

# From the Bullpen

Official Publication of The



# NEBRASKA

Hot Stove League



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2006 Season

Edition No. 24

August 16, 2006

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Guys,

It is my pleasure to bring you the pertinent news of the week in this issue of *From the Bullpen*. Effective this past Sunday night, we completed the 19-week mark of the 26-week campaign, meaning that roughly 73% of the season is behind us. Fortunately for many of us, the 27% of the season that remains includes that part of the season when our pitching caps will begin taking their toll on certain over-indulgent league managers, so the rest of the '06 campaign promises to be a bumpy and most intriguing ride. Buckle up and hold on.

## WEEK 19 STANDINGS

1.	Wahoos	8180.75
2.	Bears	8059.75
3.	Reds	8040.75
4.	Bombers	7913.50
5.	Cubs*	7898.00
6.	Skipjacks	7879.00
7.	Chiefs	7850.00
8.	Redbirds	7602.75
9.	Tigers	7584.25
10.	Blues	7518.50
11.	Senators	7135.50
12.	Tribe	6860.50

## WEEK 19 POINT TOTALS

1.	Chiefs	533.00
2.	Bears	524.50
3.	Senators	519.75
4.	Blues	482.50
5.	Reds	476.75
6.	Tigers	430.25
7.	Redbirds	422.25

8.	Jax	406.25
9.	Cubs*	385.00
10.	Bombers	383.00
11.	Wahoos	381.00
12.	Tribe	377.25

Stretch dropped the ball on providing the Week 18 point totals, so we'll cover his backside and provide them here:

### WEEK 18 POINT TOTALS

1.	Chiefs	494.00
2.	Wahoos	491.00
3.	Cubs*	468.50
4.	Bears	463.25
5.	Jax	449.75
6.	Bombers	449.50
7.	Senators	442.25
8.	Blues	430.50
9.	Tribe	402.75
10.	Tigers	353.25
11.	Redbirds	341.50
12.	Reds	320.75

So as seen above, the **Chiefs** have led the pack both of the past two weeks, scoring a total of **1027** points during the past fortnight. Holy moley, who has been so darned hot for the old Screechster? I guess he hasn't been spending all of his time getting roughed up by tough women in comedy clubs. Sadly, even after back-to-back league-leading weeks, the **Chiefs** still find themselves in the Lower Division, and sadder yet, behind the **Skipjacks**.

### INDIVIDUAL LEADERS

#### HITTERS

1.	David Ortiz	Wahoos	560.00
2.	Travis Hafner	Skipjacks	553.50
3.	Albert Pujols	Skipjacks	547.75
4.	Chase Utley	Bears	543.00
5.	Manny Ramirez	Bombers	526.25
6.	Carlos Beltran	Chiefs	510.00
7.	Miguel Cabrera	Bears	508.75
8.	Alfonso Soriano	Skipjacks	507.75
9.	Jim Thome	Bombers	501.50
10.	Derek Jeter	Redbirds	498.50

With three **Skipjacks** in the top eight hitters, one has to wonder why the **Jax** are only as high as 6th in the standings. Horrific pitching, gross mismanagement, or both?

One has to look down to the 14th slot to find a **Senator** on the hitting leader list, Jose Reyes with 495.50 points. However, after last night's turkey, he'll be moving up.

One has to go all the way down to the No. 21 slot to find a **Tribe** hitter, Troy Glaus, who has 469.00 points. But that's okay, since the cornerstone of the **Tribe** franchise is pitching, not hitting.

### PITCHERS

1.	Johan Santana	Senators	465.50
2.	Brandon Webb	Redbirds	455.00
3.	John Papelbon	Reds	448.50
4.	Roy Halladay	Skipjacks	434.00
5.	Curt Schilling	Tigers	422.50
6.	John Smoltz	Cubs*	422.00
7.	Mike Mussina	Bombers	414.50
8.	Carlos Zambrano	Wahoos	407.50
9.	J.J. Putz	Chiefs	405.50
10.	Mariano Rivera	Bombers	404.00

It's no shock that my **Senators** have the top pitcher, since I drafted Johan as the first pitcher taken in the Draft. However, I was surprised to see that my top reliever, Huston Street, is now No. 12 on the pitching points list with 397 points. This is surprising because he got off to a terrible start, and still does not have all that many saves.

