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CHIEFS STILL LEADING PACK, BUT SKIPJACKS PROJECTED TO EARN THIRD HSL TITLE

Brethren:

After eleven weeks of play, the **Chiefs** are still leading the league with 4099 points, a bulge of 112 points over the 2nd-place **Cubs***, and a seemingly-healthy 146 points over the 3rd-place **Skipjacks**. Ah, but there is more to this than meets the eye. If one allows one's eyes to wander just to the left of the point totals, one sees that the projected winner of the league this year is none other than Itchie and the **Jax**, with a projected point total of 3904.

Will the caps take their toll on the **Chiefs** and **Cubs*** and allow the fortuitous **Skipjacks** to race past them at the end? Only time will tell, but you can already sense the panic in the Chief and Cub* camps, as they routinely scan the rosters of other teams looking for trades which will help them avoid the awful fate of moonwalking through the entire month of September.

Let's take a look at the standings and point totals through eleven weeks, and then we'll chat:

WEEK 11 STANDINGS

1. Chiefs	4099
2. Cubs*	3987
3. Skipjacks	3953
4. Tigers	3704
5. Reds	3702
6. Tribe	3693
7. Pirates	3660
8. Red Sox	3542
9. Redbirds	3518
10. Senators	3483
11. Blues	3299
12. Bombers	3281

WEEK 11 POINT TOTALS

1. Skipjacks	447
2. Senators	398
3. Red Sox	397
4. Redbirds	362
5. Reds	359
6. Bombers	347
7. Cubs*	344
8. Chiefs	342
9. Tribe	319
10. Tigers	272
11. Pirates	271
(T) Blues	271

Top hitting team, week – Red Sox	311
Top hitting team, year – Tribe	2961
Worst hitting team, week – Pirates	147
Worst hitting team, year – Bombers	1920
Top pitching team, week – Bombers	190
Top pitching team, year ¹ – Skipjacks	1629
Worst pitching team, week ² – Tribe	56
Worst pitching team, year ² – Tribe	733
Top hitter, week – Todd Helton, Red Sox	108
Top pitcher, week – Pedro Martinez, Bombers	59

AROUND THE HORN

★ The **Chiefs** were led during Week 11 by Carl Everett with 38 points (thanks in part to a delectable fastball by my own Ugly Unit), and Ricky Bottalico with 32 points for the week. However, the real story behind the Chiefs' success continues to be the impossible overachievement by Mike Lieberthal and Sean "I'm Even Slower Than My Owner" Casey. In his own feeble defense (the wealthy don't get court-appointed lawyers), B.T. argues that he expected huge years out of both Lieberthal and Casey. Sure. Lieberthal had a whopping total of about 12 points in 1998 (career average .251, 36 career

¹ Uh oh. August 1 approacheth.

² This is a surprise.

HR in 1080 AB) and Sean Casey sported a sub-.280 batting average last year, about a C-note below where he is at this year. So again, sure. But B.T.'s larger concern at this point is the 143 home runs and 498 RBIs posted by his batsmen, which project him to start giving away hitting points in about the third week of July.

★ And as long as we're talking about point caps, let's take a gander over a Shamu* and his Collision-Course **Cubs***. You will note that Shammmy's* boys already have 135 home runs, 461 RBIs, and 39 saves, well over the numbers allowed on a projected basis. It won't be long before Charles will be shopping Jay Bell and Big Mac around for any pitcher with a sub-5.00 ERA. Can you say "fire sale"?

★ The **Jax**. Somebody 'splain to me how this lousy team mustered up 447 points for the week. This team has Brian Daubach, Eric Karros, Tony Fernandez, Joey McEwing, and Mike Bordick in the starting lineup, for Pete's sake, and still managed to record 262 hitting points for the week. The pitching staff, as we all know, doesn't have a single star among them, yet the Jax moundsmen managed to notch 185 points for the week. Okay, so maybe I was a bit hasty with my DAL (dead-ass last) prediction. It should have been BAL, as in Blind-Ass Luck. See below.

★ The **Tigers** continue their mid-season funk, able to notch only 272 points, and barely remaining in 4th place, just an eyelash ahead of the surging **Reds**. With Circus Geek having cooled off considerably, and with Big Guy managing his players (i.e., the untimely promotions/failures to promote of Miguel Tejada, Scott Erickson, Omar Olivares, Rick Aguilera, etc.) about as effectively as Possum manages his \$50 million portfolio, the Tigers may be playing themselves out of contention.

★ And just how are the **Reds** knifing their way through the upper Lower Division and lower Upper Division like they were warm butter? Answer: Jason Kendall, Rafael Palmeiro, Nomar, Canseco, Grieve, El Duque, and Hideki. All of the foregoing have been more than a little bit hot of late, and despite this team's great mediocrity on paper, they are doing their best impersonation of a title contender.

