

From the Bullpen

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NEBRASKA
Hot Stove League



2006 Season

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BEARS CLAW WAY TO TOP; REDBIRDS IN FAMILIAR TERRITORY; CUBS* READY TO POUNCE

Baseball brethren,

The reformulated Lincoln **Bears** find themselves on foreign ground after five weeks of play, sitting atop the leaderboard. While insiders are skeptical that SloPay's charges can keep up the pace for an entire 26-week season, rumor has it that Denny is already working with U-Bob on the design of championship **Bear**-head wearing apparel from the Art FX wild animal line of gear. Uh, might want to wait a few more weeks before having Tran Wu fire up the embroidery machine.

But hey, let's not take anything away from SloPay as he enjoys his day in the sun, as fleeting as it might be. Feast your eyes on the five-week leaderboard, Denny, with your beloved **Bear** pack on top:

WEEK 5 STANDINGS

- | | | |
|----|----------|---------|
| 1. | Bears | 2204.75 |
| 2. | Redbirds | 2203.25 |

3.	Cubs*	2199.00
4.	Skipjacks	2184.50
5.	Wahoos	2123.25
6.	Bombers	2082.25
7.	Reds	2074.50
8.	Tribe	2005.00
9.	Chiefs	1981.75
10.	Senators	1919.25
11.	Blues	1914.50
12.	Tigers	1822.50

The pesky **Redbirds** have pecked their way back up to their favorite position -- also-ran -- while the **Baby Bears** from West Des Moines now occupy the third spot just under 6 points off the pace. Best news of the week is that our defending champion **Skipjacks** have dropped down into 4th, a temporary toehold on their way to the Lower Division.

At the other end of the spectrum, we now find the **Tigers** firmly entrenched in last place, nearly 100 points behind the 11th place **Blues**. It appears that Big Guy's Eeyorian moaning and groaning on Draft Day was on the mark.

WEEK 5 POINT TOTALS

1.	Bears	490.00
2.	Bombers	479.50
3.	Tribe	451.75
4.	Cubs*	428.00
5.	Redbirds	395.75
6.	Blues	387.50
7.	Wahoos	386.75
8.	Chiefs	386.00
9.	Skipjacks	352.75
10.	Reds	318.00
11.	Senators	252.00
12.	Tigers	224.50

INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

HITTERS

1.	Albert Pujols	Skipjacks	204.00
2.	Jim Thome	Bombers	179.00
3.	Travis Hafner	Skipjacks	175.00
4.	Lance Berkman	Wahoos	175.00
5.	Miguel Tejada	Cubs*	159.00

PITCHERS

1.	Brandon Webb	Tribe	157.50
2.	Jose Contreras	Reds	147.00
3.	Bronson Arroyo	Wahoos	146.00
4.	Mike Mussina	Bombers	145.50

5. John Papelbon Reds 145.00

WHO'S HOT (Totals from Last Week)

HITTERS

1.		Bears	58.75
2.	Travis Hafner	Skipjacks	47.50
3.	Carlos Beltran	Chiefs	46.75
4.	Troy Glaus	Redbirds	46.50
5.	Jim Thome	Bombers	45.00

PITCHERS

1.	Joel Pineiro	Skipjacks	55.50
2.	Johan Santana	Senators	54.50
3.	Javier Vazquez	Wahoos	50.00
4.	Barry Zito	Skipjacks	47.00
5.	C.C. Sabathia	Tribe	46.00

WHO'S NOT HITTERS

1.	Bill Mueller	Reds	-12.00
2.	Ryan Freel	Blues	-3.50
3.	Alex Gonzalez	Chiefs	-3.25
4.	Luis Gonzalez	Redbirds	-1.75
5.	Morgan Ensberg	Tigers	-1.00

PITCHERS

1.	Jason Johnson	Wahoos	-15.50
2.	Ben Sheets	Tigers	-13.00
3.	Orlando Hernandez	Bombers	-11.00
4.	Takashi Saito	Tigers	-10.00
5.	Ervin Santana	Reds	-7.50

FOUL TIPS



Not that I'm griping or anything, but is there some reason Prince Albert couldn't have threatened Bonds' home run record and Hack Wilson's RBI record during the three years he was on MY roster? Kingmaker, thy name is Johnny.



