



FROM THE BULLPEN

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CHIEFS RALLY TO PUT DISTANCE BETWEEN PACK; CUBS* CLIMB TO 2ND; SKIPJACKS IN 3RD; TIGERS DROP FROM MONEY POSITION

The **Chiefs**, behind the torrid sticks of Mike Lieberthal (ugh) and Sean Casey (hurl) fashioned a dandy 426-point week to gain some breathing room against the rest of the field. After a mediocre start to the week, the **Chiefs** hitters turned on the afterburners during the weekend, scoring something like 160 hitting points on Saturday and Sunday alone, in spite of B.T.'s inexplicable decision to leave the red-hot Greg Vaughn (49.5 points in his last five games) on the bench in favor of Rondell White (7 points in his last six games). In fact, as hot as the **Chiefs** hitters are these days, B.T. has a shot at becoming the first-ever HSL owner to start hitting the RBI and home run limits before the All-Star break.

Here are the standings through Week 9:

WEEK 9 STANDINGS

1. Chiefs	3323
2. Cubs*	3213
3. Skipjacks	3178
4. Tigers	3151
5. Pirates	3048
6. Reds	3005
7. Tribe	2952
8. Red Sox	2853
9. Redbirds	2803
10. Blues	2766
11. Bombers	2723
12. Senators	2708

You may have noticed that the **Blues** have slipped a bit in the standings. In fact, alarmingly so. After four weeks of the season, the **Blues** were a solid second

with 1508 points, a mere 34 off of the **Tigers'** lead. During Week 5, the **Blues** dropped off a bit with a 320-point performance, seventh best for the week, to drop to 3rd overall in the standings. And then the bottom fell out.

In Week 6, the **Blues** had their horrific 145-point week, dropping Stretch's charges from 3rd to 7th. In Week 7, the **Blues** had the eleventh-best total, 256 points, to drop from 7th to 9th. In Week 8, the **Blues** produced 272 points, eleventh best for the week, to drop to 10th. And during Week 9, the **Blues** once again trailed the entire field with only 265 points for the week, further cementing their position in 10th place, and possibly presaging a further drop in the standings.

Look at it this way, Stretch. Soon there will only be one direction that you can go: up.

WEEK 9 POINT TOTALS

1. Chiefs	426
2. Skipjacks	398
3. Tribe	394
4. Cubs*	390
5. Pirates	336
6. Senators	316
7. Redbirds	296
8. Bombers	288
9. Tigers	286
10. Red Sox	277
11. Reds	268
12. Blues	265

THE GODS OF FANTASY BASEBALL

Anybody who says that there isn't a god or gods or some other higher power at the master control board of the Hot Stove League and all other fantasy baseball leagues is sadly mistaken. After fifteen years of suffer-

ing, I think I am able to distinguish cruel manipulation from coincidence.

You know what I'm saying. It's only when I happen to turn the television on in the middle of a game with one of my pitchers on the mound that said pitcher gets trounced. Or when I turn the radio on in my car and catch the Royals-Mariners game in the bottom of the 7th that – just as the signal is being picked up and sound is being emitted – I hear the clacking dentures of Denny Matthews telling me that “. . . they're giving A-Rod an error on that one. I don't know about that call, Frank (whoever).”

More examples? How much time do you have? Just last Saturday, I tuned into the Braves-BoSox game in the 4th inning to see that the most recent **Senator** pitching call-up, Brian Rose, was pitching a gem of a game against Greg Maddux and the Braves, leading 2-1 and having given up only two hits through four. I then watched in agony as the previously rock-steady Rose gave up a hit and then a four-pitch walk after recording two outs, bringing Brian Jordan – he of the leading **Chiefs** – to the plate. I knew immediately what would happen next. If I had been in Vegas or somewhere else where I could place such a wager, I could have laid down a six-figure bet that Jordan would go Yard against Rose, so sure was such a prediction. Before I could even pick up the phone and call B.T. to let him know that he was about to be the recipient of 10 points, Rose served up a gopher ball and Jordan sent it deep into the outfield stands.

But it only happened because I tuned in at that moment, I'm sure of it.

Another example? Gladly. The last time I had the mettle to look in on Tom Glavine while he was pitching, he had tossed four shutout, one-hit innings against the Dodgers. Then, just as I tuned in, the seven-hole hitter for the Dodgers rapped out a single to record the Dodgers' second hit of the night. As backup catcher Angel Pena stepped to the plate, Pete Van Wieren pointed out what a light-hitting catcher he was, and how Glavine shouldn't have much difficulty with him. Of course, Pena promptly scalded a laser smack between the wickets of the Braves first baseman, turning a sure double play into an error.

