team. When it comes against the Yanks, everyone wins (well, except the Yankees - so everyone wins).

From success to failure - Armando Benitez has often been the subject of criticism during his time in San Francisco and he took his unpopularity to new heights on Tuesday. Benitez entered in the twelfth inning against the Mets to a chorus of boos (not the most helpful way to greet one of your players) and subsequently balked twice to bring in the tying run. Carlos Delgado then came to the plate and went deep to give the Mets a 5-4 victory. Two days later, Benitez was packing his bags and heading back to Florida. No doubt he was as sad to leave as the Giants fans were sad to see him go.

Sarloos to Sar-lose - Benitez should at least be grateful he has found another Major League home. Reds pitcher Kirk Sarloos was demoted to the minors after a horror start last Sunday. In just his second start of the season (after twenty relief appearances) he managed to face seven hitters in the first inning against the Pirates without getting a single out. Sarloos was pulled from the game having given up five hits, five walks, and five runs, ballooning his season ERA from 5.09 to 7.04.

Saving all the time - Finally, it was revealed this week that Trevor Hoffman is keeping an archive of his equipment. As he is the all-time leader in saves, every

addition to his total is a record-breaking feat and the Padres are intent on making sure this slice of history is preserved. After each save, his equipment is authenticated and then put into a secure vault. Hoffman keeps the ball and the Padres keep the rest, although as MLB.com helpfully explains, his underwear is currently exempt from this procedure.

Week Ten

Sunday 3 June to Saturday 9 June.

It's been a busy week, with the player draft taking place on Thursday and Friday, and inter-league play starting up again this weekend. It all means there's lots to discuss this week in "Weekly" Hit Ground Ball.

Always saving - Let's start with a couple of great achievements. Trevor Hoffman frequently makes it into WHGB and with good reason. This week his entry is to celebrate his historic 500th save. Whether or not he has put his underpants in the archive alongside the rest of his uniform and equipment for this one is currently unknown.

Torre 2000 - Trevor wasn't the only person celebrating a personal milestone this week. Joe Torre had a welcome bright spot on a tough start to the 2007 season by getting his 2000th career win on Thursday. George Steinbrenner momentarily put his knife down as a result.

So near, yet so far – While the Yanks could celebrate a milestone, their fierce rivals had to settle for just falling short. Curt Schilling has never pitched a no-hitter in his career and he won't get any closer than he did this week against the A's. It was already looking like being a hard luck win (if there's such a thing) for Schilling, as he was

perfect except for a Julio Lugo error going into the final frame. Sadly for Curt, with two outs in the ninth, Shannon Stewart laced a single into right field to ruin the celebrations. It was one of those strange occasions when even the home supporters applaud the opposing pitcher in the hope of seeing history being made.

Bad ass Berkman! – I've always been a big fan of Lance Berkman. He's a great hitter and by and large no one has a bad word to say about him as a person. Well, apart from the umpires this week. Berkman initially got chucked out of the Astros' game against the Rockies on Tuesday for arguing a check-swing call. Then he got into another argument with the umpires about being ejected. Then he went back to the dugout and started launching his equipment on to the field. If that wasn't enough, he came back on to the field later in the game during a bench-clearing incident, explaining to MLB.com: "I'm not going to sit in the clubhouse with ice on me while my teammates are fighting. If there's a fight to be done, you have to be ready to back your guys up, that's for sure." There's a bloke you want on your side.

Berkman was handed a two-game suspension (he quipped: "It was going to be a three-game suspension, but they knocked one day off because of the distance I got on the bag toss!") which he subsequently appealed so he could play in the next series against the White Sox. Friday night: Berkman gets ejected again. He's not exactly your typical trouble-maker, but he's certainly gaining himself a reputation!

Never give up – A heart-warming story from the Giants this weekend as Guillermo Rodriguez was called up to the Majors for the first time in his career. That's a special moment for anyone, but in this case it meant even more than normal. Rodriguez has been in the Minors for twelve years,

plugging away to earn a living while supporting his family back home in Venezuela. Having seen player after player moving up the ladder, he finally got the opportunity to put the Giants' uniform on for Saturday's game against the A's due to a spate of injuries. Hopefully he will get the chance to take the field at some point, but just being involved (and picking up a Major League minimum wage) will be a dream come true and he has certainly earned it.

It's all in the name - A's reliever Santiago Casilla had a good week, picking up his first Major League win on Monday and his first save two days later. It's been an interesting journey so far in Casilla's fledging career. He made his Major League debut in September 2004, but he is almost unrecognisable from then in more ways than one. Firstly, while he was listed as 21 years old back in 2004, it was later found that he had taken three years off his actual age. That's not unusual for an import to the States (does anyone really know how old El Duque is?), but what's more unusual is that if you looked up "Santiago Casilla" from September 2004 you would draw a blank. Back then, thanks to some "loaned" personal documents from a friend, Casilla was going by the name of Jairo Garcia. When it was revealed that these documents were not his own, most people were less upset about the deceit than the fact that Jairo Garcia is a cooler name than Santiago Casilla.

Rocket racket - You may have missed it, but Roger Clemens made a victorious return yesterday. He pitched six innings, giving up five hits, three earned runs and struck out seven. With all due respect to Pittsburgh, the Buccos' batting line-up is not the most imposing group to face in your first start. Let's see how he gets on against the Mets next Friday (no throwing bats please, Roger).

Walk it like you talk it - As we're on the subject of the Mets, their favourite opposing player, Jimmy Rollins, was able to walk out of New York with a slight sense of smugness this week. While facing a barrage of jibes for his "we're the team to beat" pre-season statement, Jimmy hit a go-ahead, three run homer against the Mets on Wednesday as the Phillies swept their NL East rivals at Shea. No doubt the New York crowd will go easy on him next time.

Victor-ino - Finally, it was Shane Victorino night in Philadelphia last Sunday. Citizens Bank Park became a Hawaiian paradise with hula dancers, Hawaiian shirts and the obligatory Victorino bobble-head. Normally, such events end up leading to some misfortune for the man involved, but not in this case. With the game tied at 8-8, Victorino smacked a walk-off home run with one out in the bottom of the ninth. That's the way to do it.

Week Eleven

Sunday 10 June to Saturday 16 June.

As inter-league play continues, it's been the pitchers that have caught the eye over the past week. Read about the good, the bad and the shameful in "Weekly" hit ground ball.

Highlight of the week – What else could it be? Justin Verlander pitched a no-hitter for the Tigers on Tuesday against the Brewers. Any no-hitter is special, but the dominant fashion in which Verlander pitched throughout the game was something else. He struck out twelve while hitting 101mph on the speed gun with his 109th pitch of the game. It brought a 4-0 victory for the Tigers, fifty-three points for my fantasy team, and a whole heap of awestruck

comments. As Placido Polanco concluded after the game: "It was what we call in baseball, 'filthy,'" . Verlander now has a 7-2 record on the season and will be going for win number eight, and dare I say back-to-back no-hitters, later on today. Good luck Philadelphia!

The wonders of run support – Despite Verlander's phenomenal performance, he still only ended up with one more win in his season column. His team mate Jeremy Bonderman showed that sometimes you don't need to try so hard. Bonderman gave up four homers and five earned runs in six innings against the Phillies on Friday and walked away with win number seven for his troubles. However, before the Tigers' batting line-up carps too loudly, Bonderman played his part for the offense as well. As the game was played in Philadelphia, National League rules applied and he had to come to bat, something which he neither has much experience with nor much aptitude for (relatively speaking). In the fifth inning, Bonderman broke out of a career 0 for 21 slump and squeaked a base hit before eventually being driven home. His journey around the bases was a venture into uncharted waters and it's fair to say that it showed. Still, he crossed home plate in the end and that's all that matters. "I don't ever want to play in the National League," was Bonderman's reaction. Tigers fans will be more than happy with that if it means he stays in Detroit for years to come.

From the good to the bad - Kip Wells is having a dreadful season and he hit a new low with his performance against the Royals this week. Wells managed just 1.1 innings before he had to be pulled out by Tony La Rusa after giving up four walks and six earned runs. The loss made it a Major League worst eleventh for the season, with just two wins to go alongside. At the time of writing, Wells remains on the Major League

roster, but his immediate future is in doubt. His team mate Anthony Reyes suffered the indignity of being sent down to the Minors earlier this season having pegged an 0-8 record from his first nine starts. Reyes was called up yesterday and Wells may be replacing him in the Memphis Redbirds' rotation shortly. Sometimes, one good performance is all it takes for things to start falling in place again; therefore both Wells and Reyes would have looked on with envy yesterday as the Cards racked up a ten-run inning against the A's during a 15-6 victory.

See, this pitching game is easy! - Things got so bad for the Cardinals on Friday that they resorted to putting outfielder Scott Spiezio on the mound for the eighth inning of a blowout loss. While Spiezio seemed to enjoy it, the whole affair left many a Cards fan wondering what has happened to their reigning World Series winners. Firstly, the Cards were largely in a hole because of the performance by the A's starter Dan Haren, who they traded away (with two other players) prior to the 2005 season for Mark Mulder. Secondly, Spiezio's inning was probably the most effective one thrown by a St Louis pitcher that night (he gave up just one walk and no hits).

And hitting's not much more difficult! - Spiezio's performance on the mound may have been an attempt by the batters union to claw back some pride from their pitching counterparts. After Carlos Zambrano showed the hitters how it's done by going deep for the second time this season on Monday, the Dodgers' Hong-Chih Kuo repeated the trick the following day. Kuo showed he had a taste for the dramatic though. Not only was his blast the third of a three-pitch, three-homer sequence, but he celebrated his achievement with a Major League bat flip that the likes of David Ortiz would have been proud of. Kuo was quick to apologise after the game (although it's hard to blame him for being excited) and

that was probably the wise thing to do. The Padres took offence at Alfonso Soriano's post-homer posing on Friday and it ended up with a massive bench clearing bust-up taking place the following day. These baseball players can get a bit touchy at times.

Even Jason Kendall! - Zambrano homered on Monday, Kuo homered on Tuesday, so it was no surprise that this sequence was finished off with an even more unlikely event on Wednesday. Jason Kendall, no doubt spurred on by the embarrassment of these "soft pitchers" making him look bad, hit his first home run in over a year. This gap was relatively small compared to the 247 game homer-less streak he had endured prior to his previous long ball (also coming during a Joe Blanton start, strangely enough). What odds would you get for 2007 being Kendall's first multi-homer season since 2004?

Look away in shame – Finally, it's always good to see British people taking an interest in baseball, but we probably could have done without this week's escapade. Victoria Beckham waltzed out to the mound at Dodgers stadium on Monday and threw out the ceremonial first pitch. Somehow she managed to retain her "pouting like a demented fish" facial pose during the event. What a pro! Funnily enough, Posh wasn't there as a dedicated baseball fan and it was actually just a part of some "reality" TV show she is making to sell the Beckham brand to America. Yes, I'm dumbfounded by the idea of the Beckhams being part of a "reality" programme as well. L.A. probably doesn't need two more hideously vain, celebrity-obsessed idiots (no offense), but at least they're taking them off our hands.

Week Twelve

Sunday 17 June to Saturday 23 June.

Week twelve brought more inter-league play. Many people knock it, but at the very least it gave a great player the chance to make an emotional return to his old stomping ground this week. Sentimentality abounds in this edition of "Weekly" hit ground ball.

Home is where the heart is - The best story of the week was the return of Ken Griffey Junior to Seattle. The sure-fire future Hall-of-Famer had eleven phenomenal seasons in Seattle before departing for Cincinnati on account of family reasons. Things haven't gone as well as he would have liked since that point, with injuries taking their toll; however there are still few better sights in baseball than seeing Junior's home run swing and so far in 2007 we have been able to witness it on nineteen occasions. An emotional ceremony was held before the game on Friday, his first visit back to Safeco, and it was great to see the welcome he received.

"Can we play you every week?" - So, Griffey and the Mariners have a reason to like inter-league play and the Colorado Rockies are likely to join them on that list. The Yankees rolled into town this week for a three-game series that saw just over 145,000 fans stream through the turnstiles. Then the Rockies went and swept the most storied franchise in sports, in theory sending the fans home happy although no doubt a good proportion were wearing caps adorned with the interlocking NY. Still, it was an extremely successful series all around for the Rockies organization.

