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JOE GIULIOTTI'S BASEBALL - Boston Herald (MA) - August 10, 1997 - page B15
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BIRDS STILL THE BEST

A little less than three weeks ago, the Orioles' East Division lead over the Yankees had dwindled to 3 1/2 games. The O's were heading into a stretch where they had 15 of their next 18 games on the road, nine on the West Coast, while the Yankees were opening their longest homestand (12 games) of the season.

The Orioles have not only survived, but they increased their lead to five games heading into this weekend's action. They won 12 of the first 15 on the grueling schedule while the Yankees were 9-3 on their homestand before splitting four games in Kansas City and Texas. Now the O's play 16 of their next 20 at Camden Yards while the Yankees will be playing six at home then going to the West Coast for eight.

A LITTLE WHITE (SOX) LIE: Get out the lie detectors for this one. Chicago White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, who was allowed to surrender the season and tear down his team by trading Harold Baines, Wilson Alvarez, Roberto Hernandez and Danny Darwin - even though the White Sox were only 3 1/2 games out of first place in the Central Division - says it was the Yankees who initiated talks for Albert Belle.

The Yankees claim it was the other way around. As general manager Bob Watson put it: "He (Belle) is in the first year if a five-year deal, and we could have had him in May. What does that tell you."

Belle, incidentally, was mired in a 7-for-51 slump entering the weekend and had gone 71 at-bats without homering.

THREE FOR THE ROAD: What a great baseball trifecta: Red Sox stat man Mike Gimbel, an eccentric who once claimed to be the power behind the Red Sox throne, John Flynn, a public relations type seeking puff interviews with "friendly" members of the media to try and improve the image of general manager Dan Duquette, and Dr. Robert D. Millman, one of the shrinks who cleared Wil Cordero to play and was later arrested along with his wife for providing seven kegs of beer to 70 teenagers at his daughter's graduation party.

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE: It didn't take Heathcliff Slocumb long to torch one for the Seattle Mariners. Last Wednesday, after Mike Timlin blew the save, Slocumb threw a home run ball to lose the game. Meanwhile, on the same night, Jose Cruz Jr., involved in the trade that got Timlin from Toronto, hit what turned out to be a game-winning homer for the Blue Jays, then saved the game with a diving catch.

Salem native Jeff Juden's first start with the Cleveland Indians was doomed from the start. It began when he mistakenly put on the No. 48 jersey belonging to Jose Mesa rather than his No. 12 and ended with him pitching like Mesa. The mistake was noticed as he walked through a tunnel to the bullpen before he was tagged for three runs, five hits and walked six during 3 2/3 innings against the Detroit Tigers.

OFF THE MARK: Getting Mark McGwire is turning out to be a bad move for the St. Louis Cardinals. The slugging first baseman obtained from Oakland had two hits in his first 20 at-bats and his new team had dropped out of contention in the National League's Central Division. And remember Cardinals manager Tony LaRussa's winter boast that his team would win the division?

There have been throwback games in baseball now we have throwback travel. Following the conclusion of their weekend series with the Red Sox tonight, the Kansas City Royals will hop a train for New York, where they open a series with the Yankees tomorrow night. ... The Red Sox are bidding to become the first major league team since their 1950 counterparts to have a .300 season batting average. That team hit .302 but proved just another in a long line of Red Sox teams that had plenty of offense but no championship. They won 94 games but still finished third.

INSIDE PITCH

There's been much speculation about Cal Ripken Jr. ending his iron man streak before the year's out because of the back spasms he's been suffered. He says no way.

"During a good year this happens to me twice a season. During a bad year it might happen four or five times."

One of the many moving stories during the Hall of Fame weekend concerned Ted Williams and 8-year-old Stephen Kostel. Teddy Ballgame spotted the youngster in the lobby of the Otzsaga Hotel and called him over.

"When I was your age," Ted said to the boy, "Babe Ruth game me a ball and signed it but somebody stole it. I want you to have this ball and take care of it." (Williams signed it "to Stephen from your pal Ted Williams.")

Once again Carl Yastrzemski shunned the event, as he's done since his enshrinement in 1989. Tom Seaver, who closed out his Hall of Fame pitching career with the Sox, has asked both league presidents to force clubs to require any Hall of Famers in their employ be present at future ceremonies.

The Yankees have not given up on their attempt to get Mike Stanley from the Red Sox and will try again via a waiver deal. They thought they had a deal before the trading deadline but the Sox wanted a pitcher off the 25-man roster as well as two minor league pitching prospects in return.

Owner George Steinbrenner has ordered minor league pitching instructor Billy Connors to New York to serve as Hideki Irabu's personal pitching coach when he is brought back from the minors later this week. In his first two minor league starts since his demotion, the right-hander from the Japanese League allowed two earned runs and struck out 18.

The Toronto Blue Jays will be trying to make a waiver deal the rest of the month for onetime Red Sox center fielder Otis Nixon and send him to a division contender.

Last Thursday former Red Sox catcher Rich Gedman took 50 youngsters from a camp he runs in the Worcester area to McCoy Field to enjoy the Pawtucket Red Sox-Charlotte Hornets, Triple-A game.

ROCKET SCIENCE

With a little more than three fourths of the season completed Roger Clemens already owns six Toronto team pitching records.

Also, he finds himself needing just eight strikeouts for 2800 which will tie him with Cy Young for 13th place on the all time list.

With his 11th 10 strikeout game of the season Thursday against the Cleveland Indians, Clemens reached the 202 mark to break Dave Stieb's mark of 198.

Other records the former Red Sox right-hander now owns in Toronto are most strikeouts in a game (16 in the great performance in Fenway Park against his former team), longest winning streak (11) by a starter to begin the season, most consecutive road victories (nine), most wins at the All-Star break (13) and most strikeouts (140) at the midway point.

The shutout Thursday was the 40th of his career and he has left 15 other games after the seventh inning without having allowed a run.

HIGH HEAT

Come to friendly Fenway for a day of fun is what the hype tells us.

Well Dave Kerpen provided some entertainment for the fans - much needed entertainment considering the way the team has played at home - and he was bounced.

Kerpen is the innovative hawker who hustles his Crunch 'n Munch at the FleetCenter but whose act selling soft drinks and Cracker Jacks didn't impress somebody in the Fenway castle.

The fans loved his act (he balances containers of soft drinks on his head) and, as happens in many arenas and ballparks around the country, they flip their money to him.

But, ah, not in Boston. Somebody complained a nickel headed in his direction hit a woman in the head and Kerpen was finitu.

Lets hope a foul off the bat of Mo Vaughn doesn't hit someone in the stands. He's liable to be banished as well.

Photo Caption: BELLE OF THE BALL: Albert Belle, in his first season with the Chicago White Sox, already being used as trade bait, although White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf denies he made the initial contact in talks with the New York Yankees. Herald file photo

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