



FROM THE BULLPEN

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Eastern Nebraska Division

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Brethren:

Although I announced that last week's version of *From the Bullpen* would be the season finale, I'm not yet ready to let go of this disappointing 1999 season. Hence, this issue. Hear me out, if you like, or if your precious time is too valuable to be wasted on old business, it's a free country and you should do as you please with this edition.

THE TEAM THAT JOHNNY BUILT

It's become somewhat of a tradition, at least in my mind, for *From the Bullpen* to give some press to the league champion and analyze a bit how the championship team was assembled. Let's look, then, at how Itchie put together the championship **Skipjacks** team of 1999, round by round and decision by decision:

Rd	Player	Comments
1	Albert Belle	In the end, a decent pick, but not much fun to watch all year since he dogged it until the Orioles were out of the race.
2	Vinny Castilla	Bad timing. Itchie got Vinny in an off year.
3	Jim Thome	Nothing spectacular.
4	Javy Lopez	Great pick until he went down.
5	Tom Gordon	A washout in an oft-injured year.
6	Shane Reynolds	Stellar pick.
7	Shawn Green	Fabulously lucky pick. Solly may go a little higher next year.
8	Andy Ashby	Good trade bait.
9	Brian Moehler	Total waste.
10	Jamie Moyer	Great pick. When will the

Rd	Player	Comments
		rest of us figure this out?
11	Mike Hampton	Possibly the pick of the draft. Probable Cy Younger in the 11 th round. Sure glad I took Todd Hundley in the 10 th instead of Mike.
12	Dmitri Young	Wouldn't have been a bad pick if Itchie hadn't given up on him.
13	Jay Buhner	A non-event.
14	Steve Finley	Itchie's <i>Crisco</i> pick of the year. Greeeeez-zee.
15	Mark Grudzielanek	A woofier.
16	Eric Karros	Not bad numbers, but what a stiff.
17	John Rocker	As U-belly would put it, some peroxide in a bottle.
18	Delino DeShields	DeShitty DePick.
19	Bobby Bonilla	He's good people.
20	Tim Wakefield	Could have been worse.
21	Jeff Brantley	Untimely arm injury.
22	Quinton McCracken	Not quite as good as getting Armando Benitez in the 22 nd , like I did. I can flat-out pick 'em, can't I?
23	Mike Bordick	<i>Grease is the word.</i> Career year for Bordy.
24	C. Guillen	Not even sure who this was. Nice pick.
25	Terry Steinbach	No comment.
26	Mike Trombley	Pretty good way to finish the draft.

FREE AGENT DRAFT

It would take me a month of Sundays to go through and analyze all of the Itchmeister's many free agent selections throughout the course of the year, and doubtless Itchie plugged a few gaps here and there with some of the free agents, but the only one who really made a difference was Jeff Zimmerman, whom Itchie hadn't even heard of when the year started, but who carried the water for the Skipjacks all year long. Zim may have been the Jax's MVP, and but for a slight meltdown toward the end of the year, he would have finished in the top five or so among total points scored by pitchers. Outstanding selection, Itchie, even though you probably had him about fourth on your free agent list that week, and got him only because somebody else beat you to the punch on slugs like Blake Stein, Dave Mlicki, and their ilk.

TRADES

To my recollection, Itchie made only one trade all year, but it was a beauty. After making one heckuva sales pitch to Hayden, Itchie unloaded the disintegrating Andy Ashby at just the right time, picking up perennial superstar Craig Biggio in return to bolster an undeniably mediocre infield. This transaction afforded the Jax just enough of a point boost to stave off the Chiefs in the end, and so Itchie may feel ethically obligated¹ to share some of his winnings with the Insufferable Iowaegan.

And there you have it. The team that Itchie built.

ANOTHER ONE FOR THE BOOKS

With another season in the jar, and again to keep with custom, I have asked our faithful league secretary to update our Record of Final Finishes and provide each of you copies herewith. Armed with this information, the following observations can be made:

OUR FEARLESS LEADER

- The **Skipjacks'** 1999 crown marks the third time that an Itchie-selected team has won the title, in twelve years of competition dating back to 1988².
- With titles in 1992, 1995 and 1999, Itchie becomes the first Hot Stove Leaguer to win two crowns in the Live Ball Era, which began in 1993 when the league expanded to twelve members and we joined the Bill James family. The only other team to capture the title

¹ Right.

