

Wednesday, August 18, 2004

Competitive Balance

It's striking how five out of six of the divisions in baseball are basically wrapped up. The Dodgers have a 5.5 game lead over the Giants (with both teams leading their games by three in the top of the eighth as this is written), and the Padres are 6.5 back (and leading Atlanta by 10 in the bottom of the seventh).

St. Louis has parlayed baseball's best record and some disappointing foes (particularly Houston) into a fifteen game lead over the Cubs.

Atlanta, after beginning the season down in the standings where everyone thought they'd be, has run its lead over Florida to eight games, with Philadelphia nine back and the Mets down eleven despite adding players at the deadline.

Minnesota has opened up a 3.5 game lead over the Indians (with 2.5 of those games accounted for by their 53-58 advantage in losses) and a five game lead over the White Sox despite scoring the fewest runs of any division-leading team, including the Dodgers (who passed them tonight). They've done it by allowing the fewest runs of any team in the AL, leading the A's by three.

Finally, the Yankees, of course, have ridden the AL's best record to a nine-game lead over the ever-hapless Red Sox, despite the Sox's lead in runs scored, 671-652, and in runs allowed, 566-574.

Oakland's West is the only division that's really still in play, though Cleveland could (but won't) push in the Central. With the A's and Rangers winning tonight and Anaheim losing, we have Oakland in front of Texas by a half game (a win ahead), with the Angels two games back. The division has been a three-team dogfight all year, as it was supposed to be, though it was going to be Seattle hanging around all year, while Texas was supposed to be 20+ games behind the leader at this point.

As it's playing out, though, this thing should go down to the wire. As an A's fan, I'll point out a few of their advantages: by offensive and defensive components, the A's have been better than their opponents this year by more than the small margins their actual records are showing; the Rangers have 8 pitchers on the DL, and Scott Erickson in the starting rotation; and the Angels have had one consistent starter this year, Kelvim Escobar, while seeing their vaunted offense get outscored by Oakland's.

History

In any case, the point was not to talk so much about this year, but to see how the past couple of years compared to this one in the standings. Have the division titles usually been this much in the possession of a few teams, or, as my very faulty memory hints, are we seeing something unusual this year?

As usual, Baseball Reference is one of my favorite sites on the whole Internet. We can look at the standings after the games of August 17th going back to 1901. I don't think we'll go back that far, but let's get a start on some anecdotal evidence, and then maybe I'll see if I can put together something more quantitative and exhaustive later.

I'll use the four games cutoff to see how many divisions are in play, and how many teams are in the running in those divisions. That means that this year, we actually have two divisions still up for grabs, though the Indians are very near the cutoff.

Last year, we had the A's four games back of the Mariners, Minnesota and Chicago both three back of Kansas City, and Chicago and St. Louis within a game of Houston. That's three divisions with eight teams involved. Ultimately, none of the three divisions ended up in the hands of their owners on this date.

In 2002, Houston was four back of St. Louis, and Anaheim and Oakland were in the hunt for Seattle in the West. This season looks a lot like 2002, actually. In the end, St. Louis only increased its lead while the A's surged late again to take the West.

In 2001, Philadelphia and Atlanta were tied atop the NL East, Houston and Chicago were virtually tied (Chicago had one fewer win and one fewer loss), and San Francisco and Los Angeles were within reach of Arizona. The AL was locked

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up, with the smallest lead being Cleveland's 4.5 game advantage over Minnesota. The ties were broken, of course, with the wins going to Atlanta and Houston, but no division changed hands.

In 2000, the Mets were chasing Atlanta, Arizona was close to the Giants, Boston was four back of the Yankees, and Oakland trailed Seattle by three. That's four divisions up in the air, but only one team in each division was involved, and two of those were sort of on the fringes of involvement. Of course, Oakland ended up closing from the fringe and winning the division, but every other team held its lead.

In 1999, the NL East and Central were again tied (with the Central again being a virtual tie, with Cincinnati having played four fewer games than percentage leader Houston), but every other division was locked up. Oakland held the smallest disadvantage, 5.5 games behind Texas. There were no surprises down the stretch.

Finally, in 1998, things were even worse than they are today. Texas was a game back of Anaheim, and they eventually won the West, but take a look at the other division leads: 14.5, 7.5, 14, 20, and 12.5. That's incredible. and it puts today's "disparity" to shame.

Results?

Over the last six years, then, we've seen one year remarkably less competitive, one less competitive, but not remarkably so, one about the same, and three more competitive. I guess the answer to my question is that this year is somewhat out of the ordinary, but not remarkably so.

After all, compare this year, when only St. Louis has a double-digit lead over their closest competitor, to the numbers I listed above for 1998.

Posted by jason in Baseball at 02:09