Underdogs bite back - Wednesday was a day for the underdogs, a day when the persecuted were able to stand proud and

tall in front of the many naysayers, such as myself. Jeff Weaver logged his first win of the season and it was no ordinary performance. From terrible struggles to a complete game shutout: it's the Weaver way. Okay, he was facing the Buccos. You've got to start somewhere though. On the same night, Kip Wells finally had something to smile about as well. In last week's WHGB I raised the question of whether Wells would be on the Cardinals' roster for much longer. Ultimately he received a stay of execution, but he was demoted to the bullpen. Wells got over the disappointment by pitching two innings and being credited with the win. Okay, it was against the Royals. You've got to start somewhere though.

Maybe Weaver and Wells are starting to see their luck turn?!

Streak over - The one thing you can be certain of with streaks is that they will come to an end. Miguel Tejada's run of 1,152 consecutive games was snapped by a fractured wrist, leaving Miggy with the fifth-longest total in Major League history. It says a lot about Tejada that he suffered the injury on Wednesday and yet he still took the field on Thursday. He didn't last long (one at-bat) and ultimately had to accept the inevitable trip to the DL.

Season over? - At least Tejada's streak took the focus away from the general mess that is the rest of the Orioles organization. Manager Sam Perlozzo was sacked on Monday, a move that was met with little surprise. Losing thirteen of fifteen games isn't the greatest demonstration of managerial skill. How much of the O's failings can be placed at Perlozzo's door is debatable though. Once again, the Orioles spent money during the off-season in a way that was confusing at best, misguided at worst. What must frustrate O's fans the most is that they have a number of talented

players around which a competitive team could be built. Sadly for them, the Front Office is struggling to fill in the blanks with useful players. Perlozzo is the fall-guy really. That there are underlying problems in Baltimore was emphasised when their number one candidate to replace Perlozzo, Joe Giradi, turned them down. In fairness to Giradi, having spent his first managerial stint working for Jeffrey Loria, moving on to Peter Angelos would have left many doubting his sanity.

Nice work if you can get it - Failure can be rewarded though. The Texas Rangers are having a dreadful season and the likes of Gagne, Teixeira, Otsuka and Sosa are all being mentioned as possible trading deadline movers as the Rangers look set to pull the plug early on 2007. That hasn't stopped GM Jon Daniels from getting a contract extension. Rafa Benitez will be looking on and hoping for similar charity when it comes to Tom Hicks providing some transfer funds for Liverpool FC this summer.

Strength through adversity - Hicks will be hoping that his faith at a time of crisis will help to turn things around in Texas. The Brewers have showed that sometimes you can go through a bad moment and come out the other side in great shape. The Brewers came flying out of the traps this season, only to hit a brick wall which climaxed in Justin Verlander throwing a no-hitter against them. Since then, the offense has picked up and the Brew Crew have gone 9-1.

History beckons - We've been tracking Bobby Cox's march towards the all-time record for managerial ejections this season. Last night, Cox made history by being thrown out of a game for the 131st time in his career. That ties him with John McGraw for the most ever. It's only a matter of time before he stands alone as the undisputed ejection king. By the sounds of it, Cox is

unlikely to celebrate this impending record-breaking feat. Naturally, he is much prouder of being fourth on the all-time win list. Both records are reason to admire him greatly in my book.

Zim the sorcerer – There aren't many reasons to watch the Nats right now, but Ryan Zimmerman is certainly one player to keep an eye on. He proved this again on Friday night with an entertaining “now you see it, now you don't” play at third base. A sharp grounder to the hot corner bounced up, somehow missed his glove and ended up squeezing through the buttons of his shirt. Everyone's initial bemusement turned to laughter as they realised what had happened. Zimmerman wasn't laughing much at the time, but fortunately for him the base hit didn't lead to any runs being scored.

Don't be late - Finally, whether attending the game at Cellular Field or just settling down in front of a TV or a monitor, everyone will make sure they are ready for the first pitch in today's game between the Cubbies and the White Sox (19.05 BST). Alfonso Soriano hit a lead-off homer on Friday night and then did it again yesterday. Will it happen three days in a row? The odds are heavily stacked against it, but you never know. It will be worth tuning in to find out.

Week Thirteen

Sunday 24 June to Saturday 30 June.

Another week brings another batch of historic achievements. With the 2007 All-Star line-ups set to be announced later this evening, let's take a look at who may have increased their chances of getting picked during the final week of voting, and who may have done the opposite.

Biggio 3000 – Craig Biggio's nineteen-year journey to 3000 hits reached its conclusion on Thursday night. Some will breathe a sigh of relief. Over the last season or so, the impending landmark has loomed large over both Biggio and the Astros. Indeed, there have been points when it has appeared to be more important than the Astros' place in the standings. Whether Biggio has deserved to stay in the line-up virtually every day is debatable (he has played in 74 of the Astros' 81 games and his OBP is under .300), but he has and his hit total has steadily grown. Still, concentrating on the negatives would be extremely harsh. It's a phenomenal achievement and the fact that he has recorded every hit in an Astros uniform is something to be celebrated in this modern era where few sports stars stay in one place for too long. Biggio is certain to make the Hall of Fame and he will do so wearing an Astros cap.

500 up – Thursday was a big day for the record books. Barely hours before Biggio enjoyed his big moment; Frank Thomas hit his 500th career home run. The Big Hurt became only the twenty-first player in Major League history to reach this mark. 448 of those homers were hit in a White Sox uniform and it is a shame that he left on a slightly sour note with the organization. Thomas was one of five players who entered 2007 with a shot at reaching 500, with A-Rod being the best bet to get there next.

Umpires strike back – The players always take the headlines, but the umpires gave both Biggio and Thomas a gentle reminder as to who is in charge on their historic night. Biggio attempted to stretch his 3000th hit into a double, but the second base umpire promptly called him out. Meanwhile, Frank Thomas' night ended early when he was ejected from the game for arguing with the home plate umpire. Record books be

damned; don't mess with the ump's!

More home runs – Another record was broken this week as Ryan Howard became the fastest player to reach 100 home runs. Howard got there in only his 325th game, beating the previous record held by Ralph Kiner by a whole sixty games. It wasn't a cheap homer either: estimates have the record-breaking shot at travelling just over 500 feet. Will he join Frank Thomas and the rest in the 500 club one day? Possibly, but don't forget that, although he has only been in the Majors for a few seasons, he is already twenty-seven years old.

"Bad week" of the week - While home run hitters are having a blast, some pitchers are not enjoying themselves quite so much. Brian Fuentes was having a very solid season for the Rockies, collecting twenty saves from twenty-two opportunities and looking a good bet to make his third All-Star game; however a closer's fortunes can turn very quickly. In eight days, Fuentes managed to blow four straight save opportunities, including giving up two walk-off homers to the Astros, as the Rockies went on an eight-game slide. Consequently, Fuentes has been relieved of his closer duties for the time being.

A perfect pitching prospect - Other pitchers aren't finding life so tough. The Brewers have brought through some great young talent over the last couple of years and it looks like they might have another on the horizon. Manny Parra, a twenty-four year old prospect, pitched a perfect game on Monday for the Brewers' Triple-A team: the Nashville Sounds. That Parra replaced Yovani Gollardo in the rotation, after the latter was promoted to the Majors, shows they've got plenty of depth in their system.

Age before beauty - It's not just the young pitchers who are proving their worth. On Wednesday, Maddux, Glavine, Smoltz,

Clemens, Williams and Moyer combined to make history by becoming the first group of six, forty-plus year old starters to take the mound on the same day in the Majors. While the Braves' former big three all got wins (teaching young pups Cain, Reyes, and Bowie a lesson in the process), Roger Clemens was dealt his third loss of the season by twenty-seven year old Erik Bedard, who was just five years old when the Rocket made his Major League debut.

Rod Beck R.I.P. - Finally, the sextet of forty-plus pitchers starting on Wednesday only served to make the death of Rod Beck all the more tragic. The former All-Star reliever was a colourful character during his time with the Giants, Padres, Cubs and Red Sox. Sadly, Shooter battled with substance abuse issues and passed away at just thirty-eight years old last Sunday.

Week Fourteen

Sunday 1 July to Saturday 7 July.

Well, we've reached the halfway point of the season, the All-Star game is nearly upon us and players who are not part of the festivities are looking forward to a break (all three days of it!). As always, MLB has produced a wide variety of stories over the last week. Here's my personal selection of the highlights and lowlights.

Hargrove gone - The week started off in a strange fashion, with the Mariners' manager Mike Hargrove announcing his shock resignation. Seattle had won seven games on the spin prior to the announcement and, confounding everyone's pre-season predictions, had put themselves into a position to make a real push for the play-offs in the second half of the season. In Hargrove's last game in charge, after the news had been broken, the M's sent their leader off in style with a walk-off victory in

the bottom of the ninth against the Blue Jays.

Narron next - Hargrove's departure was a surprise; Jerry Narron getting the boot from the Reds was less so. Narron had a sub-.500 record in his two years as manager in Cincinnati and he left the team languishing at the foot of the Major League standings with a 31-51 record in 2007. The Reds made the cut with the division-leading Brewers sitting 16.5 games ahead. As with the Orioles and Sam Perlozzo two weeks ago, the team's desperate plight is the consequence of many factors, but sacking the manager is the easy way to try and make a break from the past.

The fate of Fuentes - The managers aren't the only people who are having a bad week. In the previous edition of WHGB, Brian Fuentes' dramatic collapse was highlighted and it appeared that his hopes of making the All-Star team had been dealt a fatal blow; however Fuentes' early season form was acknowledged with a place on the NL's All-Star team after all. Just when Rockies' fans were hoping that Fuentes' confidence may have been restored, he suffered an injury which means that he won't be able to take the mound in San Francisco. Fortunately it's only a minor injury and a trip to the DL does not appear to be on the horizon.

Sweeping New York - It certainly wasn't all bad news in Colorado this week. Two weeks ago, the Rockies gained a mention in WHGB by sweeping the Yankees at Coors Field. Well, New Yorkers clearly don't agree with that Mile High air. Colorado swept the Mets this week in a three-game series, earning themselves the distinction of being the first team in history to sweep both the Yankees and the Mets in the same season.

350 for Clemens - Which figure was more decisive in convincing Roger Clemens to put his retirement on hold for another season: the \$28 million pro-rated contract or the approaching landmark of 350 Major League wins? Yes, I'm as cynical as you, but that doesn't mean the Rocket shrugged off his win against the Twins on Monday as no big deal. "I just feel really blessed. I don't know any other way to put it," was Clemens' remark to MLB.com. He earned his 350th career win in fitting style as well, giving up just two hits and one earned run over eight innings. Tick it off as another supporting fact for the case of Clemens being the greatest pitcher ever.

Some win, some lose - From wins galore to losses aplenty. The Devil Rays came into this season with a batch of exciting young players and hope, at last, of a winning season. Unfortunately it hasn't worked out that way. Great stories such as the form of James Shields have been accompanied by the traditional tales of promise going unfulfilled (Elijah Dukes being a case in point). The Rays managed to snap an eleven game slide on Friday night, but went straight back to their losing ways the following day against the Royals. Sadly, it could be another one hundred loss season in Tampa Bay.

A new Japanese hero - Hideki Okajima's achievement of winning the AL Pitcher of the month award for April, ahead of his high-profile compatriot, was noted in the week five edition of WHGB. Nine weeks on, Okajima has one-upped Dice-K yet again by being selected for the final AL All-Star roster spot. Okajima might have been an afterthought prior to the start of the season, but Boston fans have quickly learned what a good pitcher he is.

No laxatives required! - White Sox pitchers had a bad case of the runs on Friday. The Twins pounded them for twenty in the first of a double-header on Friday and then followed it up with a further twelve in the night game. Mark Buehrle stopped the rot with a great start yesterday, but it looks like that may be his last performance in a White Sox uniform. The 2005 World Series champs are having a miserable season and Buehrle might not be the only player leaving the South Side over the next few weeks as they re-tool for next year.

Made in Canada - As part of the Twins' run-feast on Friday, Justin Morneau hit three homers in the second of the two games. Earlier in the week, the Rangers' Brad Wilkerson matched this feat, going deep three times against the Angels. Mildly interesting link between the two: Morneau is Canadian while Wilkerson was the last person to wear the Montreal Expos uniform, doing so during an MLB Japan All-Star tour after the 2004 season.