² When the league entrance requirements were dramatically lowered to allow for the entry into the HSL of Itchie and Magpie, a dark hour indeed in the annals of the Hot Stove League

three times is the **Tigers**, who won all three of their titles during the league's infancy, in the 1987-89 Dead Ball Era.

- The **Skipjacks'** point total of 9487 is the second highest total ever under the Bill James format, eclipsing the **Senators'** 1997 score of 9484 by only three points, and second only to the **Blues'** anomalous total of 9787 last year.
- The **Skipjacks'** improvement from last year's 9th place finish to this year's 1st place finish, a climb of eight rungs up the ladder, is the second most precipitous climb for the Skipjacks, who previously went from 10th place (dead-ass last that year) in 1991 to 1st place in 1992. The only other clubs to climb so high so fast were the 1994 asterisk-marred **Cubs***, who went from 10th place in 1993 to 1st place in 1994; and the 1996 **Chiefs**, who vaulted from their 10th place finish in 1995 to finish 1st in 1996.
- It is obvious that Itchie is an All-or-Nothing guy. But for his three years at the very top, Itchie-owned teams have never even finished in the money. Posing as the **Mudhens**, Itchie's first team in 1988 finished in 6th place, followed by a 7th place finish in 1989, a 7th place finish in 1990, a last place finish in 1991 (the low point of Itchie's life – was that the same year he got married?), and then the 1992 title. The Jax finished in 6th place in 1993, 6th place in 1994, won it all in 1995, and then finished in 11th place in 1996, 5th place in 1997, and 9th place in 1998. In sum, in twelve years of competition, Itchie's teams have finished in 1st place three times, 5th place once, 6th place three times, and in the lower division exactly half of his years of competition. I guess that when Itchie hits the Quik Shop on the way to the Draft each spring, he either has a near-religious experience which gets the synapses firing like a freshly-timed Jaguar V12; or doesn't, and shows up at the Draft the usual dullard.

THE REST OF YOUSE

- The **Chiefs** finished in 2nd for the second year in a row to wrestle the Bridesmaid Revisited distinction away from Hayden, whose **Rancid Redbirds** finished 2nd the three years in a row before that. In toto, this is the Chiefs' fourth runner-up finish, to go with his 1st place finish in 1996 and 3rd place finish in 1994. In fifteen years of competition, the Chiefs have six top three finishes. A fairly impressive resume, until you add in the fact that B.T. has two DAL³ finishes to his name as well (1985, 1992) and, more significantly, that B.T.

³ Dead-add last.

has outspent the Gross Domestic Product of Madagascar and French New Guinea together since we have been under the Bill James system. Like his golf, B.T. has the best game that money can buy.

- In spite of drafting one of the most mediocre teams of all time, the **Cubs*** were able to finish the season in 3rd place, their second consecutive top four finish, but only after I blessed Shamu's* team and cursed my own by warning Shamu* to look in his rearview mirror that fateful night a few short months ago. If one could only turn back time, I'd be spinning the time-piece wildly. Congratulations, Sir Charles, on a second consecutive competitive campaign after three consecutive disastrous seasons.
- The **Tigers**, I am pleased to report, finished in the top four – almost in the money – for the first time ever in the Live Ball Era. Not since 1991, when the Tigers finished in 2nd place, a mere 6 points behind the **Reds**, has Big Guy been able to pilot his team higher than a 5th place finish. Congratulations, Big Guy – we're all just so darned proud of you! Now that you've finally come to grips with the fact (not opinion) that you must draft good pitching early to have even a sliver of hope of winning this thing⁴, you actually will find yourself in a position to win this thing now and again, if you can catch a little peroxide in a bottle and stay on top of the free agent draft. You might even be able to one day shed the painful label of "Not able to win in the Live Ball Era" one day. We can only hope.
- Finishing the season in 5th, after having every conceivable appendage amputated via the point caps, the **Reds** return to the Upper Division after their dismal 11th place finish in 1998. With this return to respectability came a renewed interest in and vigor for the HSL competition, not to mention bragging rights over certain other league members who finished below the Reds, not the least of which are the **Red Sox**. Well done, O Bad-Haired One, well done.
- The surprising **Pirates** finished the year in 6th place, the Buckos' first Upper Division finish since Clinton took office, and the first time that the Irates have finished higher than 9th place since the league expanded to twelve teams in 1993. After finishing 9th, last, last, 9th, 10th, last and last, the Pirates finally have something to write home about and brag themselves up on around the old office water cooler. I can just hear SloPay now: "Yuuuup. I finished in the top half of my fantasy baseball league," he might offer to a disin-

⁴ Contrary to the thinking of a certain ox-like member of this league.

terested coworker. "I finished ahead of a lawyer; a sikedick and toady; another lawyer – course, he is from Iowa, but nevertheless – another lawyer; another lawyer who doubles as a stockbroker; and this handsome little silver-haired guy in Omaha who nobody can really figure out just what it is that he does do – but he went to college!" So, not only will SloPay get that kind of mileage out of his Upper Division finish in 1999, but I'll bet the wife and kids will be treating him like the King of Siam for a good many months to come. Good show, Brother Bontrager!

