



FROM THE BULLPEN

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REDS RULE

It's here, it's here, it's finally here! That two-week gap between The Draft and Opening Day was excruciatingly long, but like Christmas to a five-year-old, it finally arrived.

And what to our wondering eyes should appear, but the rocketing **Reds**, with their helmsman so queer!¹

That's right, the self-proclaimed, least-prepared HSL manager at The Draft—who wanted us all to believe he had been so busy soaking up beer while watching ice hockey that he hadn't any time to prepare—picked a whale of a team, it seems, if early returns are any indication.

Let's take a look at the Week 1 point totals and standings, shall we:

WEEK 1—STANDINGS/POINT TOTALS

<u>Team Name</u>	<u>Total Pts.</u>	<u>Hitting Pts.</u>	<u>Pitching Pts.</u>
1. Reds	511	312	199
2. Chiefs	446	206	240
3. Skipjacks	422	273	150
4. Blues	421	305	116
5. Wahoos	395	288	107
6. Tigers	349	246	103
7. Bombers	328	282	46
8. Tribe	325	259	66
9. Senators	291	151	140
10. Redbirds	284	239	45
11. Pirates	272	188	85
12. Cubs*	254	180	75

Best Hitting: The top hitting team for the week was the red-hot **Reds**, with 312 points for the week, more than the team totals of the **Senators**, **Redbirds**, **Pirates** and **Cubs***. The pissed-off **Blues** hitters had

the second highest Week 1 total with 305 points, just 7 off Tricko's pace, no doubt inspired to greatness during Week 1 by certain facts reported here just a few weeks ago.

Worst Hitting: Bringing up the rear on hitting points during Week 1 were my own anemic **Senator** batsmen, who despite being destined for greatness, are having a bit of trouble getting out of the box. Not only did Damon and Alomar start the year off by being hitless in their first three games, but Long Gone (and perhaps soon to be) Gonzalez developed a hangnail or had a tummy ache or some damn thing and hasn't even stepped on the field since day two of the season, underscoring why even SloPay won't draft the Malingering Mexican ever again. The second lousiest hitting team for the week was the **Cubs*** with an unhealthy 180 points.

Best Pitching: On the pitching side, the **Chiefs** hurlers paced the pack with an eye-opening 240-point week, led by the Big Unit with 68.5. The second-best pitching team for the week was the **Reds**, whose overachieving moundsmen chalked up 199 points for the week.

Worst Pitching: Looking southerly, the **Rancid Redbirds** had the fewest pitching points for the week with 45, which has to sting a bit, considering that Hayden took Millwood in the 1st and Hampton in the 2nd. Unless these two get their acts straightened out in a hurry, it's going to be a long old year for Mr. Iowa. As it should be. The second crummiest pitching team for the week was the **Bronx Bombers**, who have, well, a crummy pitching staff. They had 46 points during Week 1.

MVP: The MVP of the season so far is the Mad Russian, Vladimir Guerrero, owned by the Mad Missourian, Stretch "I'll show you dead-ass last" McBlunder. Relax, hothead.

Cy Young: The Cy Young of the year is the aforementioned Big Unit with 68.5 in two starts, and who is now proving, if there was ever a question about it, that spring training performance for pitchers means nuthin'.

¹ Figuratively.

AROUND THE HORN

It's customary to go around the horn to review early performances and prospects, and never one to buck custom and tradition, I therefore offer the following:

Reds: Tricko has perhaps tricked us all, showing up for Draft Day with two days of growth on his chin and booze and smokes on his breath, looking to all the world like something the cat dragged in from outside.² Like the rest of you, I assumed that Tricko was being square with us when he lamented his total lack of preparation, and I even fell for his beat act of stumbling up to the board each round during the draft, acting as if he didn't know what he was doing. *Didn't know what he was doing, my Aunt Harriet!* All he did was go out and pick a team that cranked out 511 points during Week 1, vaulting him to the lead by a hefty 65 points, and making him the betting man's favorite to win his first league crown since 1993.

Or, on the other hand, maybe the Big Hurt won't bat .536 on the year, and maybe Jermaine Dye and Brian Giles might not bat .429 or .400, respectively, for the year. But maybe Greg Maddux, Jamie Moyer and Al Leiter will go on to have dominant pitching years, as they have demonstrated in their early performances, and leave the rest of us scratching our heads and wondering just how he was able to pluck these plums away from the rest of us while drafting 5th.

A hearty high-five to Tricko, and best wishes (not really) for a wire-to-wire finish.

Chiefs: I'm puzzled. Stumped. Surprised. Amazed. Befuddled. How does a guy with a low double-digit IQ manage to pick teams that get out of the gate early and often, leaving the rest of us geniuses behind? I mean, I know that the guy spends more time praying than the Pope, but supplications alone can't be the reason for this franchise's recent successes. Now, gobs of money, loads of luck *and* fervent prayer might be the right combination.