The "I wish he was in my fantasy team" performance of the week - While Fantasy owners would be happy with Morneau and Wilkerson's three-homer days, Erik Bedard gave the best fantasy performance of the week. Bedard struck out fifteen in a complete game shut-out win against the Rangers, good for fifty-nine points in the Fantasy Baseball UK competition. And no, he isn't in my team (they never are).

Note: After their game on the same day as this was posted, the White Sox announced that Mark Buehrle had in fact signed a four-year extension to stay with the club. White Sox fans learned to never give up hope, while I was reminded that, when it comes to possible trades, it's always worthwhile hedging your bets with words such as "may" (as in he "may" have played his last game for the White Sox).

Week Fifteen

Sunday 8 July to Saturday 14 July.

Week 15 is an All-Star game special. It's the event that has dominated the week, as it does every year, and fortunately it actually deserved all of the attention this year.

American League wins again – How much can you tell from one game? Not a lot, but many believe that the American League is stronger than the senior circuit right now and the NL are not providing a convincing argument against it. The AL's 5-4 victory makes it eleven games without a loss, including ten wins and the infamous draw in 2002. Now we know which league will be hosting the first game of the 2007 World Series, which city will it be? Boston, Detroit, Cleveland, Anaheim, Seattle, Minnesota and (don't count them out) New York look the most likely destinations, but don't ask me to pick a favourite. It should be a fantastic battle over the rest of the season, as it will be in the National League.

All-Star: "good game" shock! – Leading up to the game, I went on record to say that they generally disappoint. 2007 was an exception though. It wasn't a rip-roaring classic, but it was played in a competitive spirit and the late comeback from the National League made for a great finale. Shame for NL fans it was Aaron Rowand instead of Albert Pujols at the plate at the end. Not that it bothered Albert much of course! Being kept on the bench by your own skipper in an All-Star game is the sort of slight that can simmer away in the background for the rest of the season. Cards fans will be hoping that's not the case: they've got enough problems without La Russa and Pujols falling out.

All-Star moment – Several to choose from. My personal favourite was Johan Santana's

strikeout pitch to Soriano in the seventh inning. Barry Bonds showing bunt in the third inning was a genuine laugh-out-loud moment (whether you were a fan watching the tele in Britain or Derek Jeter standing at shortstop). But what else could it be other than Ichiro's inside-the-park home run? Yes, it took a funky bounce off the right-field wall, but with the way the wind was swirling, it was a hell of a hit in any case. And, of course, it was a historic hit as well, leading to the first inside-the-park homer in All-Star game history.

Ichiro! - Tuesday night, he's the All-Star Game MVP. Friday he announces a five-year extension with the Mariners, enabling him to stay in his adopted home city with an extra \$90 million on its way. Not exactly the worst week in his life, I would guess.

Pronk's big pay day - Ichiro wasn't the only top player securing his future this week. Travis Hafner missed out on an All-Star appearance, but he used his spare time to good effect by agreeing a four-year extension to his current contract with the Tribe. Pronk will earn \$57 million from his new deal and the fans in Pronkville, the area in right field at the Jake that has been named in honour of the slugger, will be delighted.

Psychic Sutcliffe – Rick Sutcliffe has had a few embarrassing moments in the commentary booth, most notably when he turned up unannounced as a guest to the Padre's booth last year having enjoyed a few too many beers for his own good. Still, he does a great job commentating on the MLB International broadcast of the World Series and he excelled himself during the All-Star game by calling Alfonso Soriano's home run just before J.J. Putz let go of the fastball that he promptly dispatched into the seats.

Putz not a klutz – Seeing Putz struggle a bit in the All-Star game was a big surprise considering how dominant he has been this season. Any fears that Seattle fans may have had about it damaging his confidence were quickly put to rest though. In two appearances against the Tigers since the game, Putz has struck out four, given up just one hit and recorded two saves. He now has twenty-six saves on the season (most in the AL) from twenty-six opportunities and has twenty-eight successful saves in a row stretching back into last season: a Mariners record.

A Brucie bonus?! - Poor old Bruce Froemming. There he was, manning home plate at the All-Star game in his final season of a thirty-seven year umpiring career. All was going well until he got hit in the chest by a foul ball. And then it happened again! If a referee gets clonked in the face by a football, does he get much sympathy? You bet he doesn't, and neither do baseball umpires when they get tagged by a foul ball. Not even from their fellow umpires. Froemming, always a colourful character, has certainly divided opinion during his tenure as the longest serving umpire in Major League history. There would have been a few baseball fans, and pitchers, shouting "three time's a charm", that's for sure.

Five star service - Finally, the best thing about the All-Star game was Five's coverage of the event for the British audience. Johnny and Josh did a great job from their prime position in the press box and having Dave along for the ride is always a treat (despite his sweaty shirt!). Between Johnny's fixation with Albert Pujols' flashy watch, the entertaining guide to San Francisco, and the always insightful mid-innings comments on the game itself, you could tell that they were delighted to be there and they really gave British fans a sense of what it was like to be at the event.

The only shame was that they didn't have any footage of Johnny and Josh taking batting practice at AT&T Park (surely it wasn't to spare your blushes, hey guys?!). Whichever American League city hosts game one of the World Series, I hope Five digs deep and sends the team out there to broadcast directly from the stadium this year. Seeing Johnny, Josh and Dave at Fenway in their tuxedos would be a brilliant way to cap off the season.

Week Sixteen

Sunday 15 July to Saturday 21 July.

The Phillies set a landmark losing record, the Cards lose Carpenter, and the umpires lose their minds. All in all, it's been a strange week.

10,000 and counting - The week started with an historic losing feat as the Philadelphia Phillies became the first sports franchise to lose 10,000 games. The record was 125 years in the making, Phillie fans watching an average of eighty losses during each one. Over that many years, and considering the amount of games baseball teams play, it's perhaps not too surprising that such a total could be accumulated. The real test is how many games they've won over the period as well. The answer: 8810. That leaves them with a .468 winning percentage. An article on MLB.com painted a rather depressing picture for the Phillies, making the point that they will need thirty-two straight 100-win seasons just to break .500. Still, if you're not going to be great, you may as well be great at being bad. Phillies fans can rest assured, their place as the best losers in sports will be safe for a while. Indeed, three more have been added to the total over the past week.

Losing is a habit - The Phillies' feat has made everyone else look at their losses. The Braves, Cardinals, Cubs, Pirates and Reds have all broken the 9,000 loss barrier, with Atlanta (9685 - including the franchise's periods in Milwaukee and Boston) being the closest to joining the Phillies in the 10,000 club.

Franco fights on - As an old, storied franchise, it's fitting that the oldest player in the Majors has returned to the Braves. Julio Franco was designated for assignment by the Mets this week and, to the surprise of no one, he found his way back on to Atlanta's roster. Franco was with the Braves between 2001 and 2005 and he is hoping that some useful performances from the bench over the rest of this season will allow him to return in 2008 and to take the field as a fifty year old.

All quiet on the trade front - Franco's switch between the NL East rivals was one of the few moves that took place this week, despite the looming 31 July trading deadline. Elsewhere, Cezar Izturis moved to the Pirates, the Molina era ended in Anaheim with Jose being traded to the Yankees, and the Cubs picked up Jason Kendall from the A's. While they are not exactly headline-grabbing, blockbuster changes, both Molina and Kendall might end up playing the role of unlikely heroes down the stretch and into the play-offs.

Ichiro in the money - Three weeks ago, fans in Seattle were nervously awaiting developments as rumours swirled around Ichiro's future with the team. When it was announced last week that the Japanese star had signed a five-year contract extension with the M's, many celebrated the fact that he would remain tied to the organisation for several years to come. What they didn't know at the time was quite how long Ichiro would be on the pay-roll. The Associated Press revealed this week

that \$25 million of his contract will be deferred (at 5.5 per cent interest) and that he will be receiving the money in instalments until at least 2032. With that amount, plus the \$5 million signing bonus, taken out of the equation, Ichiro will effectively be pocketing \$17 million each year for the next five years. Why he needs the Mariners to pay him an average of \$35,000 a year "housing allowance" on top of that is a bit of a mystery. The M's will also be paying for an interpreter, rather than telling him to spend some of his millions on English lessons. Rumours that David Beckham demanded an interpreter as part of his contract with the L.A. Galaxy are unconfirmed.

Moneyball comes to soccer? - Speaking of Beckham, the growing U.S. relationship with soccer was emphasised by the owners of the A's announcing that they would be reviving the San Jose Earthquakes franchise next season in Major League Soccer. Oakland's GM Billy Beane is a well-known soccer fanatic and rumours about this development have been circulating for over a year. Beane has stated that he's not about to leave baseball, but he will be involved with the Earthquakes. Anyone who has read Moneyball will know that San Jose's name is quite apt considering Beane's legendary ability to blow a gasket every now and then.

Carpenter out - While the anticipated La Russa/Pujols post-All-Star game problems have seemingly failed to materialize, it's been another depressing week in St Louis. After several false starts and setbacks, the Cardinals' ace Chris Carpenter finally saw his 2007 officially come to an end when it was announced that he will undergo the all-too-familiar Tommy John surgery. Carpenter will likely be out of action for at least ten months, meaning that the Cardinals will have to cope without their number one starter for the first half of the

2008 season as well.

Wells rallies - The Cardinals' starting pitching has really come unstuck in 2007. Carpenter and Mulder have been on the sidelines injured, while additions such as Mike Maroth have failed to perform. Kip Wells has been one of the main disappointments in St Louis (and a regular WHGB target), but Cards fans will be hoping that his most recent outing will be a positive turning-point. Just as former Cardinal Jeff Weaver did back in week twelve, Wells broke out of his slump by pitching an absolute gem. The right-hander pitched eight, scoreless innings against the Marlins, giving up just two hits in the process and earning his fourth win of a very testing season.

The Barry and Bud show - Barry Bonds came out of a slump in typical fashion by slugging two homers against the Cubs on Thursday (the Giants still lost the game, which sums up the history of the franchise over the last few seasons). Bonds is now just two shy of Aaron's 755 mark. Much has been made about whether MLB Commissioner Bud Selig will be in attendance when Bonds sets the new record. With the Giants currently playing in Selig's home town of Milwaukee, the Commissioner has had a ready-made excuse to be at the recent games without actually being there to see Bonds (so he says). Unfortunately for Bud, it doesn't look like Bonds will oblige and get the deed over with. Cue the intense speculation over whether Bud will be jetting off to San Francisco after today's game. Maybe Bud will show up and claim that he's just there to collect his glasses after losing them at the All-Star game?

Umpires under a spell - Finally, it's been a strange week of umpiring mistakes and the White Sox have been in the thick of it. Grady Sizemore was credited with a catch

against the South-siders on Monday despite replays clearly showing that the ball had hit the wall first before landing in his glove. Later in the week, J.D. Drew hit a home run over the Green Monster against the White Sox only for the umpires to miss it (the ball bounced back down to the field of play and the umpires ruled that it hadn't cleared the fence). To rub salt into the wound, Terry Francona was subsequently ejected for arguing over the call (unsurprisingly he was a touch angry that the umpires had missed it). Fortunately for the umpires, in both cases the injured party went on to win the game. Funnily enough, it's not just been the baseball umps who've been making some strange decisions this week, as shown by the Kevin Pietersen "he's out, he's not out" saga in the England-India cricket test match. Maybe the release of the latest Harry Potter book has had the officials in a magical trance?

Week Seventeen

Sunday 22 July to Saturday 28 July.

It's a big weekend with Hall of Fame inductions, Bonds' home run chase and the trading deadline just days away. The week leading up to it was pretty eventful as well.

Baseball mourns and gives thanks - The week started off with two emotional events, one from each end of the spectrum. Mike Coolbaugh, the first base coach for the Tulsa Drillers (the Rockies' Double A affiliate) was tragically killed on Sunday when he was hit in the head by a line drive. The accident has re-opened the debate on whether coaches should wear batting helmets. When something like this happens, it hardly seems like a debate at all. The following day, baseball remembered Coolbaugh while being heartened by another tale of courage. One year ago, Jon Lester was forced to consider

his mortality when he was diagnosed with cancer. Thankfully, he has battled through and returned to the Majors on Monday, picking up a win against the Indians.

Perfect no more - J.J. Putz saw his Mr Perfect impression come to an end this week. After thirty-one successful saves in a row, including twenty-nine this season, the Rangers finally got to him on Wednesday. As often happens in these cases, the blow wasn't dealt by one of the established hitters such as Teixeira, Young or Sosa. No, it was Ramon Vazquez who hit a two-run homer as Texas beat the M's 7-6. Sadly for Putz, it came at a terrible time for Seattle as it extended their losing streak to six.

