COMMENTARY

The Pennant Races Come Home

Ernie Bewell and Big Earl Debate the August Division Challenges

August 20, 1981 / Data cutoff August 19, 1981

Inaugural installment of The Observer Conversation, a commentary feature with Ernie Bewell and Big Earl. The dialogue is an editorial reconstruction.

The Conference Challenges have ended. The division races are beginning again. And after three remarkable weeks of baseball, the Action Baseball League has given its observers plenty to argue about.

San Francisco has surrendered a six-game lead. Dallas has overtaken the defending champions. Chicago continues to frustrate its believers. Seattle climbed to the top of the ABC West, only to come tumbling back down. And Houston has climbed to the top of the league standings.

As the August Division Challenges begin, veteran baseball journalist Ernie Bewell sits down with Big Earl to examine what has happened, what it means, and who will still be playing when the Grand Tournament of Champions arrives.

They agree on some things. On others, not so much.

And neither gentleman is particularly shy about expressing an opinion.

Is San Francisco Really in Trouble?

ERNIE BEWELL: The Warriors entered the Conference Challenges with a six-game lead. Now Phoenix has caught them, and Los Angeles is right there. Earl, are we watching San Francisco come apart, or are we discovering just how good the challengers really are?

BIG EARL: "I had the Warriors penciled in as a foregone conclusion in the NBC West."

Earl's reasoning begins with run differential. Phoenix and Los Angeles have been winning despite allowing more runs than they've scored. San Francisco, by contrast, has a positive differential, an established pitching staff, and the kind of talent that ought to sustain a division lead.

The Warriors also strengthened their roster with the acquisition of reliever Vic Hernandez.

For Earl, the explanation is straightforward: San Francisco hasn't been overtaken by superior clubs. It has simply stopped playing good baseball.

EARL: "It wasn't that Phoenix and LA did more. It's that San Francisco fell apart."

Bewell isn't entirely convinced.

ERNIE: "The Warriors certainly opened the door, but somebody had to walk through it."

Phoenix went 13–8 and Los Angeles 12–9 during the Conference Challenges, while San Francisco staggered to a 7–14 record. Whatever their run differentials, the challengers took advantage of their opportunity.

But Earl isn't abandoning his preseason assessment.

The key, he argues, is what happened immediately after the All-Star break, when the Warriors established their lead by beating the teams in their own division.

Those same opponents await them now.

EARL: "They know how to beat their division. They did it before. I think they'll do it again."

The disagreement: Bewell sees a division race that has genuinely opened up. Earl sees a good baseball team returning to familiar territory, with an opportunity to put three bad weeks behind it.

The Chicago Question

If San Francisco represents a temporary collapse, Chicago represents something more frustrating.

The Fire have pitching. They have veteran leadership. They have a capable manager. And they have a history that includes five appearances in the Grand Tournament of Champions.

What they don't have is a championship.

Earl believed 1981 could be the season that changed.

He no longer sounds convinced.

EARL: "Chicago's got everything you need. They certainly got the manager. They've got the veterans, they've got the pitching."

Yet Chicago has struggled to convert its underlying performance into victories. During the Conference Challenges, the Fire outscored opponents by 27 runs but finished with an 11–10 record.

Earl even raises questions about the club's home ballpark—an intimate, artificial-turf facility in Chicago—and whether it suits the kind of baseball the Fire need to play.

Bewell sees the issue somewhat differently. The team has demonstrated enough quality to suggest it still belongs in the conversation, but the results have to follow.

And standing in Chicago's way are two teams with championship credentials: the 1977 Dallas Rustlers and the defending champion Detroit Dukes.

EARL: "I don't see Chicago doing it. They got to prove it to me."

For Bewell, the Central is precisely the kind of division where a team with Chicago's talent could become dangerous.

For Earl, potential is no longer enough.

The Mavericks Are Still the Team to Beat

Across the American Baseball Conference, the conversation eventually returns to Houston.

It almost always does.

The Mavericks have claimed four consecutive conference championships, but only one Grand Series title during that run. Other contenders have tried to dislodge them. Cincinnati even won the ABC Central last season, only to fall short against Houston in the postseason.

Now the Mavericks have returned to the top of the league standings.

Earl sees little reason to change his assessment.

EARL: "Houston is the best team in the American Conference until someone proves otherwise."

But that doesn't make the Mavericks invincible.

Las Vegas has just won its Conference Challenges series against Houston. Boston has an experienced manager and a club that could become dangerous in a short series. Denver has its own championship aspirations, with Xavier Little among the players Earl believes could make a difference.

Bewell wonders whether the Mavericks' dominance has become so familiar that observers are overlooking the competition.

Earl sees the distinction clearly: Houston should be favored, but a seven-game postseason series can turn on very little.

The rest of the ABC simply has to prove it can beat the Mavericks when it counts.

A Fearless Forecast

By the time the conversation turns toward its conclusion, Big Earl is prepared to put his predictions on the record.

He expects the NBC Central to remain close, but he favors Dallas or Detroit over Chicago. He believes San Francisco will recover in the West and Charlotte will maintain control of the East. He also expects the NBC wild card to come from the Central rather than Miami or the NBC West.

Across the ABC, his choices are Boston, Houston, and Las Vegas as division champions, with Denver claiming the wild card.

Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Seattle remain capable of making those predictions uncomfortable.

But the forecast is made.

And that's the beauty of having a baseball conversation before the games are played.

The arguments now belong to the record.

The results will have their say later.

The Division Worth Watching

For all the attention given to Houston's dominance and the tight NBC Central, both observers ultimately return to the same place.

The National Baseball Conference West.

San Francisco, Phoenix, and Los Angeles are separated by the narrowest of margins. Their recent performances suggest one story. Their season-long run differentials suggest another.

Now they will confront one another directly.

The Warriors have an opportunity to reassert themselves. The Firebirds and Cobras have an opportunity to prove their recent success is more than a fortunate stretch.

And unlike the previous three weeks, every victory against a division rival also means a defeat for a club chasing the same championship.

Big Earl believes San Francisco will take care of business.

Ernie Bewell isn't quite as certain.

But both agree that the NBC West may produce the most revealing baseball of the August Division Challenges.

The numbers have made their arguments.

The observers have made theirs.

Now it's time to play the baseball.

— The Baseball Observer

The reconstructed dialogue has been edited and condensed for publication. The views expressed reflect the participants' opinions and predictions entering the August Division Challenges.

Big Earl's Fearless Forecast

On the record — August 20, 1981

Race	NBC	ABC
East	Charlotte	Boston
Central	Dallas or Detroit	Houston
West	San Francisco	Las Vegas
Wild card	Central representative	Denver

Read the August Division Challenges briefing