In any event, my C-note wager with B.T. is once again looking to be in serious peril.

Now that he has picked up Robb Nen in the free agent draft (or did he?), if B.T.'s charges stay healthy all year, I predict that his pitching staff will smash the previous pitching point total record to smithereens. This team had eight pitching victories in the first week, more than Hayden's staff may have at All-Star break. And one more thing: How the @\$*& did Darin Ers-

² Or, as I recall, like most all of us when we went to Denny's for breakfast on the Sunday morning of our Detroit-Toronto-Cleveland yak trip in 1994.

tad last until the 14th round when he was drafted by B.T.? Every fiber of my being told me that Ersty was going to have an enormous comeback year, and yet I let him sail past me each round and ended up drafting Tony the Tiger (Clark) in the 12th. Beautiful.

Skipjacks: Probably the worst thing about the Skipjacks starting the season so high in the standings (3rd) is that their egomaniacal manager is probably already thinking of himself as the "Manager of the Millennium." The guy makes one no-brainer pick, Pedro in the 1st, and suddenly he goes from being a Quik Shop flunky to a managerial genius' genius, at least in his own mind.

With I-Rod, Palmeiro and Justice off to hot starts, the Skipjacks may in fact be a force to be reckoned with if Bonds heats up now that Pacific Bell has opened up. Good call on the Big Cat. Looks like he's in for a solid comeback year.

Blues. Look at them Blues, in 4th place with 421 points, even though their manager went out and drafted a *suboptimal* team. There, Stretch, is that better? I'll try to be a little bit softer in my assessment of your teams in the future, so as to hopefully avoid triggering another rage reaction from you.

With Vladdy off to his *en fuego* start, and with Giambi, Sweeney, the Joker (Joe Randa) and Company absolutely lighting it up at the plate, your team is overachieving in the extreme. If they can continue batting at a .350 team clip, you might just have a hope and prayer of overcoming your inadequate pitching staff.

Wahoos: How 'bout them Wahoos? Ain't they something? Funny how a mere name change can light a fire under a team. With Jim Edmonds absolutely tearing it up in St. Louis (how the heck did he last until the 12th round?), and with Helton and Edgar about to heat up, this team could be headed for greatness. Once Sheffield heals up and Schilling gets back in the rotation, Possum's Wailin' Wahoos could make a serious charge up the leaderboard.

Tigers: Even though they are technically in the Upper Division with 349 points, this team is not looking very good. Looks like Lima Bean might be in for a down year, and the Rocket certainly does not look like the flamethrower of old, at least so far. If not for the torrid start by the Circus Geek, and overachievement by a few others, this team would be in the Hurt Locker right now. Gotta say this, though: Big Guy's drafting of Eric Milton might have been about as shrewd a move as could be, if his flirtation with a perfect game the other night was any indication. If this guy pitched at Dodger Stadium or in Seattle, he would be lights out.

Bombers: How the heck did this team score 282 batting points during Week 1 with Big Mac sitting out half the week with injuries and Bagwell in a season-starting funk? Shannon Stewart and Jeromy Burnitz, *that's* how. These two cats were way hot for the week, and if their heat wave continues and Mouse's Twin Titans at first base get back on track, Mouse may very well be capped out on hitting points by the middle of June. Need any good pitching, Mouse? Call me.

Tribe: While it grieves me to be positioned behind the Tribe at *any* stage of *any* season, if ever there is a time to lag, it would be during the week of the first free agent draft. Not that I necessarily planned it, you see.

I'm not quite sure how I allowed U-Bob to pick up Fernando Vina this year, as I knew he was destined for a break-out year with the Cards, and he was high on my shopping list. Even with Junior's first week mini-slump, the Tribe was able to get plenty of hitting points (259) for the week, what with the hot bats of Vina, Charlie Johnson (he'll cool), Konerko and Finley. It's a decent hitting team, no question about that. Pitching is quite another story, as U-Bob's 66-point first week reveals. I know, I know. Pitching means nothing in this league. You're living proof, U-Bob.

Senators: It's a good thing it's not Thanksgiving, because there isn't much for the old Skipper to be thankful for in the world of the Hot Stove League, which is the only world. It's hard to get excited about a team with a composite batting average that is hovering around the Mendoza Line. I still like some of my pitching picks, but I'm a little chapped about Juan Pena starting the year down at Pawtucket. I can't imagine that he's not good enough to beat out Jeff Fasseiro for a starting pitching spot with the Sox.