Unbelievable Biggio - While Putz's timing might have been off, Craig Biggio couldn't have planned things any better. Before the Astros' game on Tuesday, the future hall-of-famer announced that he would be retiring at the end of the season. He then promptly hit a grand slam to break a 2-2 tie in the sixth inning. "Who's writing this stuff?" wondered the announcer. The guy with the initials CB might be worth questioning.

Close, but not close enough - Another CB wasn't quite able to write his own ending. Chad Billingsley was one out away from a complete game shutout against the Astros on Monday before Luke Scott smacked a two-run homer (the Dodgers still beat the Astros 10-2 though). If Tim Hudson watched the footage and wondered "what does that feel like?", he soon found out. The following day, Hudson himself was one out away from a complete game shutout before the Giants rallied and sent the game into extra innings. Hudson's effort went to waste in relation to his win column (he got a no decision), but the Braves at least managed to fight back and get the win in the thirteenth inning.

First impressions count (sadly for Lannan) - Wily old veterans like Biggio can write their own scripts, but rookies such as the Nationals' John Lannan have to accept the role they are given. The twenty-two year old lefty had his dreams come true on Thursday when he made his Major League debut against the Phillies. It didn't quite go to plan though. First, Lannan hit Chase Utley, breaking the All-Star second baseman's hand and lodging himself near the top of the "most wanted" list in Philadelphia in the process. Then he hit Ryan Howard. Now, in normal circumstances you could accept it as a nervous debutant losing his control (and pretty much everyone did after the event). The trouble was, Howard had hit a two-run bomb in his previous at-bat. 4.1 innings into his Major League career, Lannan was heading for an early shower after the umpire chucked him out of the game for deliberately plunking the Phillies' slugger. At least he made an impression, I guess.

From hero to zero to hero again - Anthony Reyes was a hero in the World Series last season, but this year has been a struggle for the young right-hander. Reyes was 0-10 in his first eleven starts and had been sent down to Triple A to gain some more experience (and, no doubt, to restore his confidence). The Cards had originally planned to keep him there for the rest of the season, but injuries necessitated his call-up yesterday and he finally got his first win of the season. Reyes pitched six innings, giving up two hits and two runs, as the Cards beat the Brewers for the second time in the same day. In fairness to Reyes, while his 6.40 ERA heading into the game was hurting his cause, his team mates were not helping him much over that span as they were only averaging around 2.4 runs during his starts. St Louis put three runs on the board in the first inning against Chris Capuano and Reyes took over from there.

The tale of Tyner's tater - Reyes showed that if you keep trying, eventually you will get your reward. Jason Tyner had gone 1,220 at-bats since his Major League debut without hitting a home run before finally launching his first last night against the Indians. Needless to say, his homer-less streak has been the source of much banter within the Twins' clubhouse, with MLB.com revealing that even Johan Santana had a bet at the start of the season that he would hit one before Tyner. While I'm no fantasy guru, it's probably safe to say that picking up Tyner on the expectation of a home run surge now the first is in the books would be unwise.

History beckons - Finally, while Tyner set his own homer landmark, Messrs Bonds and Rodriguez are closing in on slightly more prestigious numbers. Bonds hit number 754 on Friday at AT&T Park and will be swinging like an axe murderer tonight against the Marlins in the hope of equalling Aaron's record in his home park. If he hits it anywhere else (and the same goes for number 756 as well) you can rest assured that it won't be met by wild celebrations. That the Giants now move on to a three-game set in LA against their fiercest rivals raises the possibility that Bonds will be kept on the bench during the series. Meanwhile, Alex Rodriguez hit career home run number 499 off Gil Meche on Wednesday. The search for 500 is on, although it could have been brought to a peculiar end on Friday when the Yankees and Orioles played the final two innings of a suspended game from 28 June. Had A-rod homered, it effectively would have gone in the record books under the previous date and therefore his 499th would have been his 500th already. Fortunately for everyone's sanity, he grounded out to Tejada in his only at-bat.

Week Eighteen

Sunday 29 July to Saturday 4 August.

Week 18 was bookended by two days that will live in the memory of many baseball fans for years to come.

Career home run records - Just like buses, you wait a week for a home run landmark to be reached and then get two on the same day. Barry Bonds made history last night, and put baseball on the main BBC sports page in the process, by swatting number 755 into the left-field seats at Petco Park. While Bonds was largely booed before and after the event, most of the spectators were cheering as he was rounding the bases. Maybe they were cheering their own luck at being there to witness it, but they were cheering nonetheless. The six-game wait between 754 and 755 must have felt like a lifetime to Bonds, although he will have to go through it again until he actually breaks the record by hitting one more.

Alex Rodriguez also had to wait over a week to move from 499 to 500, with the Royals' pitching staff helping him out on both occasions. A-Rod is the youngest player to reach 500 and it was fitting that he reached the mark on the same day that Bonds hit his historic shot. Rodriguez certainly looks like the heir apparent to the career home run crown and while A-Rod himself isn't the most popular player around (partly because he is such a great player, to be fair), he hasn't been dogged by the drug controversies that have tainted Bonds' achievements in so many fans' eyes.

Bombs away - It was a strange week for A-Rod as while he was struggling to put one lousy long ball over the fence, his Yankee team mates were seemingly mocking him by blasting them with unerring ease. The

Bronx Bombers more than lived up to their nickname on Tuesday when they smashed eight dingers against the White Sox. Shelley Duncan, one of the culprits on that night, was really rubbing it in by launching five homers in his first eight Major League games. I guess hitting is contagious in that awesome Yankees lineup. Two days later, they put eight runs on the board in one inning in a brutal response to the White Sox who had dared to score eight runs against them in the top half of the same inning. That's the way to put a team in their place!

A starter's dream - The Yankees don't have a monopoly on big-scoring innings though. The Padres gave their starter, Tim Stauffer, a dream start last Sunday by handing him an 11-0 lead as he took the mound in the bottom of the first. He didn't make the most of it though, giving up seven runs in 3.2 innings himself before getting the hook. The Padres eventually ran out winners in an 18-11 game.

When pitchers pinch-hit - That first inning assault by the Padres was just the latest disaster in Jason Jennings' season. After moving from the Rockies to spend his walk year with the Astros, Jennings has probably pitched his way out of a very lucrative free agent contract by compiling a 2-7 record from fifteen starts (coupled by a 6.11 ERA). However, he managed to help the Astros win a game on Thursday with his bat. With their game against the Braves reaching the fourteenth inning, manager Phil Garner had no other option but to bring Jennings into the game as a very unorthodox pinch-hitter. Jennings laced a single to score Jason Lane in what turned out to be the game-winning run.

Lannan and the Nats - John Lannan's eventful Major League debut was highlighted in WHGB last week and he gets a mention this week for bouncing back and earning his first Major League win on

Wednesday against the Reds. Don't look now, but the Nats are really playing well at the moment. Shame they've also recently handcuffed themselves by extending the contracts of a couple of average veterans (Young and Belliard) rather than dealing them for something better at the deadline.

New boys doing well - Ah yes, the trading deadline. So many rumours, so much promise, and so little action. A few players have found themselves wearing new uniforms this week though and most have got off to a good start in their new surroundings. Mark Teixeira was the biggest name to move on deadline day and he has already endeared himself to fans in Atlanta by going deep in each of his first three games. Wilson Betemit hit a homer in his first at-bat for the Yankees as well. Meanwhile, the Padres raided the bargain bins to find a few cheap hitters to bring their offense back to life. Morgan Ensberg, who was unceremoniously dumped by the Astros, hit two home runs on Thursday and then the newly acquired Scott Hairston hit two on Friday, including a walk-off shot to win a game against the Giants. Meanwhile, the Phillies picked up Kyle Lohse on Monday and then had to take him out of his first start on Thursday after one inning due to injury. It sums up the Phillies' luck this season with their pitching staff. As Lohse put it himself at MLB.com, "I thought I'd try to fit in"!

The amazing, performance-enhanced Perez - Lohse's injury was only minor and he doesn't expect to miss his next start, but Neifi Perez will not take the field again this season and there has to be a question over whether he will ever make it back to the Majors. The light-hitting Perez was handed an eighty-game suspension for failing a drugs test for the third time. The ban started yesterday, the first day after his previous twenty-five game ban had come to an end. The idea that Perez was taking

performance enhancing drugs can't help but raise a smirk, although he is unlikely to be laughing as around \$1.25 million of his salary has just gone down the pan.

Welcome to the Hall of Fame – Finally we look back on how the week started, with Tony Gwynn and Cal Ripken Jr being inducted into the Hall of Fame. Estimates put the crowd at around 75,000, the largest ever crowd to attend the event, and it was really no surprise. Gwynn and Ripken were basically everything you could want from a ballplayer: great on the field, even greater off it. Many sports stars, with their egos inflated by the esteem they are held in for their on-field abilities, seem to be devoid of any concept of responsibility or humility. These two legends have always been exceptions to that rule and they both used their induction speeches to preach the virtues of hard work. It's difficult to imagine two better role models and they truly deserved their big day.

Week Nineteen

Sunday 5 August to Saturday 11 August.

On the weekend that the 2007-08 football season has begun, it's comforting to know that we've still got the best part of three more months of baseball to serve as a distraction. Not that I'm anti-football, far from it, but a combination of the relentlessly over-hyped Premiership and the likelihood that it will be another season of disappointment for Norwich City (although like all fans, I'm naively optimistic) makes me glad to have America's national past time to drift away to. As always, there's been plenty to capture the imagination in MLB this past week.

The home run king is dead, long live the home run king - We can't start anywhere else but with that man again. Barry Bonds

hit number 756 on Tuesday to become the all-time home run leader and, with the burden lifted from his shoulders, has continued adding to his tally over the course of the week. Bonds' reaction has unsurprisingly been one of relief: now he can simply concentrate on his baseball rather than the pressures of passing the Babe and Aaron. Elsewhere the landmark has prompted a variety of reactions. Hank Aaron lived up to his reputation by acknowledging Bonds' achievement via a very dignified pre-recorded message (which Bonds seemed to be genuinely touched by). The Commissioner of MLB wasn't in attendance, but considering the way he embarrassed himself when Bonds hit number 755, that was probably for the best. The American media has feasted on the story with the issue of steroids rarely far from the surface and sadly it is the latter, rather than the sporting achievement, that has prompted the most comment in the British press. Like most baseball fans, I'm just glad that we can now move on and talk about something else.

300 for Glavine – Tom Glavine joined the hallowed ranks of the 300 club on Sunday by helping his Mets to a 8-3 victory over the Cubs live on Five. He became only the twenty-third pitcher in Major League history to win 300 or more games. Of the other twenty-two, twenty are in the Hall of Fame and two (Clemens and Glavine's former team mate Greg Maddux) are nailed-on certainties so crossing the threshold from 299 to 300 seems to stamp your ticket to Cooperstown. That should come as no surprise as the Hall of Fame is designed to honour and celebrate the elite and the mark of a truly great player is someone who performs at a consistently high level for a long period of time. Glavine has been a terrific pitcher over the last twenty years and is still keeping the best hitters off balance at forty-one years old. Fourteen of his 300 wins have come in October and his

thirty-five career post-season starts are the most of any pitcher in MLB history. Glavine may only have one World Series ring (he was the MVP of that 1995 series as well), but he's in with a fair chance of winning another with the Mets this season. Glavine has suggested that he might retire should the Mets be successful this year. Few would begrudge him from going out on such a note.

The battle goes on – One of the best parts of baseball is the game within the game: the battle between pitchers and hitters, with both sides looking to stamp their authority on each other. Brandon Webb blanked the Nationals last night, leading his team to a 1-0 victory and making it four consecutive starts without giving up a run. While Webb is on a streak of thirty-three scoreless innings in the NL, Bobby Jenks has retired thirty-eight straight hitters in the AL which is only three behind Jim Barr's all-time MLB record. The length of these streaks suggests that it's more a case of great pitching than poor hitting. When the A's pitching staff managed to rack up twenty-one strikeouts against the Rangers on Monday, most observers apportioned the blame to the Texas offense. Still, the hitters are fighting back with the Cards putting ten runs on the board in a fifth inning onslaught against the Padres and the Rockies pounding nineteen runs in a game against the Brewers. Maybe the humidior was on the blink that night?

