



# FROM THE BULLPEN

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## SKIPJACKS RECLAIM LEAD IN SEESAW BATTLE; CHIEFS REARM FOR FINAL WEEK OF CAMPAIGN; CUBS\* POISED TO POUNCE

In a return to the good old days of the Hot Stove League when every season's end saw a feverish battle for the right to have one's name etched on the Cup, the **Skipjacks** and **Chiefs** are engaged in the most heated and mettle-testing, head-to-head combat that this league has ever seen. The seesaw battle for supremacy continues, with the Skipjacks using a 355-300 point edge during Week 25 to reclaim the lead from the perhaps battle-weary Chiefs, and assuming a 9204-9158 lead with one week of play to go.

In 3<sup>rd</sup> place and not out of it by a long shot are the **Cubs\***, who used a 361-point week to cut the gap behind the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place teams even more. With 9078 points through 25 weeks and fewer caps problems than the 'Jacks and Chiefs, the Cubs\* clearly have an outside chance at finishing in 1<sup>st</sup> and removing the taint of the asterisk-marred strike-shortened 1994 campaign.

Lurking behind the Cubs\* in 4<sup>th</sup> place with 8988 points are the **Tigers**, who probably have no realistic shot at the title with only one week to go, but are definitely in contention for 3<sup>rd</sup> place and a money finish in the standings should the Cubs\* falter at the end, earning Big Guy a measure of respect that has been so sadly lacking these past many years.

From top to bottom, here are the Week 25 standings in the Hot Stove League:

### WEEK 25 STANDINGS

1. Skipjacks	9204
2. Chiefs	9158

3. Cubs*	9078
4. Tigers	8988
5. Reds	8811
6. Pirates	8291
7. Tribe	8289
8. Senators	8251
9. Redbirds	8188
10. Red Sox	7928
11. Blues	7852
12. Bombers	7558

The lowly **Blues**, in a last-ditch effort to improve on next year's draft position, led the way during Week 25 of the HSL with a very respectable 393 points, the underachieving Blues squad largely if not wholly unaffected by point cap limitations. In polaris extremis<sup>1</sup> are the **Reds**, who despite valiant efforts on the field are getting their butts whomped on paper via the point caps. With a meager 236 points during Week 25, the Reds have fallen fully into also-ran status, and can finish the 1999 Hot Stove League campaign neither higher nor lower than 5<sup>th</sup> place, a lackluster end to the season, at best.

Following the **Blues**, the **Cubs\*** had the second best Week 25 with 361 points, followed by the **Skipjacks** with 355, the **Pirates** with 337, the **Tigers** with 327, and the **Bombers** with 325. The aforementioned **Chiefs** managed 300 points for the week, with all remaining teams, including the ailing **Senators**, finishing the week with fewer than 300 points. From first to worst, here are the point totals for Week 25:

### WEEK 25 POINT TOTALS

1. Blues	393
2. Cubs*	361
3. Skipjacks	355
4. Pirates	337
5. Tigers	327

<sup>1</sup> At the polar extreme.

6. Bombers	325
7. Chiefs	300
8. Redbirds	285
9. Tribe	273
10. Red Sox	266
11. Senators	244
12. Reds	236

The top hitting team for the week was the **Blues** with 247 points, followed by the **Senators** with 224. At the other end, the **Tribe** managed only 112 points for the week, due largely to the point caps. On the pitching side of the ledger, the **Chiefs** led the arms race with 165 points for the week, followed by the **Cubs\*** and **Tribe** who each managed 161 pitching points for the week. At the other end of the spectrum were the **Senators** hurlers who, unable to pitch effectively with both hands clutching the neck region, managed a grand friggin' total of 20 positive pitching points for the week.

## THE CONTENDAS

Instead of going all the way around the horn this week, since there are only four teams in contention for the title or a money spot, we'll pay short visits only to the camps of the top four squads this week, starting at the top and working our way down.