I'm also surprised that John Smoltz is as high as he is, No. 6 on the list for the **Cubs\***. A very quiet, but very good year that he is having.

The top **Tribe** hurler is No. 16, Danny Heran, with 388 points. Enough said.

The most surprising thing of all about this list is that the Big Unit, Randy Johnson, is not even in the top 20. I guess I shouldn't be shocked, since he wasn't on any of the leader lists for pitchers when I checked the USA Today stats earlier this week. At that time, he wasn't among the leaders in wins, innings pitched, ERA, complete games, shutouts, or even -- egad -- strikeouts. Yet the big fella still can bring it when it counts, as evidenced by his six innings of no-hit ball against the White Sox the other night.

## WHO'S HOT, WHO'S NOT

It's always fun to look at how individual players have done during the past week, to see who is hot and who is not for their respective teams. The absolute hottest of the hot hitters during Week 19 was a complete no-name, Mark DeRosa, who notched a white-hot 59.75 points for his HSL **Chiefs** team. However, and only Screech can tell us for sure, but I'm not even sure that he was in the **Chiefs** starting lineup for this outburst. The second hottest player for Week 19 was Carlos Lee of the **Tribe** with 53.25 points, followed by Gary Matthews, Jr., of the **Redbirds** with 50.50, followed by Jimmy Rollins of the **Reds** with 50 points.

The hottest pitchers for the week were Bobby Jenks of the **Bears** with 46.50 points and Brad Radke of the **Blues** with 46.50, although I'm not sure that all (or any) of Radke's points made it into the **Blues'** starting lineup. And by the way, did you see the recent article about Radke in USA Today, which revealed that he has a bad wing and is planning on retiring after this season? Apparently, Radke is gutting it out on blood, sweat, tears and guile, since his arm is in such tough shape that he can't even use his trademark Uncle Charlie except on very limited occasions. I lift my lid to Radke.

In the Who's Not category, the ice-coldest every-day player is also a **Chief**, Jorge Posada, who yakked up a gruesome minus 8.75 points for the week. Ouch. On the pitching side of things, the Top Malperformer award goes to Gil Meche of the **Redbirds (-17!)**, who has a long and proud history of inflicting painful moonwalk performances on HSL managers. Even under our new pitching scoring system, where negative performances are far less common, there is no insurance policy for old Gil.

Okay, enough about the league, let's talk about me.

## A SUMMER NIGHT IN AKRON



A couple of weeks ago, when I was in Cleveland for several days of depositions and discovered that the Major League Indians were on a road trip, I ventured south on State Highway 8 to the village of Akron, Ohio, home of the AA Akron Aeros of the Eastern League. The Aeros, a farm club of the Cleveland Indians, play their games in a pretty little bauble known as Canal Park, the cozy confines of which are located in downtown Akron, just across the way from the University of Akron campus. A pair of Abe Lincolns bought me the best seat on the house, on the third base side just a few rows behind the hometown heroes' dugout. My seat in the shade on this 90+ degree night was ideal for witnessing the Aeros' matchup that night against the rival Altoona *Curve*, a Double A affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

I was impressed by the sizeable crowd (5178) for a Monday night Double A baseball game, and after surveying my surroundings, I quickly realized that the vast majority of the fans were contestants or parents or siblings of contestants in the 69th All-American Soap Box Derby competition. It doesn't get any more middle-America than that! It was a treat to watch and hear the interactions between the Derby contestants (which spanned a wide range of youths) and their fellow contestants and family members, most of whom, it seemed apparent, were not knowledgeable baseball fans. Not to ruffle any feathers among any of you who are current or former Soap Box Derby contestants or enthusiasts, but speaking generally and not judgmentally, the crowd seemed to be a somewhat geeky, if wholesome, group of folk. I mean, if you're 17 years old and still doing the Soap Box Derby race thing, you may not have a whole lot else going for you. But, hey, it's all good.

