

# Strike before they're hot

5 players who are still buy-low opportunities

BY KYLE STACK  
Special to amNewYork

Fantasy baseball owners looking for a way to jump-start their teams often probe their league's free-agent list. Instead, they should look at opposing rosters for an underperforming player. Here are five of them:

## 'THIS WEEK ONLY' SALE Scott Baker, SP, Minnesota

4-6, 5.59 ERA, 1.17 WHIP

The buy-low window is closing for the righty; he's won three of his past four starts, maintaining a 28:2 K/BB ratio over 29 innings.

Don't mention Baker's recent surge in trade talks. Maintain a skeptical tone and hope that the Baker owner in your league is still freaked out by his losing record and meteoric ERA.

## Howie Kendrick, 2B, L.A. Angels

.235 AVG, 4 HR, 22 RBI, .640 OPS

The comparison of Kendrick's minor league batting average (.360) with his average through three big-league seasons (.306) suggests he's near rock bottom. Ironically, now that Kendrick is relatively injury-free, his bat is holding him back. He might never be even a 15/15 player, but he should be a career .300 hitter.



As Howie Kendrick begins to put his early-season troubles behind him, he becomes an excellent trade target. (GETTY)

## THE BARGAIN BIN Geovany Soto, C, Chicago Cubs

.218 AVG, 2 HR, 14 RBI, .622 OPS

Last year's NL Rookie of the Year is struggling. But Soto has one major factor in his favor: plate discipline. He's striking out less (21.1 K percentage versus 24.5 in 2008) and walking more (13.9 BB percentage against last year's 11.2 mark).

Think of plate discipline as baseball's version of karma. The more discerning eye a batter has at the dish, the more likely he is to reap offensive benefits down the road.

## Garrett Atkins, 1B/3B, Colorado

.194 AVG, 5 HR, 20 RBI, .578 OPS

Talk about a Rocky Mountain Horror of a season. Atkins hasn't seen his batting average in the .200s since May 12. Still, there are two good reasons to trade for him. First, he's been unlucky, with a .203 batting average on balls in play (his career average: .312). Second, he's averaged 25 homers and 110 RBIs the past three seasons.

Owners with the sense to recognize and acquire underperforming players win fantasy championships.

## HOME/AWAY SPLITS

Some players produce drastically lower numbers when they leave (or return) home:

- **Gavin Floyd, SP, Chicago White Sox:** 3.00 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 9.2 K/9 at U.S. Cellular Field; 7.97 ERA, 1.66 WHIP, 6.7 K/9 on road
- **John Maine, SP, Mets:** 4-1, 2.48 ERA, 1.07 WHIP at Citi Field; 1-3, 6.34 ERA, 1.65 WHIP on road
- **Melvin Mora, 3B, Baltimore:** .320 AVG, .791 OPS, 12 RBI at Camden Yards; .194 AVG, .511 OPS, 3 RBI on road
- **A.J. Pierzynski, C, Chicago White Sox:** .202 AVG, .581 OPS at U.S. Cellular Field; .375 AVG, .931 OPS on road
- **Nick Swisher, 1B/OF, Yankees:** .190 AVG, 3 HR, 7 RBI at Yankee Stadium; .303 AVG, 9 HR, 28 RBI on road



Swisher

(KYLE STACK)

## Ricky Nolasco, SP, Florida

2-6, 8.17 ERA, 1.82 WHIP

There are times when the price for a player is so low that the benefit of his potential is worth more than the player(s) you would have to give up. The 26-year-old Nolasco, once hyped as a sleeper draft pick, has numbers that can't get much worse. The potential he showed last year (3.52 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 7.9 K/9) makes it worth taking a chance on him. Unless your league's Nolasco owner has Zen-like patience, it's likely he's very much available.

# With wife ill, Lefty tries return to golf

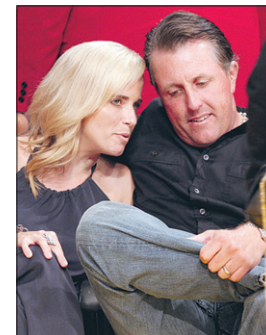
An emotional Phil Mickelson returned to the PGA Tour yesterday, trying to keep some normalcy in a life that has been turned upside down by the discovery that his wife, Amy, has breast cancer.

Mickelson will play the St. Jude Classic, which starts today in Memphis, Tenn., and then return to Bethpage Black for the U.S. Open. He has been a popular figure in New York since he was the runner-up to Tiger Woods at Bethpage in 2002.

"I'm not playing just to play," said Mickelson, whose cap had a patch in the shape of a pink ribbon, the symbol of breast cancer. "Bethpage is a golf course that suits my game. I love that course. Obviously, I'm playing because I believe I can win."

Mickelson was at Bethpage on Tuesday for a practice round.

He said his wife's can-



Phil Mickelson's wife, Amy, expects to have surgery next month. (GETTY)

cer was discovered early enough that she won't have to rush into surgery or make quick decisions. He expects surgery the first week in July. Only then will they have a better idea of what they face.

"Throughout this year, we'll have a lot of treatment," Mickelson said. "We'll try to do normal things, like playing golf tournaments." (AP)

# Childress: Vikings set no deadline for Favre decision

The Minnesota Vikings never told Brett Favre to make up his mind by this week if he wants to play, according to coach Brad Childress.

In fact, Childress said yesterday, the team has no timetable for Favre to decide about coming out of retirement again to quarterback the Vikings. "I'm not into predicting

the future, you know?" the coach said. "We'll just have to see what's around the corner tomorrow."

Childress called into local radio station KFAN during his drive to work to refute an earlier ESPN report that he had mandated that the 39-year-old star determine his status for the 2009 season this week. (AP)

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