I'm not saying they can't keep it up, but SloPay currently has one player (Chase Utley) on pace to score 750 points; one player (Eric Chavez) on pace to score 700 points; one player (Adam Kearns) on pace to score more than 685 points; and six players (Prince Fielder, Horatio Ramirez, Miguel Cabrera, Grady Sizemore and Casey Blake) on pace to score approximately 600 or more points. Throw in the unexplainable strong starts by pitcher Chris Capuano and Bobby Jenks, and you have a 2006 version of the Miracle '97 **Blues** in the making.



Week 5 figured to be a record-shattering week for the **Senators**, with six of my starting pitchers scheduled to pitch twice during the week. Unfortunately, this formula only works if you have good pitchers who perform up to expectation. Instead, my starting pitchers wound up with a miserable collective losing record for the week, and it didn't help that a managerial gaffe cost me one of Johan Santana's two fine starts. The kicker was Saturday, a day in which I had six starting pitchers and two relievers take the mound, netting me a whopping total of, like, 40 points for the day.



As bad as my pitchers are, my hitters suck worse. On Sunday, my 11 starting position players netted me a total of 2.25 positive points, on the strength of 4 hits in 37 at-bats with 2 runs scored, 1 double, 0 triples, 0 home runs, 0 RBIs, 0 stolen bases, and 2 bases-on-balls. Nice. Very nice.



Teixeira. Thome. Teixeira. Thome. Let's see, Teixeira or Thome? That's an easy one. Thome.



Quick, one of you math geniuses calculate the odds of Joel Pineiro leading the league in pitching points over the course of the last week, based upon his pitching stats over the past three years. That's right, the exact same odds that Shamu* will ever make a single trip through an all-that-you-can-eat buffet line: too small to be calculated, approaching $1/\infty$. Now, put Pineiro on Itchie's roster and calculate those odds again. If you round up to thousandths, it's 100%. No wonder Tony drags him over to the Horseshoe Casino five nights a week.



YOUR CLUBHOUSE CURMUDGEON

Okay, let me set this one up for you. After a yeoman day of legal work in downtown Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago, I battled non-rush hour L.A. traffic for nigh on three hours to drive the eighteen miles from the deposition situs to LAX, elevating my blood pressures to preposterously high levels and coining several new expletives while on this joy ride. Then I had to wait fifteen to twenty minutes for Hertz' check-in employee LeTarmac to summon up the wherewithal to check my vehicle in, curiously reminding me of a lifetime employee of the motor vehicle licensing bureau. Predictably, the Hertz shuttle bus driver approached his job with this same fervor of efficiency and customer service, depositing me at my gate with seconds to spare before my flight was to depart. Things looked promising until I spotted LeTarmac's twin sister manning (technically, *womaning*) the security line to the gate. Getting people through security and to their gate on time was clearly not on this woman's radar screen, as I watched the hollow-eyed passengers ahead of me slowly walk towards Ms. Attitude as if on the Bataan Death March.

Remarkably, by keeping my head down and my mouth shut and playing the part of a good soldier, I was able to make it through security clearance without incident and down to my gate just in the nick of time to make my flight on Southwest Airlines to Phoenix and then Omaha. Of course, these infuriating delays cost me my A seating priority, and so I had to check my bags at the gate and to occupy a broken middle seat between an opera singer and a Sumo wrestler.

Now you have the backdrop. Our flight took off without incident, and I cracked open a good book to enjoy for the duration of our two-hour flight. When our cocktail waitress came by to take my order, I called out for a cold Bud Light and waited for my free bag of salted peanuts to compliment my beverage. I was then coldly informed that because one of our passengers on this 200+ occupant plane had a peanut allergy, a request had been made for peanuts not to be served in the entire damned craft. This was the straw that broke the camel's back, figuratively speaking.* Outraged by this act of abject Socialism, I immediately unbuckled my seat belt, bolted out of my middle seat and into the aisle way, and then turned to my fellow passengers and yelled, "Let's roll," as a dozen or more of us charged the plane's concession stand to take possession of the salted peanuts of which we were so unfairly deprived.

I'm kidding, of course, about the charging of the plane, but not about being deprived of my salted peanuts by some whiny overprotective parent. On most flights, I don't even take the salted peanuts when they offer them to me, but on this flight, I wanted those peanuts in the worst imaginable way. Even more than that, I wanted the offending passenger to stand up and accept responsibility for her (I'm assuming here) actions, while taking a few stones from the outraged citizenry.

