

US Sports

ESPN's quarterly overview of US sports

As the weather warms up and summer settles in, the baseball season heats up along with the thermometer. And as the pages of the calendar continue to turn, it starts to get time to think about a return to the gridirons as well.

Things around the diamond are settling in nicely after the early stages of the season. Unfortunately for the game and its fans, things started off with more bad news from the steroid front.

After Alex Rodriguez was exposed before the season began for failing a drug test back in 2005, the baseball world absorbed yet another blow as Dodgers outfielder Manny Ramirez was suspended 50 games for violating the league's substance abuse policy. The hope was that the performance enhancing clouds were breaking, but suddenly two more of the game's greatest players had once again tainted the game.

But the game goes on, and Commissioner Bud Selig stated that the Ramirez situation pointed to the fact the new tough testing measures instituted by baseball are working. Maybe so. With young players such as Evan Longoria and Joe Mauer putting up what are assumed to be big clean numbers this season, perhaps baseball can begin to move on. At least until the next superstar fails a drug test.

Photo by Kevork Djanssezian



MLB Dodgers Getty

The Dodgers got off to an historic start as they won their first 13 home games to set a Major League record. With Manny's bat suddenly out of the lineup until July, many feared the worst for the 'Boys in Blue.' But the Dodgers proved they are more than just Manny's team and barely missed a beat as they continue to pull away from the field in the National League West. With third baseman Casey Blake and outfielder Juan Pierre having comeback years and youngsters like James Loney and Matt Kemp continuing to develop, the Dodgers look to be the team to beat out West. And with Manny's bat returning to the lineup for the second half of the season, things continue to look promising in LA.

While the Dodgers look hard to catch, the other divisions appear to be more contentious. A-Rod returned from hip surgery and the shadow of his drug test revelations and came out swinging, cracking a home run in his first at bat of the season on May 8, and knocking seven balls out of the park in his first 15 games back.

That production corresponded with a turn in the Yankees' fortunes as well. After moving into a brand new billion-dollar stadium and spending a fortune to bring in free agents CC Sabathia, A.J. Burnett and Mark Teixeira, the Yanks stumbled out of the gate. But within three weeks of A-Rod's return, they had surged to the top of the division on the back of a 9-game winning streak.

MLB Rangers Getty



Photo by Jed Jacobssohn

But the American League East is the best in baseball, and Boston, Toronto and Tampa Bay all have the talent to stay in the hunt. With so many big egos and even bigger expectations from fans in the Bronx paying top dollar to watch their team play, the Yankees will have to prove they can hold it together to be playing baseball in October once again.

In the American League West the Texas Rangers have turned some heads with a prodigious offense and just enough pitching to get by. Ian Kinsler, Nelson Cruz, Chris Davis, Hank Blalock and Josh Hamilton are proving to be one of the most potent batting orders in baseball. The question now is whether they can sustain the pace over the long haul, and whether the pitching will hold up well enough to get them past the finish line.

The American League Central looks like a race between Detroit, Minnesota and Kansas City, while over in the National League, the Central and East divisions appear wide open.

In the NL East, the Mets and Phillies can't seem to pull away from the Braves and Marlins, while the Brewers, Cubs, Cardinals and Reds look set to battle it out all season long in the Central.

This could be one of the best pennant races ever, as so many teams battle not just for their division crowns, but also for the Wild Card. In fact, more teams should be in the race than out of it come September. Don't be surprised if this season's races come down to the final day.

As the new National Football League season looms on the horizon, several high-profile quarterback stories are rising to the fore.

For the ninth time in the last 12 NFL Drafts, a quarterback was taken with the first pick. Matthew Stafford was first out of the pool of college talent and has the difficult task of turning around the worst team in the history of the league.



Yankees

The Detroit Lions became the first team ever to finish a season 0-16 to earn the first pick, and they hope that Stafford is the man to lead them back to respectability.

Stafford's bank account won't be hurting, anyway, as he inked a six-year deal worth a minimum of \$41.7 million that could see him pocket a total of \$78 million if he stays healthy and produces.

Those are heady numbers for a 21-year-old, but the challenge he faces is as monumental as his contract. It is notoriously difficult to determine which college quarterbacks will be effective pros, and the Lions have bet the farm that Stafford is their man. After seeing rookies such as Joe Flacco in Baltimore and Atlanta's Matt Ryan lead their teams to the playoffs last season, Lions fans must be hoping that Stafford can work similar magic.

The reality is that Flacco and Ryan stepped into much better teams. In fact, at this stage Stafford isn't even expected to be the starting quarterback in Detroit this year. New

NFL Mark Sanchez Getty



Photo: Harry How

head coach Jim Schwartz has veteran Daunte Culpepper pencilled in as the No. 1 guy, with the rookie getting a chance to watch and learn.

"Now, it's up to us to develop him and get good players around him," Detroit general manager Martin Mayhew said.

Turning around such a colossal failure and perennial loser as the Lions have been recently is a lot to ask of anyone, but Detroit is hoping Stafford is up to the job.

The New York Jets are another team leveraging their future on drafting a young quarterback. After the Brett Favre experience ended in the team missing the playoffs last year, the Jets sent the No. 17 and No. 52 overall choices, plus defensive end Kenyon Coleman, safety Abram Elam and quarterback Brett Ratliff, to Cleveland so that they could take USC quarterback Mark Sanchez with the fifth pick.

Sanchez put up some gaudy numbers for the Trojans, but was a starter for just one year, leading some to question whether he had gotten enough experience in the college ranks to handle for the starting job in the NFL's largest market.

But he is expected to compete for the starting job with Kellen Clemens under new head coach Rex Ryan, and some insiders rank him

even higher than Stafford. While Sanchez won't face the pressure to turn around an 0-16 franchise, he will be thrown into the pressure cooker that is the New York market.

The other big quarterback story in the NFL didn't come from the draft this year, but via a trade. The Denver Broncos traded Jay Cutler to the Bears after a falling out with new head coach Josh McDaniels and owner Pat Bowlen.

Cutler demanded a trade when he found out that McDaniels was interested in acquiring Matt Cassel from the Patriots. After a war of words, Bowlen accommodated Cutler and sent him to a team desperate for a top-flight QB.

The Broncos decided they could make due with Kyle Orton in their system rather than the strong-armed but equally strong-willed Cutler.

Cutler, meanwhile, goes from a team loaded with offensive weapons to one that has been offensively challenged, and it will be very interesting to see how both teams come out of this one.

And of course, two other top quarterbacks are in the spotlight. Tom Brady returns for New England after missing all of last year with a knee injury. Rumors had it that there were setbacks in his rehabilitation, which were strongly denied by the Patriots. But it will be interesting to see how well the surgically repaired joint holds up over the course of the season, especially since the Pats traded their Plan B, Matt Cassel, to the Chiefs after Cassel turned in a strong performance in Brady's absence last year.

The annual Brett Favre watch continues as word leaks out that the future Hall-of-Famer is considering yet another comeback, this time with the Minnesota Vikings. For this story, as with all of the other quarterback stories, the word is: stay tuned. ■

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