



# From the Bullpen

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The Hot Stove League  
Eastern Nebraska Division  
1998 Season

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## IT'S HISTORY

Now that the 1998 season is in the jar, it becomes part of our rich Hot Stove League history. As is customary this time of year, I provide you now with a snazzy recap of league finishes for the fourteen magnificent years that this league has been in existence, enclosed herewith.

Some observations from this observer:

**Blues:** This year's title also marks the first time that the long-suffering Blues have finished in the money in a Hot Stove League season, and the third time that they have finished in the upper division. Will this mark a new trend of success for the Blues, or is it just a blip on the radar screen of McBlunder's HSL life, to be followed by a return to mediocrity? Time will tell.

**Chiefs:** Owing to the late (literally) call-up of Gil Heredia, the Chiefs greased their way into their second bridesmaid finish in fourteen years, joining the '93 club in the runner-up role. Of course, it was in that season that B.T.'s squad was edged out by the once-mighty Reds during the final days of the season, losing out by a mere 47 points, a smidgen less than this year's 701 point margin of defeat. In four-

teen years of competition, the Chiefs have now finished in the money a total of five times, and in the upper division six times. The Chiefs' runner-up finish was B.T.'s third 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish in the pennant race, matching the Redbirds and the Senators for the most finishes in the No. 2 spot. Not bad, but see the report on the Senators below. It should be noted that the Chiefs' improvement from 8<sup>th</sup> place to 2<sup>nd</sup> place was the greatest rise in the ranks this year.

**Senators:** Despite a flurry of late-season misfortunes and miscues, the Senators held on for their third career 3<sup>rd</sup> place finish in the league. The Senators now have two championships, three 2<sup>nd</sup> place finishes, and three 3<sup>rd</sup> place finishes, for a total of eight (count 'em) money finishes in fourteen years. Tops. The most. And unprecedented. Curiously, the Senators also have eight upper division finishes, never having achieved a 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> place finish in the league.

**Cubs\*:** The Cubs improved from the 9<sup>th</sup> place draft spot to finish in 4<sup>th</sup> position, their second-ever 4<sup>th</sup> place standing, the first having happened in 1992. The Cubs\* have now finished in the upper division five times in fourteen years.

**Redbirds:** Despite a late-season rally, the Redbirds were unable to notch a fourth consecutive 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish in the league. In six years of competition, the Redbirds have now finished 2<sup>nd</sup> three times and 5<sup>th</sup> three times, remarkable consistency, albeit mediocrity. The Redbirds have never finished lower than 5<sup>th</sup>, however, and can be proud to have six upper division finishes in six years of competing.

**Tigers:** With their anemic finish to the 1998 season, the Tigers narrowly missed finishing in the money for the first time since 1991. It should be noted that despite his recent drought, the Tigers have finished in the money five times in fourteen years of competition, and have finished in the upper division nine times in fourteen years. Impressive. This was the Tigers' third upper division finish in six years of the live-ball era.

**Bronx Bombers:** Mouse can proudly proclaim the 1998 season the best ever for his beloved Bombers, with this year's 7<sup>th</sup> place finish topping his team's previous best of 8<sup>th</sup> place in 1995. Late season injuries and misfortune just barely kept the Bombers from their first-ever upper division finish. The Bombers' improvement from 11<sup>th</sup> place last year to 7<sup>th</sup> place this year also deserves mention and plaudits.

## A GAME FOR THE AGES

**Red Sox:** Despite a furious second-half rally, the Red Sox experienced their *lowest finish ever* in 1998, 8<sup>th</sup> place. Notwithstanding an aching paucity of championship rings for the past decade, the Red Sox have been a model of competitiveness, if not championship timber. In fourteen years of competition, the Red Sox have finished in the lower division only three times, in 1987, 1992 and 1998. The Red Sox's drop from 3<sup>rd</sup> place to 8<sup>th</sup> place in one year is the most precipitous, matching the Reds' fall from 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Skipjacks:** 1998 marks the Skipjacks' first finish ever in the No. 9 hole. In eleven years of competition, the Skipjacks have finished five times in the upper division. While the 'Jacks have won two championships in this league, these are the only two times that Itchie's charges have finished in the money. Their drop from 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> this season is disconcerting, if not alarming.