- The **Senators'** 7th place finish was their second time in the No. 7 hole, the first occurring in 1988 when the franchise was known as the Omaha Royals, of all things. Quite naturally I'm not exactly elated about finishing down amongst the dregs here in the Lower Division, but to look at it another way, the pressure will be off at the Draft next March and I can relax and pick yet another championship contender, a status that the revered Senators franchise so richly deserves.
- The **Tribe's** 8th place finish continues a dismal tradition by Underbelly of monumental underachievement. Here we have a guy who on the surface appears to have a near-genius intelligent quotient and a work ethic that would put the pyramid-builders to shame.⁵ Yet year after year after year the guy picks a team that is far below what the rest of us expect of him, and he then spends the rest of the year bitching and moaning about point caps, player injuries, pickpockets in St. Louis, and the demise of the working man's union and featherbedding as we know it. In any event, the Tribe's 8th place finish was the fourth time that this sadly disenfranchised Indian organization has finished in the number 8 hole, and extends to fourteen U-Bob's depressing skein of finishes *not* in 1st or 2nd place.
- The **Redbirds'** 9th place finish in 1999 was their first ever *not* in 2nd or 5th place. For his first six years in the league, Hayden managed to pilot his lucky little team to three 5th place finishes and three 2nd place finishes, relying on the grease factor to compensate for some ill-drafted years during that time. This year, as some of us have been predicting for the past several years, Rubella's luck finally ran out, and his frequent visits to the free agent market did not make up for this year's ill-drafted team. Poor old Hayden went to the well one too many times. Nevertheless, in spite of his many faults, not the least of which is being a cocky little Iowan, one must concede that having only one

⁵ Unless it's all a pack of lies and shams carefully orchestrated by U-belly to give this appearance, which certainly can't be eliminated as a distinct possibility.

Lower Division finish in seven years of play is something to be proud of – for an Iowaegan.

- Our 10th place finisher this year was none other than McGloat, due to a furious rally in the last week to surpass the flagging **Red Sox**. In this truly forgettable 1999 season, McGloom managed to avoid matching the **Cubs*** pilot as the only other “First-to-Worst” team in HSL history.⁶ In edging out the Red Sox for 10th place, Stretch also avoided matching the 1995-96 **Skipjacks**⁷ for the second most precipitous fall from grace, but now has the distinction of the third-biggest slide on record after having one’s name etched on The Cup. McBlunder can only hope that his drop to the number 10 spot does not presage a return to an earlier era during which the **Blues** struggled annually to avoid finishing in the very cellar of the league. It must be said that this year’s 10th place finish is the Blues’ worst in the Live Ball Era, and smacks loudly of a team whose upper management has grown fat from resting on its laurels. Take a good, long look at yourself in the mirror, Stretch, and ask yourself if you like what you see.
- And then we have the **Red Sox**. My, my, my. Sad to see this once-proud franchise in shambles. After thirteen consecutive years of finishing in the Upper Division, often in competition for a title or money finish, the Red Sox slipped last year to an 8th place finish, and this year dropped all the way down to 11th, just one rung up from the league bowels. With their ownership apparently strapped financially, the Crimson Hose franchise could not even transact business in the league for the final third of the season or so, the angry Transactions Suspended label appearing on each weekly Bill James report. Apparently an infusion of new capital, new blood, or a rededication to purpose by present management will be necessary to pull this team back up into the realm of respectability. Get with it, Possum, or else.
- And then finally, the **Bronx Bombers**, who despite valiant if not yeoman efforts, managed to finish in the very bowels of the league in 1999 after inching and clawing their way up to their highest-placement ever, 7th, last season. The last place finish marks the second time that the Bombers have finished in dead last, bookending the 1996 season, and breaking SloPay’s stranglehold on the cellar spot. Under-achievement, a host of injuries, and, let’s be honest, Mouse, a few

⁶ Shamu’s* 1995 team, drafting first after winning it all in the 1994 strike-shortened season, finished dead-ass last, finishing more than 200 points behind that year’s 11th place team.