After Carlos Perez laid down a bunt to move the runners over, Glavine promptly walked the next hitter to load the bases. After notching the second out, up comes Gary Sheffield. Glavine quickly went 1-and-2 on him, and then decided that Sheffield was the rein-

carnation of Babe Ruth, throwing three straight balls as he attempted to get Sheffield to swing at a third strike a foot off the plate. A run scores. Nice pitching, Tom. And then up comes Raul Mondesi. Ditto. Glavine goes 1-and-2 on him, and then walks him with three straight balls.

The only thing that I can compare to watching Glavine against the Dodgers is being strapped into the dentist's chair against your will as a crazed dentist pulls each and every tooth out of your head, one at a time, slowly and painfully, without the benefit of Novocaine. Overly dramatic, you say? Perhaps. But come walk a while in my shoes, pally.

As if this sort of tinkering with one's emotions isn't enough, then we have the shell game. I thought I had cured myself of this problem by practicing extraordinary patience with my pitchers and hitters, but what's a manager to do when a starting pitcher goes out and gets his teeth kicked in six or seven outings in a row. And so, in order, I have had the shell game affliction with Charles Nagy, Aaron Sele, and now Kelvim Escobar. Even Job would have demoted that sonofabitch Escobar, and then on Sunday, of course, Escobean has his best outing of the year, lasting seven innings and giving up only two earned runs, notching a cool 20 for the old **Senators'** farm system.

So the next time somebody tries to tell you that there aren't supernatural forces at work in this business, you tell them to come see the Skipper. Skipper knows otherwise.

BOTTOM DWELLING

Not to kick a man when he's down – and God knows he's down right now, poor bastard – I would be remiss if I did not point out that McBlunder's recent foray into sub-Mendozalineville easily cracked the bottom ten of all time. If my tabulations are correct – and how would any of you spuds know differently? It's not like you keep records – the **Blues'** Week 6 total of 145 points (137 batting, 8 pitching) places McBlunder in the 4th spot in the All Time Bottom Ten, supplanting the **Tribe** in that position. Here's the current bottom ten:

1. Pirates (week ending 5/4/97)	131
2. Tigers (w/e 5/22/94)	136
3. Senators (w/e 5/1/94)	138
4. Blues (w/e 5/16/99)	145
5. Tribe (w/e 9/26/93)	149

6. Pirates (w/e 10/3/93)	153
7. Cubs* (w/e 9/26/93)	159
8. Blues (w/e 9/12/93)	162
(T) Skipjacks (w/e 4/13/97)	162
10. Pirates (w/e 6/22/97)	164
(T) Pirates (w/e 6/5/94)	164

Have heart, McBlunder. At least you will be known for something this wretched season.

BALLS AND STRIKES

◆ How the **Cubs*** are able to stay afloat given their pathetic pitching staff is beyond me. Throw in a little mismanagement by Shamu (leaving Kirk Rueter's 30.5 points and Scott Sullivan's 39 points in the minors for the week) and one has to truly question how this team can be in 2nd.

◆ The rancid **Redbirds** are due for a fall. This scrapheap team is nothing but a collection of other teams' never-evers and has-beens. Does everyone realize that this team now sports Fred McGriff, Charles Johnson, Mike Stanley, Ron Coomar, Tony Phillips, Butch Huskey, and Harold Baines? On Sunday, only 19 out of his hitters' 63.5 points came from players he actually selected on Draft Day – the rest are from his greasy free agent pickups. It won't last, Jimmy, believe me.

◆ With the Circus Geek finally cooling off a bit, the **Tigers** offense is starting to sputter a bit, as it should. As to his pitching staff, perhaps Big Guy's recent demotions of Omar Olivares and Scott Erickson are telling. As Big Guy put it, in the words of Bobby Goldsboro, he and God were "Watchin' *Scottie's ERA* Grow." And grow, and grow. Good move.

◆ Turning our attention to the **Jax** and their obnoxious owner, at least Itchie won't have Vinny to bitch about anymore. Vinny's three-bagger on Saturday vaulted the **Jax** to a 97.5-point hitting day, and without Vinny's three taters, it would have been an awfully average week for the gum-flapping credit card salesman. In a word: *unsustainable*. In spite of Shamu's nightmares.