The Padres can start giving Trevor Hoffman save opportunities anytime now, which I really don't think would be asking too much. J.D. Drew is already driving me bonkers with his Masters version of the Shell Game. Big Guy warned me about this, but not in time to avoid drafting him. Thanks.

Redbirds: With this squad's woeful first few days of the season, Hayden is darned lucky to be as high as 10th place. After the first two days in Japan and the first day or two of baseball in the States, the Redbirds were still underwater. With a torrid last weekend, they were able to inch and claw their way up to 10th place, but this team won't be going much higher than that this year. As soon as Fryman cools down to his true talent level, and Renteria, Offerman and Durham get back to their normal levels of production, this sorry squad will probably drift down to the very bottom.

Pirates: I'm truly surprised SloPay doesn't live in Alabama or Mississippi or somewhere else in the Deep South, given his penchant for the lower latitudes. The guy drafts in the No. 6 hole—his highest in years—and immediately plunges to 11th. Like water seeking its own level, I guess.

Anyway, SloPay is probably less than pleased with the molasses-like starts of Thumper's Sammy Sosa and Manny Ramirez, and I noticed that Nomar knocked in NoRuns during Week 1, so that had to be a stick in SloPay's craw. On the other hand, I rather doubt that SloPay expected his 17th round draft choice, Jose Vidro, to be batting .400-plus this far into the season, so it all probably comes out in the wash. Maybe drafting 2nd in the free agent draft will be what SloPay needs to turn his ship around.

Cubs*: Which brings us to the cellar, with its carrot-topped denizen, Shamu*. With the dismal starts from Olerud, Tino, Knoblauch, Bichette and Walker, Shamu* has to think that things will get better as the season goes on. But the Achilles' heel of this team may be the pitching staff, if Brown doesn't heal up soon and start chalking up points in a hurry. It's only a matter of time before Ramon, Kenny and Burba start getting their butts kicked on a regular basis, and so Shamu* had better hope that the free agent draft was good to him. If not, it's going to be a long, long year.

FREE AGENT DRAFT

By all reports, last Sunday's free agent draft was a debacle of biblical proportions. I still don't know what the end results of the draft are or will be. For my part, I tried to make my transactions on the computer starting at about 11:30 p.m. on Sunday night, and thought that I had accomplished my task only to learn that the computer did not accept any of my five rounds of draft choices. In a panic, realizing that it was five minutes till midnight, I quickly punched the Bill James phone number to call in my draft, only to hear the recording that the live lines were now closed. I left three panicky messages on the voicemail right at midnight, following which I attempted to fax my picks to Bill James, but was unable to get my stupid home fax machine to work. Finally, I e-mailed the commish on line and informed him of my concerns. It wasn't until the next morning that I learned that others had similar problems, and the horror stories continue to trickle in.

At last notice, Mouse was going to try to have our entire first week's free agent draft invalidated since he did not receive any of his selections, and to get the draft rescheduled for this coming Sunday. I'm sure you'll hear more about this in the very near future.

OPENING DAY

My Opening Day trip to Seattle with Big Guy and Shamu* was a most excellent adventure. Running rags on the plane while Shamu* befriended two Silly Billies across the aisle, we made it to Seattle in no time. After setting up in our hotel, we trekked down to Safeco Field to check out this new diamond in Emerald City. We walked right past the fresh rubble of the Kingdome, which was imploded only last week. I like it better as a pile of rubble than I did as a ballpark.

Safeco Field is a terrific new baseball cathedral. The first-day ceremonies began with an open roof, but even as the retractable roof was closed to keep out the bad weather, the ballpark still had a feel of an open baseball stadium. I like it. I like it a lot.

Even better was seeing my first game at Safeco with Pedro Martinez on the mound. As most of you know from watching the game on TV, Pedro was masterful, giving up two hits in seven innings while striking out eleven. I didn't realize until that game just how splendid Pedro's changeup is, but it may be an even better pitch than his fastball, if that's possible.

The right fielder that night for the Mariners (can't remember his name) looked like he was swinging a baseball bat for the first time, so badly did Pedro fool this poor sap. John Mabry, that's who it was. And he bats left-handed.

One thing is clearly true about Safeco Field: It is a pitcher's ballpark. We saw three or four balls rocket off hitters' bats, all of which we thought would be home runs, only to see them die in the gloves of the outfielders. No wonder Ken Griffey, Jr. bolted this town and signed on with the Reds. Ain't no way Junior would be breaking Hank Aaron's record playing half his games at Safeco.

I haven't decided yet where Safeco Field fits in my ranking of ballparks, but I'll cogitate on that a bit more and include this in another feature of *FTB*. I'm sure you'll be holding your breath.

That's it for this issue. Keep those cards and letters coming.

Skipper