'It's 'Rick of the Rovers' stuff' – One man who knows about the pressures on both sides of the pitching/hitting battle is Rick Ankiel. In previous weeks we have seen stories in MLB unfold as if they were following a script. Ankiel's story is yet another that could easily be mistaken for the plot of a film. When he announced in March 2005 that he would be giving up pitching and taking to the outfield, most observers mourned the early end of a

promising Major League career. Brian Gunn of the [Hardball Times](#) summed up the feelings of many when he stated that Ankiel "is not a real hitter by any conceivable stretch of the imagination" and that "for all intents and purposes it's best to consider Rick Ankiel [as] retired from baseball". Gunn, a big St Louis fan, was being cruel to be kind; hoping for an end to the very public suffering that Ankiel had endured since his control escaped him in freakish fashion against the Braves in the 2000 NLDS. Two years and five months after that initial announcement, Ankiel walked to the batters box at Busch Stadium on Thursday night to the sound of rapturous applause. When he hit a three-run homer in the seventh inning, an incredible wave of joy swept the stadium and it's impossible to watch the footage without getting caught up in the moment. Ankiel followed this up by going deep twice last night, making it three homers in his first three games back in the big leagues. He's not going to keep hitting .417/.417/.1.167 of course, but there's every reason to think he can carve out a decent career as a hitter and it will be an incredible achievement if he does.

Where's the strikezone? - Ankiel may have suffered flashbacks had he watched any of the Yankees/Blue Jays series this week. Several pitchers were missing the strikezone by a fair distance, although this wasn't a case of erratic control. No, they were putting the ball exactly where they wanted it: straight in the direction of the batter. A feud has been building between the two clubs since A-Rod's schoolboy shout caused the Jays to drop a pop-up in a game earlier this season. Josh Towers hit A-Rod in the leg on Tuesday (this followed a failed attempt the day before) and Roger Clemens retaliated by nailing Alex Rios square in the back. You have to feel a bit sorry for Rios: there's a bit of a difference between Josh "tough as tissue" Towers throwing at you and Roger "the Rocket"

Clemens! The latter received a five-game suspension while Towers just received a fine, although I guess that's a fair reflection on the potential damage the two could have caused.

Beware: a moose is loose (on an ATV) – Finally, if bad blood still exists between the two AL East rivals, let's hope the events at Seattle haven't given them any ideas for the next round of retaliation. Coco Crisp nearly became Coco Crushed on Sunday after failing to look both ways when taking the field at Safeco. To be fair, he probably didn't expect the Mariner Moose to be hurtling past on an ATV. The Moose clipped Crisp as he went by and thankfully it didn't cause any damage to the ATV (Crisp was okay as well). No doubt the lawsuit is in the post though.

Week Twenty

Sunday 12 August to Saturday 18 August.

The division races are really starting to heat up. It's tight at the top of the AL Central and West divisions, and the Yankees are making a run at the East. In the Senior circuit, both the Mets and the D-Backs have opened up what could be decisive gaps, while the Cubs have finally overtaken the Brewers. There's lots to look forward to over the rest of the season, but there's also been a lot to look back on from the past week.

Cox chucked again - History will be the judge, but 2007 could well go down as one of the great record-breaking seasons. While the recent feats of Bonds, Glavine and A-Rod may have captured the most headlines elsewhere, WHGB has been following Bobby Cox's season more closely than most. Back in week twelve, Cox tied John McGraw's all-time record for the most

ejections . After an eight-week wait, Bobby finally took sole possession of the top spot when he got chucked out of a game against the Giants. That made it career ejection number 132, all coming as a manager (McGraw's total includes fourteen from his playing days). Cox took no pride from setting the record ("It means nothing. It just means I've been around for a long time. That's all" he said on MLB.com), but his players were more appreciative. The record-breaking ejection was typical of Cox: stepping in to argue Chipper Jones' case and taking the punishment to stop his player from being tossed instead. Yes, the record is partly down to Cox being a manager for such a long time, but the way he protects and defends his players is one of the many reasons for his longevity and success.

Glavine goodies – In last week's edition of WHGB, I noted Tom Glavine's achievement of winning 300 games and all that comes with it: entry to an exclusive 300 club and a one-way ticket to Cooperstown. But things got even better for Tom on Sunday when the Mets staged a pre-game ceremony honouring the starter. It looked less like Glavine had reached a tremendous landmark and more like he had just won a TV Quiz show. There were a few gifts to start with, such as a decorative plaque on which 300 golf balls spelt out "300", a glass plate signed by his team mates, and a pair of hockey jerseys. Then came the "Bullseye" moment: two jet skis and a sparkling SUV. No doubt they made all the sacrifices seem worthwhile!

From "Bullseye" to "The Price is Right" - Wednesday proved to be a lucrative day for several talented young ballplayers. It marked the new deadline for draft picks to sign with their respective clubs and, as with most such deadlines, the weeks of posturing were brought to an end by last minute announcements of deals being

reached. Number one pick David Price was unsurprisingly the biggest winner, banking himself a six-year, \$11.2 million contract with the Devil Rays. Rick Porcello had reason to celebrate as well; he walked away with a \$7.25 million deal from the Tigers. Not bad money for guys who haven't played a single inning of professional baseball! Of course, if they live up to their potential then it will be money well spent. Time will tell.

Big Z staying in Chicago - Judging by the money that they commanded, it's no surprise that both Price and Porcello are potential starting pitchers. Securing even Major League average starting pitching is an expensive task nowadays, let alone young pitchers who could be number one/two starters in the future. Locking down a proven ace? That's going to take a lucrative multi-year contract. And so it proved as the Cubs took Carlos Zambrano off the 2007/08 Free Agent market by coming to an agreement over a five-year \$91.5 million deal. Perhaps it's more accurate to state that Zambrano took himself off the market. It looks as though this is one of those rare occasions when both the team and the player have given a little to make it happen. Zambrano wanted to stay but rightly wanted a contract close to what he deserved, even if it wasn't the biggest pay-day he could secure; the Cubs wanted to keep him and knew they would have to offer a very good deal to get it done, even if Carlos was prepared to accept a slight home-town discount. Cubs fans have every reason to be delighted and it's a great boost for everyone on the North-side going into the final six weeks of the season.

Brewers droop! - Meanwhile, things aren't going quite so well in Milwaukee. After enjoying a comfortable lead at the top of the NL Central for so long, the Brewers now find themselves 0.5 games behind the

surging Cubs. Chris Capuano typifies their downward slide. Through his first seven starts, Capuano was 5-0 with a 2.31 ERA. In his fifteen starts since that point, he has lost ten straight decisions and upped his ERA by three whole runs. He takes the mound tonight with the hope of putting an end to his skid. He's facing the Reds (53-69), but their ace Aaron Harang is on the mound, which kind of sums up his luck really.

The more things change, the more they stay the same - Last week, WHGB noted the impressive pitching streaks that Messrs Jenks and Webb were on and those streaks continued in week twenty. Bobby Jenks logged another three up, three down inning last Sunday to equal Jim Barr's record of forty-one consecutive outs. A slight ankle injury has so far prevented him from trying to break the record, but few would bet against him doing so. Meanwhile, Webb blanked the Braves on Friday night, making it five straight starts without giving up a run, the last three of which were complete game shutouts. Webb is sitting on a forty-two inning scoreless streak and is chasing down Orel Hershiser's record of fifty-nine. More importantly, the 2006 Cy Young winner is well and truly playing his role as the staff ace, with the young D-Backs team atop the NL West and in with a great chance of making the postseason.

Micah makes his mark - One of the many youngsters playing their part in Arizona's success this year has been Micah Owings and his performance last night was the highlight of his season so far. Owings pitched seven solid innings against the Braves, giving up three hits, three runs and striking out seven. He backed this up by blasting two home runs as part of a 4 for 5 night at the plate, contributing six RBIs to his own cause in a 12-6 victory. The win-loss statistics don't generally tell the whole story for a pitchers' performance, but in this

case I think we can say he definitely earned his sixth win of the season.

Phil Rizzuto R.I.P. - Finally, the Yankees lost a much-loved family member this week. Phil Rizzuto, the Hall of Fame shortstop and long-time Yankees broadcaster, passed away at the age of eighty-nine. By a strange coincidence, I had been reading about Scooter during my lunch-break on Tuesday before hearing the sad news when I arrived home from work later that day. It was a poignant reminder of the sort of person Rizzuto was, beyond his obvious talent on the diamond. The reference came in Jonathan Schwartz's article "A Day of Light and Shadow", one of a fantastic collection that makes up the book "Sports Illustrated: Great Baseball Writing". The article relates to the infamous 1978 Red Sox-Yankees play-off game, prior to which Schwartz had a chance encounter with the Yankees great. Rizzuto was always unashamedly rooting for the Bronx Bombers during his commentary, something that would understandably infuriate a died-in-the-wool Boston fanatic like Schwartz, but just a few minutes spent in his company was enough to convert him.

"I had never met Rizzuto before and had often imagined myself dressing him down before a large and approving assembly. Instead, when he departed to make his way to the radio booth, I found myself regretting the fact that I hadn't told him that I had never come upon a better or more exciting shortstop. Never."

What better testimony to Rizzuto's character could you have?

Week Twenty-one

Sunday 19 August to Saturday 25 August.

The laws of the universe dictate that some people will have a good week, and some will have a bad one. Here's a review of this week's winners and losers.

The good news first - Wednesday was a big day for Dave Trembley. After twenty years in the Minor Leagues, he finally became a Big League manager on a full-time basis. The Orioles announced that the "interim" part of his title could be thrown away as Trembley received a contract to manage the Orioles for the 2008 season, with an option for 2009. You will remember that Joe Giradi was initially offered the job virtually days after previous manager Sam Perlozzo was shown the door at the end of June. Giradi turned it down and maybe that will be a blessing in disguise for the Orioles. It has certainly been a big break for Trembley, but few would deny him his chance. He made a favourable impression during his two-month period as interim manager and he has certainly earned his shot.

Then the bad news - How have things gone so far for Trembley? "Room for improvement" would probably be the nicest way to put it. His reign could hardly have started any worse. Mere hours after the press conference, Trembley could only sit and watch as his team were pounded for 30 runs by the Texas Rangers. Their 3-30 defeat (during which the Orioles actually jumped out to a 3-0 lead) was the worst in franchise history and was the first time a team has conceded thirty runs in over 110 years. The Orioles then lost to the Rangers again in the second game of the doubleheader and have followed that two-loss day with three more defeats. So, five

games in and Trembley has a 0-5 record, with his team being outscored 17-59. No one said it would be easy, Dave.

Teixeira doing his share - The Orioles know that it will take time to turn things around and, while managers are important, the best way to improve your team is by bringing in quality players. That's why Atlanta were prepared to part with several prospects to acquire Mark Teixeira. The first baseman has lived up to his billing since joining the Braves on deadline day. He's hitting .303/.406/.697 with Atlanta and had a particularly impressive week. It began with two homers last Sunday, followed by another pair on Monday. Overall he was 12 for 28 on the week, with seven walks, five homers and fifteen RBIs. Unfortunately for the Braves, Tex hasn't been able to carry the team on his own. Atlanta have lost seven of their last ten and have slipped to seven games behind the Mets in the NL East.

Hamels hits the DL - While additions to a team can play a major part in deciding a pennant race, so can losses through injury. The Phillies have followed Atlanta's lead recently and let the Mets surge ahead. They've just about been able to cope with the untimely loss of Chase Utley over the past few weeks, but seeing Cole Hamels head to the disabled list is a real blow to their post-season aspirations. Losing a starter is slightly different to losing an everyday position player: Hamels will hopefully only miss two starts. Those two games could end up being decisive though. The Phills have now lost six of their last seven games and are in danger of seeing another season slip away.

The DL hokey-cokey - The Braves have also had some bad luck with injuries. Edgar Renteria came off the 15-day DL on Wednesday, faced one pitch and then went straight back on it again. The Braves'

shortstop had been hobbled by an injury to his right ankle, yet he returned to the lineup having completed various fielding drills and batting practice without any side effects. The one thing Renteria hadn't practised was checking his swing and it was this action that somehow set the injury off again.

Seven seasons and counting - A former team mate of Renteria's from his days in St Louis is continuing to play through injuries. Albert Pujols is dealing with a hamstring problem, but it doesn't seem to be hurting him at the plate too much. Pujols homered in five straight games this week and became the first player in Major League history to hit at least thirty home runs in each of his first seven seasons. That Pujols has performed at such a level despite rarely taking to the field completely healthy is remarkable.