**Skipjacks:** The Skipjacks hitters were led by a white-hot Albert Belle, who has been absolutely *en fuego* since his Orioles team fell hopelessly out of contention. Joey cracked out 30 points on Thursday night alone when he hit four doubles to tie a major league mark, and scored 12½ points on Wednesday and Sunday as well, totaling 59 points for the week. You're a gamer, Joey! In addition to Belle, the Skipjacks enjoyed decent weeks from Thome, Bordick (sound of collective hurling), Finley (more hurling), and Solly Green, while Fernando and Biggio went AWOL and Vinny was off dreaming of an off-season full of tequila, siestas, fiestas and more tequila. On the pitching side, Itchie received major support in the person of Robert Person, with admirable contributions from Paul Byrd, Mike Remlinger and John Rocker. Itchie looks like a genius for promoting rookie Joe Mays for Friday's contest, with Joe tossing a gem and chalking up 31.5 points after spending the previous few weeks in negative territory.

*Keys to victory:* Wake-up calls to second basemen Tony Fernandez and Craig Biggio, whose point contributions won't be severely affected by point caps, and continued stellar pitching from the Skipjacks' relief corps, with solid starts from at least three or four starting pitchers.

**Chiefs:** B.T. enjoyed solid weeks from Lieberthal, Casey, Durham and Rondell White, but little else from his hitting squad. Thanks to solid pitching outings from Kevin Brown (30.0), Randy Johnson (34.5), Andy Benes (22.0) and Mike Mussina (27.0), the Chiefs are still in contention. However, to have a shot at this thing, the Chiefs will have to have more splendid pitching during Week 26, and solid contributions from recent free agents James Baldwin and C.J. Nit"wit"kowski. Good luck on that one, B.T.

*Keys to success:* Pitching, pitching, pitching. The Chiefs cannot afford any more negative-point implosions from Jose Lima (minus 21.5) or John Halama (minus 6.5), and have to keep the hurlers in positive territory.

**Cubs\*:** This surprisingly successful-on-the-field but definitely mediocre-if-not-crummy-on-paper team continues to be led by such no-names as Brad Ausmus, Jay Bell, Edgardo Alfonzo and Matt Stairs, but it was the Cubs\*' pitching during Week 25 that carried the cudgel for Shamu\*. With Burba (29.0), Pedro (38.0), Bottenfield (24.5) and Guzman (11.0) all posting double-figure performances on Tuesday, followed by Maddux's 21.0 gem on Thursday and Lieber's 37.5 beauty on Saturday, the Cubs\* were able to post a 161-point pitching week in spite of Robb Nen's (minus 17.0) act of arson on Saturday. The Cubs\* may have helped or hurt themselves by picking up Matt Clement in Sunday's free agent draft, with this rookie poised to make two starts during Week 26. The jury is out on this one, Shamu\*.

*Keys to success:* Continued grease jobs by Brad Ausmus, Eddie Alfonzo and Jay Bell; lights-out performances from Maddux, Lieber and Pedro; and two stellar starts from Matt Clement.

**Tigers:** The Tigers continued to receive major support from Ivan Rodriguez, Rico Brogna, Matt Williams and Luis Gonzalez, just as they have all year, but Big Guy also received the pleasant surprise of Gary Sheffield actually showing up to play here at the end of the season. Shniffy cracked out 34.5 points during Week 25, probably his best performance in the last couple of years. On the pitching side of the equation, Big Guy continued to live off his relievers with Aguilera, Mariano, Scott Sullivan, Derek Lowe and Jeff Shaw all posting positive returns for the week, but Scott Elarton giving up most of the gains he made earlier in the week with a minus 12.5 setback on Sunday. In terms of starting pitching, Omar Olivares trotted the Tigs back to the tune of 12.5 points on Thursday, Scott Erickson chipped in 11.0 on Wednesday, and Rick Reed tossed in 20 points in two outings for the week. Eric Milton, demonstrating conclusively that

his no-no was a fluke with a capital F, managed only 1.5 points in his singular outing for the week.