**Tribe:** The Tribe pulled out all the stops to squeak past the Reds and achieve their second consecutive 10<sup>th</sup> place finish. In thirteen years of competition, the Tribe has now finished in the lower division ten times. While the Tribe has achieved 3<sup>rd</sup> place money on two occasions, they are yet to see a championship or a runner-up finish. Perhaps 1998 will be the year of the Tribe? What do *you* think?

**Reds:** What happened to this proud franchise? The Reds, no longer able to leech baseball information off the Tigers' owner, have dropped to their worst finish ever, breaking their string of ten consecutive upper division finishes. Tricko has now gone since 1994 without a finish in the money, and has his work cut out for him next year, drafting from the 11<sup>th</sup> hole.

**Pirates:** A model of league consistency, the Pirates finished in the 12<sup>th</sup> spot for the second consecutive year and the fourth time in the last six years. Despite some brilliant selections on Draft Day, the Pirates were unable to achieve enough consistency to avoid yet another cellar finish. One has to look back to 1991 for a Pirate finish in the upper division.

I don't know how many of you watched Game 5 of the NLCS, the Braves' 7-6 win over the Padres in San Diego on Monday night of last week. Although this term gets overused these days, this game was irrefutably a *classic*.

After the nightly wrestlemania to get the kids in bed and asleep, I ventured into my study (I've never called it that before, but I like the sound of it) to catch my breath, pay a few bills, and gird for another day in the dog-eat-dog world. I then flipped the tube on to catch the score of the playoff game, and tuned in just in time to watch Kevin Brown mow down the Braves in order in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, looking untouchable as he sawed off the bat of one hapless hitter. Although I figured the Braves were toast at that point, fortunately I stayed tuned as the Braves mounted their comeback the following inning.

The rest of the game was unmatchable drama. First, the very mediocre Michael Tucker crushes a 3-2 Brown offering over the fence for a three-run shot to give the Braves a 5-4 lead. In the top of the 9th Atlanta reliever John Rocker gets on base, and scores from 2<sup>nd</sup> on a Graffanino double with some gutsy baserunning, taking out Padres catcher Hernandez in the play which in turn allowed Graffanino to score, giving the Braves a seemingly insurmountable 7-4 lead going into the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>.

What made this game a "classic," however, is what happened in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup>. Cox brought in McBlunder's fireman, Kerry Ligtenberg, to close out the game. He didn't. Instead, he served up a 2-run gofer ball to the fearsome Greg Myers, allowing the Pods to close within a run. Out comes Ligtenberg, and in comes Greg Maddux in a rare relief role, striding in confidently from the Braves bullpen. The first hitter faced by Maddux, Greg Vaughn, looked like a store mannequin as Maddux froze him with two strikes that caught the far outside atoms of the plate. As McCarver put it on the first one, "There's nobody in baseball who could have hit that pitch."

Then, with two strikes on Vaughn and right where he wanted him, Maddux fanned him chasing a breaking ball down and away. Picasso, Van Gogh and Whistler all rolled into one.

The next batter, second baseman Quilvio Veras, wasn't exactly fooled by Greg, grounding out sharply but harmlessly to Guillen for the second out.

The next batter was Steve Finley, lefty-versus-righty. With a 2-2 count on him,

***Maddux pumps his fist at this third strike, knowing that he has done his job and the game is over. Only trouble is, the umpire called it a ball.***

Maddux throws a perfect pitcher's pitch to Finley, starting in at Finley's mid-section, and then tailing out to catch the inside corner of the plate, freezing Finley in his tracks. Maddux pumps his fist at this third strike, knowing that he has done his job and the game is over. Only trouble is, the umpire called it a ball. The replay showed it to be the perfect pitch, as effective as any Carl Hubbell screwball, but even on replay, the umpire still called it a ball. Had the game been in Atlanta, the umpire would have been in serious danger for his life.