10 RBIs for Anderson - Sticking to the injury theme, Garret Anderson has battled through more than his fair share of injuries over the past few seasons, but he tried to make up for lost time with his performance against the Yankees on Tuesday. Anderson went 4 for 6, hitting two homers and two doubles while racking up ten RBIs. A-Rod went deep twice for the Yankees and, strangely enough, he was the last player to get ten RBIs in a game, against the Angels, back in 2005.

Santana's seventeen strikeouts - While Anderson certainly had a great night, the Yankees pitchers he was facing were not making things too difficult (Mussina in particular had a second poor start in a row). Had he been facing Johan Santana, maybe things would have been a bit different. The Twins' ace recorded a career-high seventeen strikeouts last Sunday, striking out each Rangers hitter at least once in the process. Santana came out of the game after eight innings, but the Rangers didn't

receive any respite as Joe Nathan took to the mound and retired all three batters (2 on strikeouts) to close out the game. The Rangers' offense may have been feeling sorry for itself, but spare a thought for their starting pitcher Kevin Millwood. He gave up just four hits and one run and still came out of the game with a loss to his name.

Pass the pitcher - Another pitcher having a tough time at the moment is Byung-Hyun Kim. He was placed on waivers by the Marlins at the start of the month and was claimed by Arizona. In his first start for the D-Backs, he lasted just 2.1 innings while giving up five runs. In his second start, against Florida, he recorded just one out before getting the hook. The D-Backs released Kim this week, the Marlins re-signed him and added him to their bullpen. Kim was called into action on his first day back and promptly gave up a three-run homer to Adam Dunn. Maybe Kim shouldn't unpack his bags just yet?

Bonds reveals all - Finally, Friday was another day of celebration in the life of Barry Bonds as he was honoured by the city of San Francisco. During his speech, Bonds lifted the lid on the secret of his success, claiming that "Love has given me the strength". Unconfirmed reports stated that a startled Bud Selig has demanded an investigation into whether love counts as a performance-enhancing drug and he is considering using Roxy Music's "Love is the drug" as vital evidence in throwing the book at the all-time home run leader.

Week Twenty-two

Sunday 26 August to Saturday 1 September.

It's been a week of high drama in MLB. The top teams in each division have been slugging it out, while individuals have been raising their games under the pressure of the intense competition. The excitement just continues to build as we head into the final month of the regular season with so much still to play for.

No-hitter in Boston – Clay Buchholz launched his way to the top of WHGB this week with his spellbinding performance last night against the Orioles. In just his second Major League start, the Red Sox rookie pitched an absolute gem, giving up three walks and one hit-by-pitch during nine dominant innings. As with any no-hitter, Buchholz's team mates played their part both by making some excellent defensive plays (most notably Dustin Pedroia robbing Miguel Tejada of a base hit) and providing the run support. The night was Buchholz's though. Many great pitchers have failed to record a no-hitter during their careers (Curt Schilling went agonisingly close earlier this season, for example), so to do it at this stage in his career must scarcely be believable for Buchholz.

Baker nearly perfect – While Buchholz was able to nail down his no-hitter, Scott Baker had to settle for a one-hitter on Friday after being perfect heading into the ninth inning. One of several promising young starters in the Twins organisation, Baker has seen several of his contemporaries climb above him in the pecking order since his debut in 2005, not least Boof Bonser and Francisco Liriano. There's reason to believe that the twenty-five year old is now starting to figure out life in the Big Leagues. His performances have

steadily improved each month this season, as evidenced by his 2.87 ERA since the All-Star break compared to a pre-ASB mark of 5.71, and the Twins will be hoping that his recent flirtation with perfection will increase his confidence even further.

K.C. and Baltimore on the receiving end (again) - It doesn't diminish the achievements of Buchholz and Baker, but the identities of the teams they strangled at the plate shouldn't come as much surprise. Baker's victims, the Royals, have scored the second-fewest runs (609) of any team in the AL so far this season, with the White Sox (567) occupying the bottom spot. Buchholz's victims were the Baltimore Orioles, who have endured a pretty miserable time since Dave Trembley took over the hot seat on a permanent basis last week. You will recall that his reign started in the worst possible way courtesy of a record 30-3 loss at the hands of the Rangers. Well, that loss was followed by another eight in a row, including a defeat by the Devil Rays in which they conceded eleven runs in one inning (the Orioles hit six home runs in the game and still managed to lose). They finally snapped this unwanted streak by defeating the Red Sox on Friday night, before Buchholz sent them back to their losing ways in emphatic style.

It's tight at the top - The Royals and the Orioles may not be in the battle for a play-off spot; however plenty of other teams are and it has been a fascinating week of baseball. The scheduling gods planned it to perfection, throwing together the first and second-placed teams in five of the six divisions, with the Indians facing the third-placed Twins in the other. The leaders in the AL West (the Angels over the Mariners) and the AL Central stole a march on their rivals by sweeping their respective series, while the chasers in the AL East, NL East and the NL West closed the gap with the Yanks sweeping the Red Sox, the Phillies

sweeping the Mets , and the Padres taking three of four from the D-Backs. In the NL Central, the Brewers' slide hit a new low on Tuesday when they lost the first game of their three-game series with the Cubs and fell to third place. They managed to bounce back and win the next game, but lost the finale leaving the Cubs in pole position with a month to go.

Another Rodriguez – The Giants may be watching the play-off race from the outside, but even that cannot diminish the joy that this season has brought to one of their players (and I don't mean Mr Bonds). Back in Week 10, WHGB highlighted the story of Guillermo Rodriguez who had spent twelve years in the Minor Leagues before finally getting called up to the Majors this season. He hit his first home run last Sunday and has performed admirably while backing-up Bengie Molina for the Giants. In thirty games so far this season, Rodriguez has hit a respectable .282/.350/.408 and, of course, has been part of the Giants team while Barry Bonds made home run history. Whatever the future holds for him, 2007 will always be a special year for Rodriguez and his family.

Farewell Number Five - It was an emotional night at Minute Maid Park on Monday as the Astros retired number five in honour of Jeff Bagwell. The presentation was handled perfectly with a well-chosen cast on hand to wax lyrical about the future Hall of Famer. It showed precisely why Bagwell is held in such high esteem within the game and by baseball fans in general: his first-rate statistics were always accompanied by a first-rate character. The only blot on the night was Bagwell's choice of shirt. Maybe I just don't understand that Texas dress sense?

And then farewell Purpura and Garner! - The Bagwell ceremony was yet another welcome distraction for Astros fans who

have endured a miserable campaign. A 58-73 record by the end of play on Monday resulted in both general manager Tim Purpura and manager Phil Garner being relieved of their duties (otherwise known as "sacked"). The timing of the move surprised many, but the decision had seemingly been coming for a while. Purpura was roundly booed by Astros fans during Bagwell's ceremony and the disastrous Jason Jennings trade has undoubtedly come back to haunt him. Whether it was the general manager's idea to bring Craig Biggio back this season is another matter though. Many have suggested that Astros owner Drayton McLane was responsible for this decision, one that was understandable from a sentimental point of view but completely at odds with the basic tenet of putting the best possible team out on the field. However, owners don't tend to sack themselves so Purpura and Garner will be looking for new jobs instead.

Triple the fun - Finally, it was triples all round on Monday. The Indians turned a 5-4-3 triple play at a crucial moment against the Twins. Up 7-3 in the seventh inning of the first of a three-game series, Cleveland cut short a Twins rally in the best way possible. Meanwhile the White Sox were hitting back-to-back-to-back jacks against the Devil Rays, chasing Edwin Jackson from the game partway through the seventh inning. Dan Wheeler entered from the bullpen, struck out the first two batters he faced and then gave up the fourth homer of the frame. That five-run inning was the only offense the White Sox could muster, but it was enough to get the 5-4 victory. Sadly for Chicago, their triple play at the plate will count for a lot less than the Indians' in the play-off hunt. The 2005 World Series must seem a life time ago to White Sox and Astros fans right now.

Week Twenty-three

Sunday 2 September to Saturday 8 September.

It's been a big weekend for sport. We've seen wins for England in the football, cricket and rugby, and the NFL season really kicks-off in earnest this evening. Alongside all of this, baseball continues to produce great stories, memorable moments and controversy.

What goes up must come down? - The St Louis-Pittsburgh clash on Thursday night may not have seemed like a particularly momentous game to those in attendance, but it proved significant for two people. Rick Ankiel continued his astonishing story by blasting two home runs against the Pirates, driving in seven runs in the game. However, his tale took a bitter turn the following day when it was reported that Ankiel had received a year's supply of human growth hormone (HGH) back in 2004 while recuperating from Tommy John surgery. While the drugs were apparently obtained legally through a licensed physician, and Ankiel has not broken any laws or rules, the news has cast a shadow over his remarkable comeback and reminded everyone that the issue of performance-enhancing drugs is far from straight forward. Where do we draw the line between genuine use of medicine and cheating? The revelations about Ankiel are the product of a much-wider investigation that has also pointed the finger at Troy Glaus and players/trainers from other sports.

Littlefield sacked - The Cardinals' 16-4 demolition of the Pirates also spelled the end for Pittsburgh GM Dave Littlefield. During his six-year tenure with the club, Littlefield has failed to halt the organisation's dismal displays. The Pirates

currently sit at 62-80 on the year and are destined for their fifteenth consecutive losing season. There's no doubt that PNC Park is something to be proud of and they do have a promising core of players in Tom Gorzelanny, Ian Snell, Paul Maholm, Zach Duke, Jason Bay, Adam La Roche and Freddy Sanchez to name a few. The Pirates are reportedly set to announce the appointment of a new CEO in the coming days and hopefully he will be able to work with the new GM to build on these foundations. Ownership will have to play their part as well though. ESPN lists the Buccos' payroll for 2007 at \$38.6 million, fourth lowest in the Majors, and even the wisest Front Office would struggle to put a consistent winner on the field with such relatively little investment where it counts. Of course, when you start with such a small pot of money it's even more important to spend what you have wisely. Littlefield's parting 'gift' of Matt Morris' salary in 2008 should be a painful reminder of this fact for the incoming CEO and GM.

One more win for the Royals - The Pirates aren't the only team with a disturbing fondness for losing. The Kansas City Royals have hit three figures in the losing column in each of the last three seasons, but one more win will guarantee that the sequence is brought to a halt (i.e. one more win and they can "only" lose 99 games). As befits the Royals' way recently, they haven't embraced the challenge with much urgency: they've been stuck on 62 wins since last Monday. Still, if there is hope in Pittsburgh then we can find hope in K.C. Rookies such as Alex Gordon, Billy Butler and Brian Bannister have provided bright spots this season (even if Gordon hasn't quite lived up to his pre-season hype - this year at least) and their GM Dayton Moore continues to earn favourable comments from within the game.

Frustrated Rays and O's - Sticking to the 'victory-challenged' theme, tempers boiled over in Tampa Bay and Baltimore this week. Carl Crawford was finally tipped over the edge on Monday when he was called out at first after seemingly beating out a throw. Crawford jumped up in the air and spiked his batting helmet on to the floor before turning his attention to the umpire. First-base coach George Hendrick tried to keep between Crawford and the umpire, resulting in the strange sight of the enraged outfielder trying to climb over Hendrick to get at the ump. Meanwhile Daniel Cabrera was less than impressed by Coco Crisp's base-running antics at third base which caused the O's pitcher to commit a balk, allowing Crisp to score a run. Dustin Pedroia was standing at the plate at the time and was the unfortunate victim of Cabrera's rage in the form of a fastball directed squarely at his head. Cue a bench-clearing spat and a suspension for Cabrera.

51 and counting - Alex Rodriguez continued his MVP-calibre season by going deep twice against the Mariners on Wednesday (both in the same inning) and then hitting two more last night against the Royals. A-Rod now has a Major League leading 51 homers on the season and is only the fourth Yankee ever to pass the fifty mark. The Yankees have been insistent that they will not re-sign A-Rod if/when he opts out of his contract at the end of the season, but he will be incredibly difficult to replace. While the thought of a player getting a multi-year deal worth \$30 million a year seems crazy, Rodriguez is doing his best to show that if anyone deserves that sort of money, he does.

