The Forecast Meets the Facts

The Baseball Observer | 1981-08-31 | Games through 1981-08-30

Ernie Bewell and Big Earl Look Back at the August Division Challenges

Ten games in eleven days. Six division races. And a remarkable number of questions still unanswered.

Before the August Division Challenges, Ernie Bewell and Big Earl sat down to discuss the state of the Action Baseball League and make their predictions.

Now the games have been played.

Some predictions have survived. Others are being reconsidered. And with September approaching, the two observers have returned to the conversation.

What follows are selected excerpts from their August 31 discussion, edited for length and organized by subject. Their comments reflect their views at the time, not necessarily conclusions established by the statistical record.

Miami: A Believer Is Born

ERNIE: "Remember our first conversation? You weren't buying the Hurricanes. You thought that negative run differential was eventually going to catch up with them. You figured Charlotte would take care of business.

"Well, look what happened!

"Four games against the Colonels. Four Miami victories."

BIG EARL: "But you know what it is? It's good fundamental baseball in my opinion. And Charlotte's got a fighter on their hands. I think they're in the playoffs, but it could be as a wild card."

ERNIE: "Is Miami outperforming its statistics, or are its statistics failing to capture something important about the way this club wins?"

BIG EARL: "What I notice about those teams is that you look at their one run game records. Yeah, they're winning those games. They're winning the close games. They're generally winning extra inning games."

ERNIE: "Is it a repeatable skill, or will some of those close decisions eventually go the other way?"

BIG EARL: "Miami has made a believer out of me. I didn't think they could sustain this. And they have. And I see no reason why they shouldn't continue."

ERNIE: "That's not inconsistency, Earl. That's watching baseball and allowing what you see to change your opinion."

Chicago: Is This Finally the Year?

ERNIE: "Chicago might not need the wild card at all!

"The Fire just went 7–3 during these Division Challenges. Dallas went 6–4. Detroit, the defending champions, went 1–9."

BIG EARL: "Chicago has the pedigree in that race. So Chicago won the division last year. Chicago beat Charlotte in the division series last year. Chicago is a perennial tournament team.

"So sure they could win this Central. They could make the wild card because they're a good team. But I don't know if they, can they get it done? This would be a sixth trip. Can they win it all?"

ERNIE: "Chicago knows how to get there. What the Fire haven't demonstrated is how to finish the job."

BIG EARL: "I can see Miami and Chicago making this tournament and leaving Dallas behind. That wouldn't surprise me."

San Francisco: Big Earl Isn't Budging

ERNIE: "Phoenix went into San Francisco and took three of four! Tony Zacate shut the Warriors down in one of those victories.

"To their credit, the Warriors recovered and took three of four from Los Angeles."

BIG EARL: "I don't believe in Phoenix. I think this is San Francisco's year. I don't know why they fell. I would like to look into that."

ERNIE: "I agree with you that we need to investigate what happened to the Warriors rather than merely report that they lost."

BIG EARL: "What's bad is when it happens to five or six guys at the same time. Nobody's picking anybody up."

ERNIE: "San Francisco went 5–5. They didn't pass the test convincingly, but they didn't fail it completely either."

BIG EARL: "But if you ask me, I have not changed my mind. I think it's the year of the Warriors and I don't think LA or Phoenix will be the wild card."

St. Louis: The Pitching Was Always There

ERNIE: "When you watched St. Louis take those five games from Houston, what did you see? Did you see a Mavericks club developing some serious problems, or did you see a Stallions team finally discovering how good it can be?"

BIG EARL: "I've seen the stallions pitching over and over. Jose Coronado, he's leading the ABC and something, ERA I think."

"Yeah, he's leading in strikeouts, 213 strikeouts. He's not leading in ERA, but he might be leading, yeah, he's leading in pitcher WAR 5.8. So St. Louis, and Bert Lopez 4.9."