Canal Park, home of the Aeros, is a top-notch ballpark and a very fine venue for watching a game. I was impressed that the field is located directly adjacent to the Akron Children's Hospital, just beyond the left field wall, which is a cool thing because five or six floors full of pediatric patients can watch baseball being played from their hospital rooms, which is just as it should be. Just beyond the right field wall is Menches Brothers restaurant. A 400-foot foul shot by a powerful lefty would most certainly provide a thrill to a couple of tables of patrons. The top ballpark sponsors look to be the Akron Beacon Journal and 1350 Radiofree Ohio.

The game itself was quite satisfying. I experienced a couple of "firsts," seeing baseball players named "Nyjer" and "Milver" play for the first time; I enjoyed watching and listening to a Drunk Derby Dad boastfully bleating about his life's experiences in the fascinating world of Soap Box Derbies, in between sloshing beer up and down our row as he rambled and stumbled from here to there and back; and I admired the Aeros' two different mascots, an orange rodent of some sort ("Orbit") and a multicolored apparently unnamed duck (neither with an obvious theme connection to the team), and thought about how Stretch would have been positively seething over Orbit's madcap antics. Had Brother McBlunder been present, some sort of physical restraint would probably have been necessary.

Down on the field itself, the entire crowd was entertained by the thumbing out of visiting Altoona Curve player Brett Roneberg (of Queensland, Australia) after his vigorous arguing about a called third strike on a full count. Not only did the protesting Roneberg get the thumb from



the home plate umpire, but when he continued to protest to the first base ump, he got the thumb a second time, to the delight of the roaring crowd.

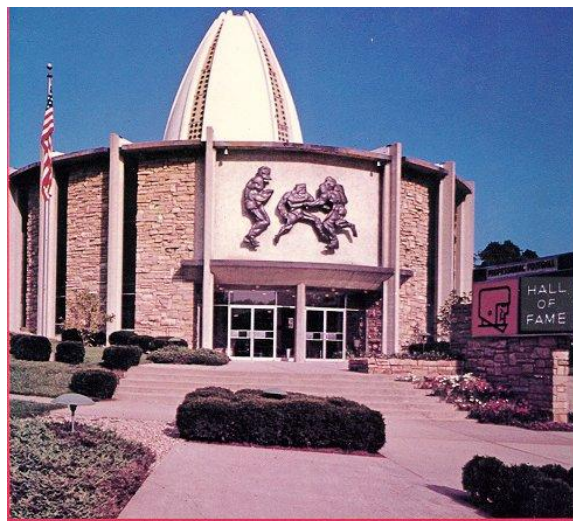
I was impressed by a relief pitcher for the Altoona Curve, Ron Chiavacci, who entered the game in the fifth in relief of the starter and demonstrated some serious gas. At 6-foot and 240 pounds, Chiavacci has some serious horsepower behind his pitches, and I will be surprised if we don't see him in a Pirates uniform in September or next season.

The hitting highlight of the game was provided by Kevin Kouzmanoff, a 24-year-old third sacker from Evergreen, Colorado. With the bases drunk in the home half of the fifth, Kouz pulled an Elvis and left the building, hitting a mammoth grand slam that sealed the outcome of the game. I suspect that Kouz has some Indian feathers in his future, politically correct or not.

Final note on Akron: The team manager is Tim Bogar, assisted by coach Felix Fermin and pitching coach Scott Radinski, former major leaguers all. It's true what they say, once you're in the club, you're in for good. Unless your name is Jose Canseco or Barry Bonds, that is.

### **IT AIN'T NO COOPERSTOWN**

Not only did I have a chance to see the Akron Aeros in action on my recent trip to Cleveland, I also had an opportunity to drive down to Canton, Ohio, about an hour south of Cleveland, for a short visit to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Many of you may recall that our entire Hot Stove League was previously scheduled for an engagement to tour the Hall in Canton on our 1994 junket to Detroit, Toronto and Cleveland, but were deprived of same because of crippling, downright debilitating hangovers on the part of a few bad apples in the league who spoiled this side-excursion for the whole bunch through. I'm not naming names, just stating facts. Anyway, as your league proxy, I decided to pay a visit to Canton while in that general neck of the woods so that I could let you all know what you missed, or didn't miss.