To wrap up a short story made long, is it just me or is this precisely the type of behavior that should not be tolerated in a civilized society? I don't think it's just me.

Other Things Sticking in my Craw at This Time

Just as I could not understand the deal with the salted peanuts, there are many other things in our modern world that I simply fail to fully comprehend. Such as:



Hip-hop music. What be the attraction? And what exactly is the message?



Celebrities having babies. Can you believe Tom Cruise and what's-her-name took a limo to the hospital for the blessed event? Please.



Hyperactive and hyper-annoying "select" little league baseball teams who do perturbing team chants in the dugout at 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning. What do these folks do, stock their dugouts with cases of caffeine-laced Red Bull to get their ten-year-olds jacked up for a day of competition? Relax, already. Little Tanner's not likely to be patrolling center field for the Yankees anytime soon. A future carjacker, maybe.



Overzealous little league parents who cheer more for little Ian's infield dribbler single than they did for the launch of the Space Shuttle. And little league parents who repeatedly chant "Say U Can!" when their little Zackie is up to bat. Just once, after a Zackie whiff, I want to march over to the parent and say, "Can you say: He can't!" Just kidding. That stuff doesn't really bother me.

HIDDEN BALL TRICK

Ever since I was just a little fry, I have been obsessed with baseball statistics. I can vividly remember spreading out on Jack and Phyllis' living room floor on a Sunday morning, poring over the list of weekly Major League statistics printed on the last inside page of the Sunday sports section, seeing that Willie Stargell was leading the circuit in RBIs, that Andy Messersmith had the league-leading ERA, and so forth and so on. I don't know what it is about baseball statistics, but I love to read them, compare them, analyze them, absorb them. I can literally** get lost in them for hours at a time.

My latest fascination is with one of the most arcane baseball statistics I have ever come across, the list of Major League players who have been picked off of a base by the infamous, humiliating hidden ball trick. I found this statistic, of sorts, located in a relatively secluded spot on the *Retrosheet* website (<http://retrosheet.org/hidden.htm>) a year or so ago, but didn't pay much attention to it until recently. I printed off a hard copy of this for some late night reading the other day, and ended up spending an hour or so reading over the list in amused amazement.

As the lead-in paragraph to this statistical table suggests, this is one of the most humiliating events in sports to be caught off base with a hidden ball in the baseman's glove standing right next to you. It is pure trickery, tomfoolery, skullduggery and deceit, having nothing whatsoever to do with actual athletic achievement. It's the stuff of sandlot baseball. When I first saw it happen in the 10-year-old age group that Joe played in a couple of years ago, the first year that players were allowed to lead off a base, I noted that every single time that it happened to a player, without exception, the 10-year-old player who got caught immediately began shedding tears, such was his embarrassment and shame.

Although an out is an out is an out, I sort of thought that by the time baseball players reached the Major League level, there would be some sort of gentlemen's agreement between the baseball brethren that the hidden ball trick not be used. In addition, I would have thought that the level of sheepishness that must be felt by a player who attempts to pull the hidden ball trick -- whether successful or unsuccessful -- would be enough to keep it from happening in the Major Leagues. Until I saw this list on *Retrosheet*, I probably assumed that the stunt hadn't been used since the 1950s or before, and even then, with relative infrequency. I was astounded to see that the feat has happened as recently as last season, and with much more regularity than I had supposed, even though it is still somewhat of a rarity (probably because of the difficulty of pulling it off).

As one can see from a careful perusal of the list, players of every ilk have fallen prey to the hidden ball trick. Hall-of-Famers, journeymen, pitchers, catchers, middle infielders, Latinos, Irishmen, African-Americans, cerebral players, flakes, future managers, future announcers, the list runs the entire gamut. But since you are all busy fellows who wouldn't have time to read this list in its entirety and make your own analysis, my aim here is to provide you with an abridged version of the whole, a recap of the high points of this important bundle of statistics:



Mike Lowell, then the third baseman for the Marlins, is the last person to successfully execute a Hidden Ball Trick (HBT), victimizing Luis Terraro of the Diamondbacks last year on August 10. It's interesting that the next to last person to execute it was also Mike Lowell, who nabbed Brian Schneider of the then-Expos on September 15, 2004. Could it be that Lowell got shipped out from Florida because of a breach of etiquette involving his back-to-back HBTs? I doubt it, but keep your eyes on the grassy knoll.