★ And now let's talk about a team that isn't going to contend for any title this year, other than perhaps the First Team to Lose Points Through Caps in July. That would be the **Tribe**. By some weird, inexplicable, once-in-a-Millennium fluke of nature, the truly average Tribe hitters have been collectively as hot as Shamu's glare when Jan is 15 minutes late getting dinner on the table. As unfathomable as it seems, there are six Tribe hitters who are averaging more than 4 points per game (Nilsson, Edgar,

David Bell, Jeter, Surhoff and Walker), and four others that are averaging 3.5 PPG or better. And then we get down to Dante Bichette, at 3.4, and Richard Hidalgo, at 3.3. In fact, both Derek Jeter (5.6) and Larry Walker (5.5) are averaging more points per game than Tribe pitchers Darryl Kile (5.4), Jimmy Haynes (4.4), Dwight Gooden (3.9), John Johnstone (5.1), Danny Graves (4.7) and Mike Jackson (5.3). Of course, that says a lot more about the Tribe's pitching staff than about the prowess of these two outstanding hitters. In any event, if the Tribe hitters can continue averaging a collective .308, U-belly will continue to have a lot of fun in the league this year – until about the first week of August.

★ As to the Lower Division teams, we will cover them in more detail in a future issue, but suffice to say that the **Senators** are happy to still be out of the cellar and in 10th place, even creeping up to 8th place earlier in the week until Todd Helton hit for the cycle for the Red Sox and David Wells pumped out a 35-point win for the Redbirds. Like that'll happen every week. In any event, it looks like the **Pirates**, **Red Sox**, **Redbirds** and **Senators** may be fighting it out for the last spot in the Upper Division once the **Tribe** begins its tumble, and sad to say, but it looks like you can probably put a fork in the **Blues** and the **Bronx Bombers**. I could be wrong on this, but I don't think so.

INDIVIDUAL LEADERS³

HITTERS

1.	Derek Jeter	Tribe	373
2.	Ken Griffey, Jr.	Redbirds	370
3.	Jeff Bagwell	Cubs*	368
4.	Roberto Alomar	Senators	357
5.	Jay Bell	Cubs*	351
6.	Manny Ramirez	Blues	348
7.	Matt Williams	Tigers	331
8.	Jose Canseco	Reds	329
9.	Jason Kendall	Reds	327
10.	Rafael Palmeiro	Reds	320
11.	Mike Lieberthal	Chiefs	305
12.	Sammy Sosa	Chiefs	299
(T)	Luis Gonzalez	Tigers	299
14.	B.J. Surhoff	Tribe	298
(T)	Larry Walker	Tribe	298

PITCHERS

1.	Pedro Martinez	Bronx Bombers	379
2.	Randy Johnson	Tigers	303
3.	Curt Schilling	Pirates	254
4.	Jeff Zimmerman ⁴	Skipjacks	249
5.	Jose Lima	Chiefs	246

³ Not including bonus points.

⁴ Please.

6. Robb Nen	Cubs*	238
7. Billy Wagner	Tigers	233
8. Mike Hampton	Skipjacks	232
9. Kevin Brown	Chiefs	229
10. John Wetteland	Reds	228
11. Paul Byrd	Skipjacks	225
12. Troy Percival	Bronx Bombers	217
13. John Rocker	Skipjacks	216
(T) Shane Reynolds	Skipjacks	216
15. Scott Williamson	Senators	214

It is interesting to me that out of the fifteen top-scoring hitters, only Derek Jeter (373) and Ken Griffey (370) were drafted in the first round. A-Rod, Piazza, Joey Belle and Garciparra all were picked in the first round but are not among the top fifteen scoring hitters to date, although it should be noted that three of the four have missed a number of games due to injuries. And Albert just isn't that good.

I will also point out that of the six pitchers taken in the first round, four of the six (Pedro, R.J., Schilling and Kevin Brown) are in the top ten among pitchers, with only the underperforming and injured Roger Clemens and the washed-up Greg Maddux not in the top group in terms of scoring.

The surprises? Well, you might say that Jay Bell at 351 points and 5th overall is a bit of a surprise. Ditto with Matt Williams at 331 and 7th. Likewise with Canseco at 329 in 8th. More of the same with Lieberthal at 305 points and 11th, Circus Geek at 299 and 12th, and B.J. Surhoff at 298 and 14th.

SAME TIME, LAST YEAR

Last year at this time the **Blues** were leading the pack with 4074, followed closely by the **Bombers** with 3958, followed by the **Chiefs** with 3878, the **Tigers** with 3864, and the **Senators** with 3852. The **Pirates** trailed the league with 3226. Strangely similar to this year, eh?