◆ The **Pirates** continue to hang in there, piecing together a few hitting points here and there to remain in contention, and getting pitching points from places the rest of us would never expect. On Sunday, SloPay garnered 63 pitching points from Freddie Garcia, Mike Sirotko, and Billy Taylor. I said, *Freddie Garcia, Mike Sirotko, and Billy Taylor*. Criminelly. I've got two

former Cy Young winners on my team and I can't get a stinkin' seven-inning win to save myself.

◆ The **Tribe** continues to amaze. This team is hitting like there is no tomorrow. And as fast as the **Tribe** is approaching the hitting caps, there may not be a tomorrow for this squad. But look where the points are coming from. First, from the white-hot Dave Nilsson. From Thursday to Saturday of last week, this guy scored 42 points. A good month for the average **Senator**. Dave Freakin' Nilsson. And then there's O'Henry. In his last ten games, Rodriguez has something like 67 or 8 points. I'm sure Bob was counting on that when he drafted this career stiff. Best of all, the **Tribe** staff is finally rounding into form, with Ubelly's recent pickups of Jimmy Haynes and Joey Hamilton. Can you say *moonwalk*, Bob?

◆ SloPay picked up Marty Cordova – the former **Cub*** – in this past week's free agent draft, acing out the **Senators** and half a dozen other clubs who were trying to sign him. Why Shamu dropped this red-hot former All-Star is beyond me, but perhaps he was simply running out of room in his minors to hide some of the players that he was afraid to get rid of. Unfortunately for Shamu, Marty may have been the wrong player to release, as the rest of the owners were snapping at him like shark chum to pick him up, as hot as he has been. Apparently Shamu couldn't bear to part with such superstuds as Jose Mesa (60 points), Wilson Alvarez (52), or Juan Guzman (55). And so Marty became his sacrificial lamb.

◆ Speaking of the Sham-man, it is always fun to call Charles during the week while he is at work and engage him in a conversation about baseball. Shamu immediately clicks onto the *Stats, Inc.* web page, and proceeds to communicate in hushed tones in a fashion that would make Al Haig (Deep Throat) proud. Not that Shamu is concerned about being caught with his fingers on the mouse with a box score on the screen, mind you.

◆ Time for a little quiz. What do all of the following players have in common: Ed Sprague; Marquis Grissom; Warren Morris; Alex Gonzalez; Bret Boone; Desi Relaford; Eric Karros; Rich Aurilia; Rondell White; Tony Phillips; Ray Sanchez; Troy O'Leary; Tony Fernandez; Davey Martinez; Harold Baines? Answer: Through last Sunday, they all had more runs batted in than Scott Rolen. No, make that Scott *Stinkin'* Rolen. As he proved again last Saturday, this guy may set a major league record for most times going 5-0-0-0 in a game in which his team scored between 5 and 15 runs. Unless, of course, the same record is set by Bobby Higginson or Andruw Jones, first.

This is my last season.

POSSUM PRATTLE

Yesterday afternoon, in the middle of a busy workday, to my great surprise my computer e-mail message box informed me that I had incoming mail from none other than the heretofore low-lying Possum. Surprised but honored by his unexpected communiqué, I reprint it for you here:

As always, thanks for your diligent efforts to keep us apprised of league goings-on. However, I take a little umbrage at your inference in the current FTB that my hitters are flukishly overachieving, with a current team batting average of .302. You ask who besides Piazza and Greer are career .300 hitters ... answer: Bernie Williams, defending AL batting champ (career BA of .293, but last 5 year average of .314), Will Clark (.302 career BA), and Todd Helton (.310). In fact, my top 12 hitters have a career average of .287, and have as a group averaged .297 over the past five years, after averaging .298 in 1998. While slightly higher as a group at present, I would be willing to wager this group is probably performing as close to its group average of the past 5 years as the average team in the league. Further, while the Red Sox have the second or third highest batting point totals to date, this performance is being accomplished without aid of any ridiculous break-out seasons---a la Lieberthal, David Bell, or any totally over the top individual performances (Canseco, Manny Ramirez). As in prior years, the Red Sox are characterized by top to bottom hitting consistency, and as always, are unaided by huge individual performances that could only be characterized as lucky by realistic, objective league participants, when those performances are viewed within the context of historical career aver-

ages. The Sox are also unaided by fortuitous pitching performances by such standouts as Lima, Byrd, and Snyder (please) ... however, this too shall pass, as cream inevitably rises to the top. I appreciate your willingness to share facts with your readership, and look forward to your next issue of FTB. TB

Editor's comment: That's why they call him Possum.

Next week: U-belly sounds off.

Skipper