Pedro's back ... - It was the moment that many Mets fans had been waiting for all season. Pedro Martinez finally made his 2007 debut on Monday against the Reds and it was undoubtedly a success. He

pitched six strong innings, mixing his speeds and location well, and gave his team a chance to win the game (which they duly did). Few expected him to take the mound and pitch like the Pedro of old first time out; it's more than possible that he will never recapture that form again, but there's every reason to suggest that he can be an effective starter for the duration of his current contract at least (health permitting) and, of more immediate concern, every reason to suggest that he can help the Mets take the NL East this year and to get to the World Series.

... and picking up where he left off -

While simply returning to the mound was an achievement for Pedro, he entered the game needing just two more strikeouts to reach 3,000 in his career. Martinez struck out opposing pitcher Aaron Harang to reach the milestone, becoming only the fifteenth pitcher in MLB history to do so. Not that everybody was aware of it, mind you. The Mets' catcher Paul Lo Duca casually lobbed the historic ball in Pedro's direction, completely oblivious to its importance. Something tells me he might be the butt of many a clubhouse joke at the moment. Pedro finished the game on 3002 strikeouts and will be looking to add to the total tonight against the Astros.

Week Twenty-four

Sunday 9 September to Saturday 15 September.

It's been yet another intriguing week in MLB. In the American League, we can probably say that there are now five teams battling for four spots. In the National League, all three divisions are far from settled with the possibility that even the Mets could miss out altogether on October baseball. If the past week is any indicator, there are plenty more twists and turns in

store over the next two weeks or so.

Good things come in threes – Two weeks ago we saw the Tribe turning three and the White Sox hitting three homers in a row. Those seemingly unusual feats were repeated this week. The Phillies turned the fourth triple-play of the 2007 season having already been responsible for the first back in April. I'll be honest, it was one of the uglier triple-plays that I have seen. Normally you expect to see the ball ping-pong around the infielders at break-neck speed, leaving the crowd rubbing their eyes in amazement. Not so in this case, with Greg Dobb catching Matt Holliday's line drive and then Chase Utley tagging out Sullivan and Tulowitzki leaving the crowd saying "is it?... oh.. it is". It was still a triple-play though, so it's a bit harsh to complain really. As for the Brewers, they know how to do things in style. Hitting back-to-back-to-back jacks is always impressive, but when it's the first three batters of the day you know you are witnessing something special. Weeks, Hardy and Braun gave Ben Sheets a dream start against the Reds last Sunday and he didn't waste it as the Brewers took the game 10-5.

Living life to the max-well – Justin Maxwell doesn't believe in doing things by half. The Nationals have given the youngster a September call-up and he got his first Major League hit in his fourth game. He also got his first ever Major League home run at the same time. Oh, and his first grand slam. Yes, with the bases loaded and on an 0-2 count, Maxwell smashed a grand slam into the left-field seats to give the Nationals a 7-5 lead. The Nats naturally blew the game later on, but that didn't make it any less memorable for Maxwell.

Four more years of Ozzie? - Most managers would be fearing the axe with a 61-83 record on the season, but Ozzie

Guillen's punishment for the White Sox's campaign was a four-year contract extension (announced last Tuesday). In fairness to Ozzie, ditching him would have been the ultimate case of the "what have you done for me lately?" syndrome bearing in mind the world title he helped bring to Chicago two years ago. Still, it's very rare for a sports organization to make such a bold sign of support when a team has underperformed in the way that the White Sox have this season. Guillen's controversial character makes him more susceptible to the chop than most managers: "Ozzie being Ozzie" can be excused when the team is winning, but it makes him an easy target when things aren't going so well. White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf clearly doesn't blame Guillen for this disastrous campaign, but someone will be called to account if it's repeated next year.

Musical chairs in Minnesota - While the White Sox are happy to retain the status quo, changes are afoot in Minnesota. General Manager Terry Ryan announced his resignation on Thursday, although it won't signal the start of major disruptions in the Twins' Front Office. Assistant GM Bill Smith will simply shift up a place at the end of the season, while Ryan will remain with the organization as Smith's senior adviser. It's an interesting time for Ryan to vacate the hot seat. During his thirteen-year tenure as GM, the issue of a new stadium (and of course the related threat of contraction) has rumbled along and work has just now begun on their new home. The Twins have ludicrously played the pauper throughout (these are the same Twins who are part of the booming MLB market and are owned by Carl Pohlad – he of the estimated \$2.6 billion fortune), and Ryan has appeared to have his hands tied when it comes to adding extra pieces to the puzzle or keeping the prize pieces they already have. Torii Hunter looks set to

leave this winter after allegedly receiving a relatively pathetic three-year extension offer, while Johan Santana has been similarly slighted and has publicly lambasted the organization. With the new ballpark scheduled to open in 2010, the Twins are running out of excuses and if they cannot tie the likes of Santana, Morneau and Mauer to the team for years to come, Bill Smith is likely to take all the flak.

Philles: the comeback kings -

Philadelphia have been a permanent annoyance to the Mets this year. Time and again, they have waved goodbye to the Phillies, only to see them reappear in the NL East division race. Two games into their final series of the season, the Mets probably just want to get the final game over and done with. The Mets let a 2-0 lead slip away on Friday before being defeated in extra innings and then last night a 3-1 lead going into the seventh inning turned into a 5-3 loss. These were the Phillies' 44th and 45th come-from-behind victories of the season (most in the Majors) and made it seven straight wins against their rivals from New York. The Mets had a player ejected in the latter innings of both games, so maybe they are starting to feel the pressure?

Damon chasing the dollars - Boston fans will tell you that Johnny Damon is always ready to earn some extra money. After catching a lazy fly ball for a third out during a game against Toronto on Thursday, Damon jogged to the sideline and gave the ball to a fan. Nothing strange about that, you may think, but Damon had obviously been negotiating with the fan before the event as he was ready and waiting with his twenty dollar note! Damon gratefully accepted the payment, before handing it over to a kid whose reaction suggested that he would rather have had the ball instead.

Boston in Japan – We've seen Camden Yards turn into a home-from-home for Boston this season, with the stands packed out by more red than orange. In 2008 we may see the Red Sox nation descend on Japan as well. With Matsuzaka and Hideki Okajima on their roster, it came as no surprise to hear that the Red Sox are being lined up to open the 2008 MLB season in Japan with a series against the A's.

63 at last – Finally, as a follow up to last week's WHGB, congratulations must be extended to the Royals. At their eighth attempt, K.C. finally crossed the threshold from sixty-two wins to sixty-three, ensuring that they can't lose 100 games this season. From small acorns ...

Week Twenty-five

Sunday 16 September to Saturday 22 September.

It barely seems like yesterday that we were all counting down the days until the season started. Now we've only got a week left, but what a week in prospect! There's still so much to play for along with the sheer joy of watching a ballgame, which should never be taken for granted.

Who's joining the Red Sox? - Boston became the first team to clinch their post-season spot last night following their victory over the Devil Rays and the Tigers' loss. The Media are stressing over whether the Red Sox will head into October as the AL East winners or as the AL wild card, but I doubt the team itself will care one bit. Recent history has showed that how you get to the play-offs makes virtually no difference; you just need to get there and then anything can happen. Boston are set to rest several key players over the final week and while the Yankees may take pleasure from stealing the AL East crown, it

makes no sense for them to put too much energy into it as they virtually have the wild card sewn up anyway. The real battles are taking place in the senior circuit, where no division winner is certain and several teams will either see all their efforts rewarded, or counting for nothing.

Rockies are rolling – One of those National League teams treading a fine line between agony and ecstasy are the Colorado Rockies. They faced the Dodgers in a crucial four-game series this week and promptly swept their wild card rivals. The Rockies have now won seven in a row and have battled their way to within 2.5 games of the wild card despite suffering a number of injuries to key players such as Cook, Hirsh and Willy Taveras who is probably out for the rest of the season. Whether they can keep this remarkable surge going may depend on Matt Holliday. The left fielder has put his name into the NL MVP running with another excellent season, hitting eleven homers in his last thirteen games while boosting his RBI total to an NL-leading 131. However, Holliday was held out of yesterday's game against the Padres with an oblique strain and if a couple of days' rest doesn't cure the problem then the Rockies are likely to just fall short. We shall find out soon enough.

Thome joins the club – One of the great things about MLB is that even the teams out of contention can provide memorable moments. We entered the season with five players in with a chance of reaching 500 career home runs over the course of the year. Frank Thomas crossed the mark at the end of June and A-Rod did it in August, while it became clear after the All Star break that Manny Ramirez and Gary Sheffield would have to wait until 2008. So, the spotlight fell on Jim Thome. Last Sunday, Thome came to the plate against the Angels in the bottom of the ninth on 499 career home runs. It was Jim Thome

bobblehead day at the Cell, the White Sox had pulled to within a run having trailed 7-1 and Darin Erstad was standing on first base. You know how the story ends. Thome reached 500 by launching a walk-off homer, prompting scenes of unbridled joy for a group (players and fans combined) who have had little to celebrate in 2007.

Mollina's night – Yadier Molina followed Thome's lead on Wednesday. It was Molina night in St Louis, with Cards fans clutching their little Yadier bobbleheads. Having failed to complete the game on Tuesday due to illness, there was some doubt as to whether Molina would even take the field on his big night. He wasn't going to let a touch of sickness ruin things though and when he walked to the plate in the tenth inning, score tied at 1-1 with a man on second, the script had already been written. Molina laced a single to bring in the walk-off winning run.

Maybe next year? - Elsewhere in the National League Central, teams are already putting their plans in place for next year. As mentioned a couple of weeks ago, the Pirates recently appointed a new CEO in Frank Coonely and his first task of finding a replacement for Dave Littlefield looks set to be completed in the next few days. The rumours are that Neal Huntington, currently part of the Indians' Front Office, will be appointed as the Pirates' new GM early this week. Meanwhile, the Astros announced the appointment of Ed Wade as their new GM on Thursday and the team immediately tried their best to impress him by smashing the Cardinals for eighteen runs. Rookie J.R. Towles batted in eight of those runs, setting a new Astros record in the process. The NL Central is an interesting division as, while it's very competitive, the level of that competition is relatively low compared to some other divisions. So there are opportunities for both the Astros and the Pirates to change their fortunes in the same

way that the Cubs have done this season. Admittedly it helps when you spend over \$200 million in the off-season!

Cubs for sale - The Cubs themselves will be undergoing a major change during the off-season as the Tribune Company puts the team up for sale. Various potential investment groups are currently jockeying for position with the figure of \$1 billion being touted in a deal that will also include a 25 per cent stake in a sports network. The most interesting part of this potential sale is the impact that a World Series win might have. Would the Cubs' value actually decrease if they finally shake their "loveable losers" tag?

Parting is such sweet sorrow – Barry Bonds and the Giants announced on Friday that they will be parting company after fifteen years. The split should benefit both parties. The Giants' "win now with Barry" project has not worked and a new direction is needed. Their four division rivals have all blossomed through developing young talent, while the Giants have discarded high draft picks for over-the-hill free agents. It will take several years for San Francisco to turn things around and that's why it makes sense to cut Bonds loose. He still carries a valuable bat and he will no doubt get a lucrative one-year deal, but it makes little sense for the Giants to make that investment when it won't bring team success. If Bonds' motivation to return in 2008 is to win a World Series, then he has to find a team who can win it all next year. Just in case you were expecting a quiet off-season: think again!

How much are Barry's balls worth? - Just under a million dollars apparently (\$939,217 to be exact). Yes, Barry's historic balls went under the hammer last week and one was understandably more valuable than the other. While the home run number 755 ball went for \$186,750 to a

guy called Ben Padnos, Marc Ecko paid \$752,467 for the record-breaking 756 ball and promptly handed its destiny over to the world. YOU can cast your vote to either send the ball to Cooperstown as it is, send it to Cooperstown with an asterisk on it, or simply have it blown to pieces (voting ends next Tuesday). Bonds has branded Ecko an "idiot", but then again I'm sure Ecko's businesses have never received so much attention and publicity. Padnos has been a bit more blatant about his business plan: 1) buy the ball, 2) set up a website where people can vote on the ball's future, 3) sit back while media outlets throughout the world publicise your website, 4) start counting all the money you're making from the businesses paying to advertise on the site.

I voted on Ecko's website to send the ball to Cooperstown untouched. There may be plenty of controversy around Bonds, but every individual has the right to make up their own mind and I wouldn't want to deny someone the chance to see the ball in Cooperstown if they want to. Let's be honest though: it's going to be marmalized!