BALLS AND STRIKES

© U-belly's observation about Shamu's* laissez-faire management technique this year has merit. How many times has each of us overmanaged our team and outsmarted ourselves by making one move too many? On a personal level, plenty. Just the other night I was sitting at my desk at home watching the late-night edition of *Sportscenter*, stupid with fatigue, when I saw a brief clip of a Cincinnati Reds player and a vague comment about a death in his family. I didn't even catch the name of the player, but when they flashed his picture on the screen, I was sure it had to be the Senators' own Pokey Reese,

since I knew it was not Barry Larkin, Greg Vaughn, or the freaky Dmitri Young. Assuming that Pokey (I still don't know if it was him) would miss several games because of the funeral and such, I immediately dialed up Bill James and demoted Pokey in favor of another Senator. Pokey hasn't missed a game since, and, in fact, cracked out five hits in six at-bats for 18 points for the Senators' farm system on Tuesday night. Time for a visit to *Overmanagers Anonymous*.

© Once again this year we are all learning the hard way that there is no "sure thing" when it comes to drafting pitching. Witness the problems experienced by McBlunder with Clemens and Smoltz, the **Cubs*** with Greg Maddux, and the **Senators** with the behated Tom Glavine. I mean, who do we draft in the first two rounds next year? Jose Lima and Paul Byrd? Pullleeezzzz. But it may come to that, the way things stand right now.

© As a two-time champion in this glorious league, I am reluctant to concede any correlation between success and luck, but then I look at where Itchie's hapless drafted team is at in the standings, and I recognize that Dame Fortune might have just a little bit to do with it. You want examples? How about Paul Byrd? Or Steve Finley? Or Tony "Splendid Splinter" Fernandez? Or just about anyone else on the **Jax** roster save the players that Itchie actually expected to do well (Vinny, Joey and Thome). The guy that is really sticking in my craw right now is the aforementioned Fernandez, the 52-year-old career .272 hitter who is threatening to be the first player since Ted Williams to bat .400, and who is the second highest scoring third-baseman. If that's not pure luck, then the Pope really isn't a bead-squeezer and Itchie really isn't a charter member of the Hair Club for Men. Enough already.

© Sad to say, but looks like our defending champion, the beloved McBlunder, has given up the ghost for the year. Not only has he been beset with yet another injury to a star player (Manny Ramirez) but mismanagement is also starting to take its toll on this sorry team. Inexplicably, Stretch has kept John Jaha riding pine even as he is in the midst of a career-best hitting and homer streak. Can the **Blues** really go from first to worst? Sad, but possibly true.

© I look at Rubella's roster and can only shake my head in disbelief that this pathetic conglomeration of superannuated has-beens and pitifully never-will-bes is actually ahead of the **Senators** in the point standings, at least at this writing. To think that this team is actually scoring positive points at all with players like Butch Huskey, Fred McGriff, Charles Johnson, Ripken (with all due respect, Cal, you're past your prime), and Harold Baines, among others, astounds me. The **Redbirds** have

more castaways than *Return to Gilligan's Island*, more recycles than an aluminum can production plant. It just goes to show you that you really can whiz all over yourself on Draft Day and pick a horrendous team, and still cherry-pick your way to a position other than last in the standings. Or at least, for a while.

© I was pleased to see that Fernando Vina made a second visit to the DL for the Senators, followed by Saberhagen's third trip to sick bay. Most recently, as you probably read, Sabe went on the DL because he cut his foot while at a team barbecue at his lavish Long Island estate. While details were sketchy, he and Strawboo no doubt got together to relive some of the good old years together on the Mets, and did one line too many. In any event, the first news that I had that he was coming off the DL was when I saw the highlights on *Baseball Tonight* Wednesday evening as he pitched two-thirds of a shutout against the Orioles. Thanks a lot, *Stats, Inc.*

© Thanks and kudos to U-belly for his entertaining debut of *The Bellyflop*. As always, I enjoyed looking through Bob's window on the world, and appreciated his effort in writing the newsletter. I also think it's neat that Underbelly has figured out that if you simply break out your *Bartlett's Book of Famous Quotations*, you don't necessarily have to know how to spell. Now here's a quote for you, Brother Underbelly: *He who can't win this league, won't.*⁵

© I would be remiss, I guess, if I did not point out that Itchie's excellent (groan) pitching staff ranked seventh among all pitching staffs in the Bill James system with 1580 points through eleven weeks. Since this is the first positive publicity that Itchie has received since being named the 1976 Rummel (Roncali? Ryian?) Senior Scholar(right)-Athlete (harr!! I almost swallowed my tongue on that one), of the year, I repeat it here and extend my hearty congratulations. Mind you, this seventh-best pitching staff in the nation has as its top two scoring pitchers two players that Itchie picked up in the free agent draft (Paul Byrd and Jeff Zimmerman), and only because the other pitchers that he really wanted were not available for him. B-A-L, period. The End.

See you next week.

Skipper

⁵Anon.