"So I was not surprised when they put it together. They've got the pitching, the hitting just has to do their part."

ERNIE: "You're telling me St. Louis didn't suddenly become a good pitching team in August. The pitching was there all along. The rest of the club needed to catch up."

BIG EARL: "Danny Martinez put up some hits. I was looking at their lineup their home page, their lineup. Brandon Sims hits .299, number five hitter. Victor Campos 24 home runs, hitting .238. Lander hitting .260 with 18 home runs. A pretty solid lineup."

Las Vegas: Different Ways to Win

BIG EARL: "Look at Las Vegas, who is a winner. And they have one guy, Mike Rabel, who is 17 home runs, hitting .258."

"They got the pitching. Everybody got a 3 ERA. Their closer is under two. You got another guy, middle relief, under two ERA. So there's different ways to win in this league."

ERNIE: "There isn't just one blueprint for winning.

"Some clubs overwhelm you with their lineup. Others prevent you from scoring. Some get outstanding starting pitching; others depend on the bullpen to protect narrow leads."

BIG EARL: "I believe in Vegas. I believe in Charlotte. I believe in San Francisco."

"Seattle, I don't know. Denver, I think they've got something going on. They've got some players that are special on that team. So I think that's the only reason that separates Denver and Seattle. But I think Vegas gets it done."

Boston and Philadelphia: The Whisper and the Answer

BIG EARL: "That's one of the things I like about um the ABL Advance and the ABL 411. You see the winning pitchers, you see the home run hitters, you see the players of the game. And those names who come up more than once, you notice."

ERNIE: "That's how you begin recognizing the players who are making a difference. Not simply by studying a leaderboard, but by watching their accomplishments accumulate as the season unfolds."

BIG EARL: "They were a preseason favorite. They are the lone team who has not made the tournament in the nine previous seasons."

"So this is some evidence, a whisper. So perhaps something's happening, but they haven't made a believer out of me."

ERNIE: "The Fury played extraordinary baseball and gained exactly one game!"

BIG EARL: "I tell you who I am believing in is in the Boston Patriots."

"Now they're not just a team barely getting in because they're the head of a weak division. They're a team that's making noise and they're a team that I think can hold their position."

Houston: The Luxury of a Lead

ERNIE: "What happens to your opinion of Houston if Boston goes in there and takes two out of three—or even sweeps the Mavericks? At what point does Houston's August slump become something more serious in your eyes?"

BIG EARL: "I don't know how serious it can get when, um, unless St. Louis stays hot."

"Otherwise, Houston has an eight-game lead."

"I dismissed them early. They stumbled out of the gate. I thought maybe this wasn't their year. But they proved everybody wrong. They got red hot. They have the best record in baseball. I think they will compete at home against Boston."

ERNIE: "Houston can afford a slump. Most of the teams chasing the Mavericks cannot."

The Final Test

ERNIE: "Big Earl, if you could choose just one September series to sit down and experience pitch by pitch—not advance through it, but really watch the baseball—which series would you choose, and what makes that particular matchup so compelling to you?"

BIG EARL: "You know there's a lot of compelling matchups."

"I think the best series in September is actually in October."

"You know we won't do pitch-by-pitch. Only in the Grand Series do we do pitch-by-pitch."

"I think the Chicago-Dallas series. And they play six times. I think that's quite compelling because that's a tough race, both with their division."

ERNIE: "The best series in September may be the one played in October."

BIG EARL: "Once the October 4th is done, everybody's 0-0 and we lace them up. And we will cross those white lines and see what we got."

ERNIE: "The games will begin again.

"Eight qualifiers. One championship.

"And a tenth Grand Champion waiting to be crowned."

The Observer Conversation is a companion to Ernie Bewell's August 31 feature, "This Is the Test." Quotations are selected from the original discussion and grouped by subject. The conversation has been condensed without inventing dialogue or changing the participants' stated predictions.

The Baseball Observer

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