Week Twenty-six

Sunday 23 September to Sunday 30 September.

The final week of the regular season brings the final edition of "Weekly' hit ground ball" for 2007. The story of the week has been the daily shifting fortunes of teams embroiled in the hunt for October, so it seems fitting to chart 'the week that was' in chronological fashion.

Sunday 23 – The week starts with the Angels and the Indians clinching their respective divisions with plenty of time to spare. Both teams were able to celebrate their pennant wins in their final home

games of the regular season. It's certainly been a strange year in Cleveland, with the opening home series against the Mariners snowed out resulting in the Indians playing three home games in Milwaukee (against the Angels, funnily enough). It's also the last time a pennant will be raised at "Jacobs Field" as the Tribe are hoping to sell the naming rights of the stadium this winter. No doubt it will be something classy with a strong connection to baseball traditions. Or maybe not. Changes are also afoot in Washington as the Nationals said goodbye to RFK Stadium with a victory over the Phillies. They will begin 2008 in their brand new (insert terrible corporate name here) stadium, much to the dismay of the Nat's pitching staff.

In the NL post-season race, mild-mannered Milton Bradley blew his top in spectacular, but costly, fashion. Bradley had to be held back by manager Bud Black after the umpire Mike Winters allegedly taunted the infamously combustible outfielder. Milton wouldn't let go of the argument, Black wouldn't let go of Bradley and it ended with him crumpled in a heap on the floor having twisted his knee. Reports later stated that Bradley has torn the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee, an injury that could keep him out of action for nine months. With Mike Cameron also suffering a potentially season-ending injury in the game (a 7-1 loss to the Dodgers), it was a bad day for the Friars to say the least.

Monday 24 – The calm before the storm? Just seven games were played today, affording a few teams a well-earned rest before a final charge to the finishing line. Three teams in the play-off race had a chance to steal a march on their rivals, but only the Brewers took advantage, defeating the Cardinals 13-5 in the first game of an immensely important series. The Padres lost to the Giants, with Barry Zito finally getting into double digits in the win column.

Year one of San Francisco's \$126 million seven-year investment in the lefty hasn't been a great success. Zito still gets a \$4.5 million raise in 2008 though, which should cushion the blow for him at least. As for the NL East, the Nationals are enjoying playing the spoiler. A day after winning friends in Queens by beating the Phillies, they turned around and beat up the Mets 13-4. The Nationals giveth and the Nationals taketh away.

Tuesday 25 - The Rockies won again (stop me if you've heard this one before). That's nine in the row and even the NL West pennant is not beyond the realms of possibility now. The Brewers can afford to ignore Colorado though, their fight is a straight two-way dust up with the Cubs. Tuesday couldn't have gone much better for the Brew Crew as the Cubs lost to the lowly Marlins, while the Brewers made it two in a row against St Louis. During the game, Prince Fielder went deep twice to become the youngest player ever to hit fifty homers in a season. You can't help but admire the way the Brewers franchise has turned itself around *via* some astute drafting over the past ten years. Their home-grown infield of Fielder, Weeks, Hardy and Braun is something any team in the Majors would be proud of.

The Devil Rays are trying to follow the Brewers' lead, but competing against the Yankees and the Red Sox makes life difficult (the Blue Jays and the Orioles aren't shy of spending money either). Still, it does give you plenty of chances to annoy the big boys and they certainly annoyed the Yankees today. The Bronx Bombers entered the game needing one win to seal their play-off spot and looked odds on to make it when A-Rod hit a grand slam in the third inning. The Rays had other ideas and tabled six runs in the sixth inning, four of which came on Jorge Velandia's grand slam (not bad for your first career MLB homer).

Tampa Bay won *via* a walk-off single by Dioner Navarro in the tenth inning, putting the Yankees' celebrations on hold for another day at least.

Wednesday 26 – Even though the Yankees got revenge on the Devil Rays and booked their play-off spot with a 12-4 victory, it was the NL West teams who stole the show today. The Rockies won again (stop me if you've heard this one before), defeating the Dodgers (ditto) to make it ten wins on the spin. With San Diego beating the Giants as well, it's the D-Backs who are now starting to feel the heat. They went down 5-1 to the Pirates and saw their lead in the standings shrink to just one game. Brandon Webb is scheduled to start tomorrow and a Cy Young calibre start will be needed from him to get them back on track.

Meanwhile, the Giants were able to hit the headlines, but only due to Barry Bonds rather than a bit of team success (no change there). Bonds made his final appearance in a Giants uniform at AT&T Park during their defeat to San Diego. While he may be one of the biggest stars ever to play the game, Bonds's Giants bow has been fairly low-key. The result from Marc Ecko's 756 homer ball poll was announced as well and surprisingly (to me at least) the ball will remain intact. Over ten million votes were reportedly cast, with forty-seven per cent voting for the ball to be branded with an asterisk and then given to the Hall of Fame (only nineteen per cent wanted the ball to be blown into space, with the other thirty-four per cent voting to send it to Cooperstown untouched).

Thursday 27 – The Rockies won again (stop me if you've heard this one before). Something tells me the Dodgers will be glad to see the back of them: that's eleven straight wins for Colorado with seven coming against LA. Winning is contagious, but so is losing and the disease is

spreading in the NL Central. The Marlins completed their sweep of the Cubs, yet the Brewers once again failed to take advantage. This time, you've really got to pin the blame on the Brewers themselves. Presented with such a golden opportunity, Milwaukee committed five errors (three by Ryan Braun) to hand victory to the Padres, who gladly accepted the present. With the prospect of rain in Pittsburgh, Arizona decided not to risk wasting Brandon Webb's start and sent Micah Owings to the mound (and the plate) instead. Part one of the gamble paid off brilliantly as Owings pitched well and then continued his astounding form with the bat as the D-Backs beat the Pirates 8-0. The young right-hander pitched 6.1 innings giving up no runs on four hits, while going 4 for 4 at the plate (including three doubles) with three RBIs. If Webb wins tomorrow, the D-Backs will probably be celebrating a return to the play-offs.

A bit of history was made in Philadelphia as Ryan Howard struck out for the 196th time, setting a new season record. He hit a homer during his previous at-bat though and helped the Phillies to a 6-4 victory over the Braves, killing Atlanta's play-off hopes in the process. Panic has well and truly set in at Shea as the Mets' NL East lead has completely vanished: the Phillies and the Mets are tied at the top of the division. This would be one of the biggest collapses in recent history and the New York press are only too aware of it.

Friday 28 – The Rockies w.., oh no they didn't! The unforgiving NL landscape basically meant that Colorado couldn't really afford to lose a single game the rest of the way and as each victory came it somehow made the decisive loss more certain to arrive. The Rockies' fate remains uncertain as they still have a shot at the wild card, but today was the day on which several other teams' future was decided.

The story of the day was starting pitching. The D-Backs' gamble paid off brilliantly as Brandon Webb followed Micah Owing's win on Thursday with a victory against those Rockies. Arizona still don't know whether they will enter the play-offs as NL West champions or the wild card winners, but they will be there and that's what matters the most. Just ask Milwaukee. The Cubs sent Carlos Zambrano to the mound against the down-and-out Reds, while the Brewers started their three-game series against the play-off chasing Padres with Chris Capuano on the hill. Factor in the differences in opposition and combine it with the fact that Milwaukee had lost all of Capuano's previous twenty-one starts and something suggested that judgement day had arrived. Cubs won 6-0 to take the Central division crown; Brewers fell 6-3 and are left pondering where it all went wrong.

As for going wrong, the Mets' disastrous descent shows no sign of abating. They lost to Byung-Hyun Kim and the Marlins as Cole Hamels guided his Phillies to a 6-0 victory over the Nationals. At least the Mets don't have to watch their cross-town rivals celebrating yet another division pennant, as Dice-K pitched the Red Sox to their first AL East title since 1995. Boston will face the Angels in the first round of the play-offs, while Cleveland face the Yankees.

Saturday 29 – Heading in to the Saturday games, two play-off spots were still up for grabs. Sunday will start the same. San Diego were the main story of the day. An early game against the deflated Brewers gave them an ideal opportunity to book their place in the post-season with a win and to keep the NL West division title alive as well. An extra innings loss turned their potential dream day into a nightmare. It handed the division to Arizona before they even took the field, which was bad enough for the Padres. But of course the D-Backs' are finishing their season with a series against

the Rockies, the Padres' main rival for the wild card. With nothing to play for, Arizona lost to the Rockies who got straight back on to the winning road and must fancy their chances of following it up tomorrow. The equation is still simple for San Diego: win and they're in. Simple in theory, but perhaps not in practice.

The Padres don't just have the Rockies to contend with either as both the Phillies and the Mets will enter the final day one game behind in the wild card race and battling for their division crown. After all their hard work to reach the NL East summit, the Phillies immediately threw away the advantage by losing to the Nationals, while the Mets fought back in the division race and crushed the Marlins 13-0. John Maine has no doubt prompted a host of "Maine man" headlines, but we can forgive the media on this occasion. Just when the Mets needed a big performance, Maine pitched brilliantly, flirting with a no-hitter and striking out fourteen during seven scoreless innings.

Away from the play-off race, it was a memorable night for Craig Biggio as he donned the tools of ignorance for two innings in his second-from-last MLB game. Great for Biggio and a nice diversion for Astros fans, but more than anything it rams home the harsh truth that 2007 has been a terrible year for the Astros and that they can afford to mess about at the season's end. Still, if anyone deserves a good send-off then it's Biggio and with Cecil Cooper being officially confirmed as the full-time manager for the next two years, maybe the end of one era will help to launch the start of a successful new one.

Sunday 30 – A fascinating final day, best summed up by the fact that it hasn't turned out to be the final day for two teams after all. The Padres decided against starting Jake Peavy on three-days' rest and

subsequently lost to Milwaukee, opening the door for the Rockies. True to form, Colorado barged straight through and forced a Monday night sudden death play-off game. They will have to face Peavy though and it doesn't get any tougher than that. Mind you, the Mets would gladly swap positions with the Rockies. God knows what the ramifications of their historic collapse will be, capped off by Tom Glavine's disastrous start (pulled in the first inning having given up seven runs while retiring only one batter). The Mets lost twelve of their final seventeen games, but the Phillies still had to win thirteen games over the same span to take the division by one game. Jimmy Rollins said they were the team to beat before the season started and he's been proved right in the end. More importantly, Rollins backed up his words with a 162-game MVP winning performance (subject to them awarding it to the "right" person – which doesn't always happen).

Any advice for the post-season participants? Well, firstly I would suggest pitching around Alfonso Soriano (if that's possible – he generally swings at anything). He hit yet another lead-off home run today, his seventh of the month, and has been in stunning form in September. Secondly, take a look at last year's World Series teams. The Tigers finished eight games behind the Indians in the AL Central and the Cardinals were so far out of contention that they could afford to let Troy Percival pitch the opening frame of their final-day game against the Pirates. Make the very most of your chance this October, as there's no guarantee you'll be back there next year.

Week 26(a)! - Monday 1 October. I guess that's why it's called the 'wild' card!

Few expected the Padres-Rockies play-off game to be a simple affair and it wasn't. The Rockies came back to win it in the

thirteenth inning, with plenty of controversy thrown in for good measure from Garrett Atkins' double that should have been a homer, to the "did he, didn't he?" debate over whether Matt Holliday actually touched home plate to end the game. It was always going to be tough on the loser and San Diego will be feeling pretty low right now, but you have to hand it to the Rockies. Their late-season charge was remarkable and when you consider that they got the better of Peavy and Hoffman, few could deny that they deserved their victory.

The post-season has a lot to live up to. I'm sure it won't disappoint.

Postscript

Sadly, the post-season did disappoint after all. Apart from the bug swarm in Cleveland, the division series stage was uneventful, with three sweeps and a 3-1 victory for those Indians against the Yankees. In the NLCS, the Rockies' sweep of the D-Backs continued their astounding story, but was still a bit of a let down for the neutrals looking for a competitive series. The ALCS made up for it to a certain degree, with the Red Sox just inching their way past the Indians 4-3, yet hopes of a classic World Series were quickly put to rest when the Red Sox comfortably took the first two games at Fenway. The sweep was completed in short measure and, following such a spectacular regular season, it was difficult not to feel underwhelmed (except for Boston fans, of course).

Still, perhaps we're being greedy? 2007 was a great year in MLB overall and if 2008 can match it, well, the new season cannot come soon enough.