*Keys to success:* Cycles and/or three-jack nights from three or four starting hitters, no-nos from all starting pitchers.

## BALLS AND STRIKES

✧ The past four weeks of the Hot Stove League season may mark the single-worst monthly performance by a **Senators** squad since the very inception of this proud and success-steeped franchise. Just a short month ago, the Senators were fully engaged and averaging something like 400 points a week, and knocking on the back door of the House of Shamu\*, having closed the gap between the Senators and **Cubs\*** to 191 points. It was at precisely that point that the entire Senators roster was infected with apathy and malaise, and one short month later the Senators find themselves more than 800 points behind those same once catchable Cubs\*. And Skipper has endured thirty days of box score misery at the old home computer, engaging nightly in involuntary processes of lashing out at my innocent children gathered nearby and profanity-laced diatribes directed at no one in particular, but brought about by the cruel hand of the baseball gods.

Other than being flayed open with a cat-o-nine-tails to the bare back or taking a mace ball to the forehead, I can't imagine anything more painful than what the sorry pilot of the Omaha Senators has gone through this past month. Thank you for feeling my pain.

✧ I guarantee you that the Hot Stove League has set a new mark for free agent transactions during the last Sunday night of the season. This past Sunday, no fewer than seven HSL teams dipped their toes into the free agent pool, signing no fewer than 23 free agents to one-week contracts.<sup>2</sup> *Bravissimo*, brethren. That's giving it the old college try.

Let's take a quick look at who signed who this past Sunday, just for fun:

Redbirds	Orel Hershiser Miguel Batista Sal Fasano Graem Lloyd
Senators	Marquis Grissom Bubba Trammel Ryan Rupe
Cubs*	Matt Clement

<sup>2</sup> Like there are 23 unsigned players worth having on your roster. Try 3.

	Antonio Alfonseca Luis Polonia
Chiefs	Brian Anderson C.J. Nitkowski Jose Jimenez Jeff Williams James Baldwin
Tribe	Jay Witasick Rod Beck
Skipjacks	Eric Gagne Ramon Martinez
Bombers	Mike McFarland Terry Shumpert Jason Thompson John Burkett

Wow. Tough break on Orel last night, Rubella. Maybe his next start will work out a little better for you.

*Luis Polonia*, Shamu\*? When did he finish that seven-year stretch in the Big House for that little problem with the 13-year-old? Have you no shame? No need to answer that rhetorical question.

Nice call with John Burkett, Mouse. His performance this week should cement your position in the cellar.

✧ I know that our focus in this league is on baseball, and for 364 days out of the year I could care less about professional golf, but how 'bout that Ryder Cup finish on Sunday? As I said, the rest of the year I could care less about golf, but give me a smart-mouthed young Spaniard, a goofy dancing Swede with a train engineer's cap, and a pompous twit from Brit challenging the very manhood of our fellow countrymen, and suddenly my blood is coursing red, white and blue, and I'm more than a little bit interested in the outcome. Although Ben and the Americans could have been a bit more reserved and gracious in victory on Sunday, it was nevertheless quite satisfying to watch the Europeans stewing in their own juice. They keep forgetting that we bailed their asses out not once but twice earlier in this century and have no right to best us at anything.

## SAME TIME, LAST YEAR

In stark contrast to this year's anticipated photo finish, last year at this time McBlunder was sitting on top of an extraordinarily comfortable lead, with 9469 points through 25 weeks to the next-best total of 8834 points by the **Senators**, a whopping 635-point margin. Unfortunately for the **Skipjacks**, things are just a bit tighter this year, and Itchie is going to have to keep his focus and his hand on the switch for another full week.

## **BOYS' DAY OUT**

We are on for Friday at Woodland Hills. The first tee time is at 11:50 a.m., I believe, with the second tee time to follow. See you there, and remember, since some of us (me) are still post-partum, mum is the watchword.

Skipper