After the blown call, Maddux gave up a walk to Finley, putting the tying run on first and the winning run at the plate, the latter in the form of Tony Gwynn.

Notwithstanding Greg Maddux's mastery of the rest of the major league players' union, Tony Gwynn absolutely owns Greg Maddux. His career average against Maddux is close to .450, and in 79 plate appearances against him leading up to Monday night's confrontation, Maddux – a pretty fair strikeout pitcher – had never, ever recorded a strikeout against Tony Gwynn. This, my friends, is what baseball lore is made of. If I could have slapped down a grand and beamed myself inside Jack Murphy (I refuse to acknowledge QualComm as a name) Stadium to witness this matchup, I surely would have.

You know the ending. Tony slapped a hard grounder off of Maddux's first pitch, but right at the Big Cat, who, after batting it around a bit, recorded the final out.

Not unlike Underbelly's unshakeable memory of Dennis Quaid in *Christmas Vacation*, I'll never forget this one. An October classic.

## WEEKLY LEADERS

My apologies to Itchie for failing to recognize him and his beloved Skipjacks for finally leading the league in points during a week. For Week 27, the tenacious Skipjacks scored a grand total of 25 points, on the strength of Steve Trachsel's 25-point pitching victory over the Giants in the one-game playoff. Here were the Week 27 point totals:

1. Skipjacks	25
2. Bronx Bombers	8
3. Pirates	5
4. Senators	4
5. Red Sox	0
6. Redbirds	0
7. Chiefs	0
8. Tribe	0
9. Reds	0
10. Blues	0
11. Tigers	0
12. Cubs*	0

This was the only time all season that the Skipjacks managed to post the league's weekly best. On that order, here is a list of the weekly point leaders during each of the 27 weeks of the season:

1. Senators	417
2. Chiefs	421
3. Skipjacks	402
4. Blues	375
5. Redbirds	456
6. Cubs*	388
7. Bombers	487
8. Chiefs	453
9. Blues	551
10. Senators	489
11. Chiefs	408
12. Senators	436
13. Senators	456
14. Senators	428
15. Redbirds	316

16. Red Sox	450
17. Redbirds	505
18. Tigers	408
19. Blues	376
20. Blues	536
21. Chiefs	468
22. Blues	437
23. Redbirds	390
24. Cubs*	431
25. Cubs*	426
26. Redbirds	435
27. Skipjacks	25

For the season, the Blues led the way with the top weekly total 13 times, followed by the Senators with 7, the Bronx Bombers with 4, the Chiefs with 2, and a bunch of teams with 1. Remarkably, the Pirates, Tribe and Reds failed to lead the league in weekly point totals even once for the season.

The top weekly scoring team for the year was the Week 9 Blues with 551 points, followed by the Week 20 Blues with 536, and the Week 17 Redbirds with 505. The three worst weekly point totals for the year were by the Week 11 Cubs\* with 163, the Week 6 Red Sox with 168, and the Week 15 Tribe with 170.

## McBLUNDER FETE

As anticipated, the responses are pouring in to my inquiry about your availability for our annual awards banquet on the Saturday evening during Thanksgiving holiday, November 28<sup>th</sup>. Let's take inventory - so far, I have heard from: Nobody. I take that back, since Rubella is hosting the party, I know that he is available. And I think he said that Stretch can come to town that day for his crowning party. And with the promise of free wearing apparel with the championship Blues logo, I can assume that Shamu\* will make it to town from Des Moines, come hell, high water, hurricane or locust plague. Unless a better offer comes along.

But as to the rest of you, please, please take the time to write or call with your availability on November 28. Or prepare to suffer the consequences.

And that, my friends, is all. See you next issue.

Skipper

## NEXT WEEK

*McBlunder's Modest Manifesto: The 1998 Blues – The Greatest HSL Team of All Time?*