⁷ The 1996 Skipjacks finished an embarrassing 11th, after their halcyon season of 1995.

lousy draft picks, spelled the demise of the Bombers this season. But with his rash of transactions during the final fortnight of the season, Mouse served notice that he is content to be nobody’s patsy, and will fight and finagle his way back up the standings ladder next season, come what may. Bravo, Friend Mouse.

IN RE *BELLYFLOP*

You all had a chance to read U-Bob’s dry little piece on his qualms about the point caps in last week’s special issue of *TheBellyflop*. I’ve been trying to think of a way to respond to this position paper without coming right out and calling the poor guy an absolute blithering ignoramus, or at a minimum, a textbook example of the devolution of homo sapiens, but softer words don’t come to mind and wouldn’t cut the mustard anyway. Sometimes a spade simply needs to be labeled a spade.

But before attaching any harsh labels to this long-time and beloved league member, I thought it best to try to investigate the matter a bit further, so I paid a visit to U-Bob’s coworker, Trang Nguyen, to try to learn a little bit more about U-Bob’s discussion of the point caps with him. It was enlightening, indeed.

“So, Trang, I understand that you had a nice little chat with my good friend U-belly about our rotisserie baseball league, and how the point cap limitations work, eh?”

“Me talk with Mr. Bob? No, Mr. Bob tell me – no, yell at me about bad baseball system. This what you ask about?”

“What do you mean, Trang?”

“Well, three, four days last week, and four, maybe five days week before, Mr. Bob chain me to hot screen-printer after hours – he tell me I get big overtime pay of one dollar ten cents per hour – and scream and yell at me over and over about many baseball problems he has.”

“*Baseball problems*. What do you mean?”

“Like him say, ‘Come on, Trang, work that screen press, faster, faster, you lazy, third-world bloodsucker – THOSE FRIGGIN’ POINT CAPS, DANTE BICHETTE HITS TWO HOME RUNS AND SEVEN RBIS AND I NET OUT THE SAME THREE POINTS THAT SKIPPER GOT FOR A BLOWN SAVE FROM SCOTT WILLIAMSON LAST NIGHT, WHAT THE 2@#\$\$ IS UP WITH THAT, EH, TRANG!’”

“Wow. What’d you say to him, Trang?”

“I say, ‘You right, Mr. Bob, you right. Not fair, not fair, not fair. Arrrgh! Now, please, let fingers out of hot press.’ Mr. Bob tell me, ‘Sorry, Trang. Now let’s move that line of sweatshirts over to the D line and SONOFA-BITCH, LARRY WALKER JUST WENT FIVE-FOR-FIVE FOR MY TEAM, AND GUESS HOW MANY POINTS I’M GOING TO NET OUT OF THAT, TRANG, JUST GUESS.’

“I say ‘I can’t, Mr. Bob, aieeee, I can’t until you let my head out of the hot dye vat. Thank you. You right, Mr. Bob, you right. Hitting point caps, they suck very much. You very right.’ Then I say, ‘But I do have a question, Mr. Bob. Why they put point caps in place *this* year?’ “

“Yeah, what’d he say, Trang?”

“Mr. Bob tell me, ‘Well, it wasn’t just this year.’

“I ask him how many years he been in league. He say this his *seventh* year under the Bill James system.

“Uh-huh. Then what, Trang?”

“Then I ask him, ‘How many years they have point caps in place, Mr. Bob?’ He say, ‘Why, all seven, Trang. Why you ask? -- I mean, why *do* you ask?’ I say him, ‘Well, if point caps be in place all seven years, and point caps cause big hurt on you before, why you not draft team this year in way so point caps not hurt you so much, Mr. Bob?’ Then he say ‘Get your ass back on that machine and get to work, and I mean now, Trang. How can I explain an American game to an ignorant rice-paddy refuge. Sheesh.’”

And now, my friends, you know the rest of the story.

U-belly has sort of become the Ernie Chambers of our baseball league. Hey, if somebody wants to waste an entire career bucking the system at his own expense and at the expense of his constituents, whom am I to say? Go ahead, U-Bob, keep drafting good hitting, ignoring good pitching, and we’ll look for your name on The Cup next Millennium. I mean the *next* millennium.

Enjoy the Series, brothers. More later.

Skipper