As aforesaid, it ain't no Cooperstown, not by a long shot, but the Hall in Canton is still worth seeing, if you get the chance. The structure itself is really quite underwhelming, particularly compared to the majesty of the baseball shrine in Cooperstown, and it was surprising to me how few people were actually roaming the halls when I was there, in what presumably was peak tourist season. Not that I expected many of the Soap Box Derby crowd to meander down to Canton to see the Hall, since they are not exactly the "How 'bout them Bears?" type.

The first thing that you see when you enter the Hall in Canton is a marvelous statue of Jim Thorpe, the first president of the National Professional Football Association (NPFA), the immediate precursor to the NFL. After paying homage to the greatest Indian athlete (Native American or otherwise) of all time, I entered a room which lays out the history of professional football and contains many impressive exhibits. I got a big kick from reading about Red Grange, George Halas, Ernie Nevers, Jim Thorpe, Nebraska's own Guy Chamberlain, and many of the other early stalwarts of professional football. A few of the fun facts that I learned or re-learned during this visit were as follows:



Professional football traces its origin to Pennsylvania in the 1880s, when players first began accepting hard, cold cash and other financial benefits to tread the gridiron. The first known professional football player -- whose name I can't remember, damn the early Alzheimer's -- received \$500 for playing in a game. Professional football soon spilled over into the neighboring state of Ohio, where the Canton Bulldogs were one of the early powerhouse teams, and one of the most famous elevens of their era.



In 1902 the unofficial champions of professional football were the Philadelphia Athletics, coached by none other than our beloved Connie Mack. And yes, Mr. Mack wore his suit and derby on the football sidelines, just as he did in the baseball dugout.



Jim Thorpe was the premiere player on the Canton Bulldogs in the Teens and early Twenties, and Guy Chamberlain was also a famous player as well as coach of the Canton Bulldogs during this time frame. The Bulldogs were acknowledged to be the champions in 1916, 1917, and 1919, with no champion being recognized in 1918 because of World War I.



In the fall of 1920, owners or representatives of eleven different professional teams met at a car dealership garage in Canton, Ohio, to form the first professional football league, the aforementioned National Professional Football Association. George Halas attended the organizational meeting on behalf of the Decatur Staleys, which he later came to own before buying and running the Chicago Bears. By unanimous vote, Jim Thorpe was named the first president of the NPFA, a distinction he held for only

one year.



African-Americans were allowed to play professional football since almost the very beginning, and I saw no mention in any of the written materials at the Hall that there was consideration given to segregating the blacks as was done in the Major Leagues. Curious, indeed.



Jim Thorpe left the Canton Bulldogs in the early 1920s and formed an all-Indian professional team, which had a short and undistinguished tenure.



The powerhouse team of 1925 was known as the Pottsville (Pennsylvania) Maroons, a coal-mining town team which featured a handsome, strapping lad by the name of Jack Ernst. It is unknown whether he is shirttail kin of my father, Jack Ernst, born in 1926, or whether my grandparents who named my dad were pro football fans. Since I have traced the Ernst clan back to Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania, it's certainly possible that we are of the same bloodline. As the years go on, it is distinctly possible that I will be making this claim as a bona fide hereditary fact.



In the 1920s, Ernie Nevers, who started out as a professional baseball player, ran a rugged pack of professional footballers known as the Duluth Eskimos. In one incredible year in the 1920s, the Eskimos barnstormed all over the country playing professional football games, with something like 28 out of 29 of these games on the road, the great majority of which they won.



I had forgotten that the Green Bay Packers were football champions during five seasons in the 1960s, a true dynasty put together by the peerless Vince Lombardi.

