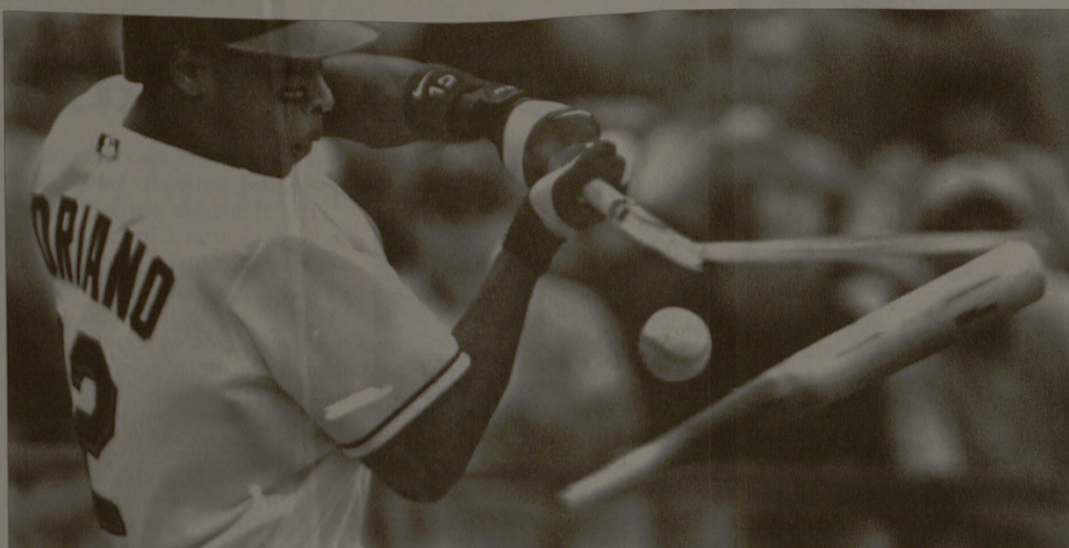


White Sox win 7-4 over stumbling Rangers

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — The Chicago White Sox face long odds, but they're not ready to concede the AL Central title to the Minnesota Twins just yet.

Carl Everett homered and the White Sox took advantage of Texas' season-high five errors to win a 7-4 victory over the fading Rangers on Monday. The White Sox won their fourth straight to move 7 1/2 games behind the first-place Twins.



Louis DeLuca • THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Texas Rangers second baseman Alfonso Soriano shatters his bat in the first inning of Monday's game. The White Sox won the game 7-4, putting the Rangers 7.5 games back of AL Wild Card leader the Red Sox.

"We're trying to put together some wins and finish on a strong note," White Sox first baseman Paul Konerko said. "We're not out of it, but I'd be hesitant to say we're in it either, not 7 1/2 out."

Chicago has six games left against Minnesota, three at the end of a 10-game road trip that began Monday.

"We've got to be around four or five back going into Minnesota," Konerko said. "But we're playing better."

In the first two innings, White Sox starter Jason Grilli (1-1) allowed three hits, walked three, committed an error and threw two wild pitches. But the Rangers were only able to

come up with one run during that stretch as they lost for the seventh time in eight games.

Grilli, who earned his first major league win since April 20, 2001, for the Florida Marlins, gave up three runs and eight hits in 5 2/3 innings. He struck out three and walked three.

"I definitely don't want to start off in a hole," Grilli said. "The positive thing was that I battled through it. I was just trying to minimize the damage. To get out of that situation with one run, that's what I'm trying to do, to keep the team in the ballgame."

Astros notch 11th straight with 11-5 win over Reds

By Joel Anderson
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The crowd was on its feet, beckoning the latest slugging surge in the Houston Astros' vaunted offense to re-emerge from the dugout.

Already seated and oblivious to the cheers, Brandon Backe didn't stir from his daze until his teammates nudged him back outside.

"I was just excited thinking about the home run," said the 26-year-old pitcher, who was making only his fourth career start. "I was going to go down and sit in my little hole, but they told me to get out there."

Backe hit his first career homer, a two-run shot, and allowed one run in seven innings to keep the Astros in the thick of the NL wild-card chase with an 11-5 win over the Cincinnati Reds on Monday, their season-high 10th straight victory.

Jeff Bagwell, Lance Berkman and Jeff Kent also homered for Houston, on its longest win streak in five years. The Astros have won 18 of 21 since Aug. 15, the best record in the majors during that stretch.

The Astros closed within a game of NL wild-card leaders Chicago and San Francisco. Houston, a season-high 11 games over .500 at

74-63, hasn't been within striking range of the Cubs and Giants in more than three months.

"They are not missing anything at the plate," Reds manager Dave Miley said. "If you make a mistake, they hit it and they hit it hard."

Backe virtually shut down the Reds after giving up three hits and a run-scoring single to D'Angelo Jimenez in the first. He gave up only four singles from there, finishing with a career-high eight strikeouts and a walk.

But it was Backe's performance at the plate that was the biggest surprise.

Backe went 2-for-2 with a walk, including the two-run shot in the fourth that gave Houston a 5-1 lead.

"It was my big dream to be a hitter in the major leagues," said Backe, who was drafted by Tampa Bay in 1998 as a second baseman. "I never thought I'd be a pitcher. My hitting skills are still there. I practice all the time behind closed doors."

The crowd of 40,581 gave Backe a standing ovation as rounded the bases and didn't stop the cheers until he came out from the dug-out to doff his cap. It was the first homer by an Astros pitcher since Ron Villone did it against the Reds on Aug. 15, 2003.

"I asked (manager Phil) Garner, 'Did we just win the World Series or what?'" Berkman said. "I didn't know what was going on."

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