

Sunday, April 20, 2008

Frank Thomas gone; where to now?

Frank Thomas has actually been released by the Blue Jays after he complained about getting his playing time cut. He apparently thought the benching was motivated by his \$10 million plate-appearances based vesting option. It's hard to say, of course, given the lack of insight into the front office machinations, but one does have to wonder: Thomas is a historically great hitter who's had a poor 72 plate appearances this year. He wasn't going to hit like this all year, and Matt Stairs certainly won't out-hit him, as much as I love Wonder Hamster.

It's really too bad to see J.P. Ricciardi falling apart like this. I thought Billy Beane had a chance to be baseball's Bill Walsh, but given Ricciardi's inability to put together a winning team and L.A.'s inability to accept that Paul DePodesta provided the Dodgers their best chance at winning, it looks like that won't be happening anytime soon.

Here's Ricciardi on the decision: "I don't know that we have the luxury of waiting two to three months for somebody to kick in because we can't let this league or this division get away from us." This is disingenuous enough to make me wonder whether Thomas's allegations about his vesting option might contain some truth. The division isn't going to "get away from" them. It's gotten away. There are at least two teams better than the Jays in the division (New York, Boston), and one more that might be better (Tampa). And that "two to three months" comment is almost certainly an exaggeration.

In any case, the question becomes "whither Frank Thomas?" Who needs a DH? Let's trip through the standings. Boston's got Papi. The Angels have enough trouble getting all their outfielders at bats without having to worry about permanently clogging up their DH spot. (Note that this isn't a good reason for Anaheim not to do this -- Thomas is a better hitter than Garrett Anderson, Gary Matthews, and Torii Hunter -- but it is a reason why it won't happen.) Baltimore? If you're willing to send down Luis Hernandez until Brian Roberts gets traded and shunt Aubrey Huff and Kevin Millar into permanent bench roles, this would work. But what would Frank Thomas want with a team that might lose 100 games? A repeat engagement with Oakland? Between Mike Sweeney and Jack Cust, the A's are full up at DH, and it's not like they need a guy like Thomas to put them over the top in the division. They're not winning it. (That said, if Thomas is still hanging around out there later in the year and Sweeney or Cust hasn't picked it up, and the A's are interested in making a push at the division, this would be intriguing. But I don't anticipate Thomas still being available in two months.) Kansas City? Now that's interesting! Push Ross Gload to the bench and Mark Teahen or Billy Butler to first and install Thomas at DH? Boy, that's one hell of an offense. Combine that with a suddenly dangerous rotation and a shutdown closer and you've got a really fun team in a tough division. I'd root for them.

The Yankees? They're in the same situation as the Angels, but worse, given that their extra outfielders aren't valuable defenders the way the Angels' are. Plus they've got Giambi's cranky glove and Jorge Posada's aches and pains to deal with. No, I don't really see it, as much as it might help them. Seattle? Goodness what an update Thomas would be over Jose Vidro. They'd have to be willing to tell Vidro to take up a permanent spot on the bench, which won't make him so happy, but the on-field results ought to be enormous. It's a crime that Jose Vidro is an every-day DH in this league. Tampa? Hell, they just claimed Dan Johnson, so they're obviously ok with an immobile slugger type hanging around. But Johnson's different, of course, because he didn't just get released for complaining about a lack of playing time. If you sign Thomas, you've got to start him. I guess what happens is that Eric Hinske and Jonny Gomes become the right field platoon, which isn't such a horrible situation. Minnesota's got plenty of room for him in the lineup (Craig Monroe?), but they're not really in a mode where they need to win today, so I'm not sure there's a lot of call for blowing a load of cash on Thomas. Cleveland's got Pronk, so they're out. If Texas wants to push Frank Catalanotto and David Murphy into part-time roles and install Thomas full-time as the DH, there's room for an upgrade there. Plus the West is wide open, so with a Big Hurt, a little luck, and an additional pitcher, they could be dangerous. Finally, Detroit? They've already got Gary Sheffield. Could they push him to left to knock Jacque Jones out of the lineup? I don't know if Sheffield is a DH by choice or necessity at this point, so it's hard to say. It might not be a bad idea, though.

So what'd we come up with? Kansas City, Seattle, Tampa, and Texas? I'd really enjoy seeing Frank Thomas with the Royals or Rays, although that might just be my hopes than an AL West rival doesn't vastly improve its offense in one fell swoop a week from now.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Baseball at 12:58