## THE BUST ROOM

One of the more remarkable features of the Hall in Canton is the bust room, where sculptured heads of all members of the Hall are exhibited in order of their year of induction. The busts of the early players are magnificent and seem true to life; some very rugged dudes played the game in the first half of the 20th century. However, during more recent times, it appears that the sculpting standards have slipped quite a bit, as many of the busts from the 1980s, '90s and 2000s are almost laughable. For example, Jack Ham's bust makes him look like a dead ringer for Wolfman Jack; Dan Fouts' bust bears an alarming resemblance to Jesus, while the bust of Earl Campbell is black Jesus; and John Elway looks more like JFK than Kennedy himself. Okay, okay, maybe I'm being a little picky, but shouldn't the bust of Vince Lombardi



have featured his famous gap-toothed smile and not an under-the-mistletoe pucker? Just one man's opinion.

And finally, my biggest bugaboo about the Professional Football Hall of Fame: *There's just too darned many members.* A Hall of Fame is supposed to include only the very best of the very best, year in and year out, and not the top five or six players that someone can drum up on an annual basis. The 2006 class is a case in point, with six inductees: Troy Aikman, Reggie White, Warren Moon, Harry Carson, John Madden, and Rayfield Wright. I can certainly see the first three of these guys in the Hall, but the latter trio are a stretch. Yes, John Madden is a fun guy who has added a lot to the game, but let's face it, as a coach he only won about 110 games in his whole career, and only one of his teams won the Super Bowl. Nice career, to be sure, but not exactly Hall of Fame material, now is it? And as for and Rayfield Wright and Harry Carson, I'm not even sure that I've even heard of these guys before -- not that this is the test -- and to my way of thinking, they certainly do not belong in the Hall of Fame. I understand that there may be differences of opinion.

By way of a second example, in 1996 some cat named Lou Creekmur was inducted into the Hall, and in 2005, some old boy named Benny Friedman had his number called. According to their busts, Creekmur was a lineman for the Detroit Lions between 1950 and 1959, and Benny was a quarterback for the Detroit Wolverines in some precursor league to the AFL. Now, I ask you: Have any of you heard of either of these two dudes? If none of you very knowledgeable sports fans has heard of them, were these two fellows really good enough and famous enough to be Hall of Fame timbre? I have these and many other rhetorical questions about which to ponder. But I think the point is made.

At any rate, despite its shortcomings, I still feel as if I got my money's worth in Canton in exchange for my 15 bucks. If you're in the neighborhood, stop in.

### **NEITHER HERE NOR THERE**



As I'm dictating this week's edition on my drive home from a North Platte deposition, I am admiring a crop duster in a bright yellow plane near the Goehner exit. A hundred years from now, nobody will believe that we allowed people in airplanes to spray toxic chemicals out of the sky, but for the here and now, it looks like a pretty fun job. If that deal at Wrigley Field selling bobblehead dolls doesn't work out, I'm going to have to look into it.



Did anybody read the article in USA Today today (Wednesday) about the career of Big League Umpire Bruce Froemming? Remarkable. This week he will arbitrate his 5000th Major League game in this his 36th season as a Major League umpire. Before making it to the Bigs, Froemming spent something like thirteen years in the bushes, giving him almost fifty years as a professional umpire. He was call-

ing games when Joe Torre was playing catcher and third base in the minors, and the two of them didn't like each other one bit. A great story.



I see that Jose Canseco is going to resume his career, but this time as a *pitcher*. Wow. Both he and the team he will be hurling for must be desperate with a capital D.



How about Greg Maddux throwing eight innings of shutout ball for the Dodgers, one start after throwing no-hit ball for six innings? Serious resurgence. And even though he was locked into a 1-to-1 duel, why would the Dodgers manager pull the plug on him for the 9th inning when Maddux had only thrown 68 pitches through 8? Take a chance, already.



At the risk of being labeled an anti-Mabryist, I watched in amazement on Tuesday night as a clueless John Mabry pinch hit in the top of the 10th of Tuesday night's game against the Astros -- as he stared dumbfounded at a called strike 3 which pierced the heart of the plate; a perfect waist-high fastball which Big Papi or almost anyone else would have hit a country mile. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall of either dugout.

### **THE CLOSER**

I could go on and on, you all know that, but I'll close this one out. Next week, we can all look forward to being treated by the arid wit of the manager of our second-place team, the **Bears**. SloPay, don't disappoint!

Skipper