Here are some of the Hall-of-Famers who have fallen prey to the HBT: Cap Anson; Charlie Comiskey; Buck Ewing; John M. Ward; Willie Keeler; Frank Chance; Johnny Evers; Eddie Col-

lins; Sam Rice; Harry Heilmann; Mickey Cochrane; Rabbit Maranville; Jimmie Foxx; Billy Williams; Orlando Cepeda; Willie Mays; and Gary Carter.



A future HOF and the best base stealer of all time, but no genius, he, Rickey Henderson, was embarrassed by the HBT in 1998 by first baseman Rafael Palmeiro.



Perhaps because they are above it, a far few number of HOFs have been on the other side of the HBT, the guy with the ball in the glove and the Cheshire cat grin on his mug. Here are the HOF perpetrators that I have identified: Nap Lajoie, Honus Wagner; Ty Cobb; Leo Durocher; Johnny Mize; Orlando Cepeda; Rod Carew; and George Brett.



You may have noticed that Orlando Cepeda was both a perpetrator and a victim. In 1958, while a first baseman for the San Francisco Giants, Cepeda nailed Wes Covington of the Milwaukee Braves. Some eight years later, in 1966, Jim Ray Hart, a third baseman for the San Francisco Giants, nailed Cepeda while he was a member of the St. Louis Cardinals. Similarly, Lou Boudreau, shortstop and manager for the Cleveland Indians, was a perpetrator of the Hidden Ball Trick, both in 1941 and 1942, the second time nailing Don Kolloway of the Chicago White Sox. Three years later, Tony Cuccinello, a third baseman for the ChiSox, avenged his teammate by nailing Boudreau in the season opener that year.



It should not be surprising that far more managers have been HBT perps than victims. Here are the big league pilots in each category:

Perpetrators

Bruce Boche
Mike Hargrove
Phil Garner
Gene Michael
Del Crandall
Gene Mauch
Bill Rigney
Lou Boudreau
Leo Durocher
Charlie Dressen
Frank Chance

Victims

Ozzie Guillen
Dusty Baker
Frank Chance
Bucky Harris
Darrell Johnson
Terry Kennedy



As one would expect, most of the Major League players who have been victimized by the Hidden Ball Trick have only had it happen to them once. The embarrassment and shame of it happening one time is usually all that it takes to keep it from happening again. The only exceptions that I could find to this were current White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen, who had it pulled on him three times in the course of three seasons, and twice in the same year (once by well-known prankster Steve Lyons); and some cat named Jack Martin, who also had it happen to him three different times and twice in the same season. Interestingly, Martin played for three different teams when he was nailed these three different occasions.



In terms of repeat perpetrators, several players have pulled off the HBT on multiple occasions. Bill Coughlin, a second baseman for the old Washington Senators, pulled off the feat nine different times between 1901 and 1908. Babe Pinelli, a third baseman for the Tigers, nabbed or helped nab five different players between 1918 and 1922. Yankee shortstop Frank Crosetti pulled off the HBT six different times between 1936 and 1940, and in this same proud tradition of Yankee shortstops, Gene Michael nailed five different victims between 1968 and 1973, including former league MVP Zoilo Versalles. In recent times, Marty Barrett of the Boston Red Sox has successfully executed the HBT three different times, including both Bobby Grich and Doug DeCinces of the California Angels in the same month of July in 1985.



The HBT has been employed on Opening Day (April 17, 1902); during the World Series (October 9, 1907); as part of a triple play (April 30, 1929); and as the last out of a game (July 28, 1913). However, in perhaps the most insulting and humiliating episode of all, on April 8, 1988, Steve Jeltz, a shortstop for the Philadelphia Phillies, nailed Gary “Kid” Carter with the Hidden Ball Trick. This painful moment not only ended the game for the Phillies and the Mets, it also happened on the Kid’s birthday. Ooh, that hurts.

Fascinating. That’s it for now.

Skipper

* Remember, the Curmudgeon also becomes quite angry when people misuse the term “literally,” as in “This was literally the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

** Not figuratively.