

National League

EASTERN DIVISION:

Atlanta Braves:

2005 Overview:

14 straight division titles speak volumes for the Braves ability to field a competitive team year after year. 2005 was no different. Playing all year in a very tight NL East division, the Braves once again managed to reach the postseason with a 90-72 regular season record. The Braves exited early in the first round of the playoffs, losing in 4 games to the NL Central Houston Astros - but not before playing in the longest playoff game in history, an 18-inning, 5 hours and 50-minute epic battle that ended in the Astros advancing to play the Cardinals for the NL Championship.

The Jones boys led the offense once again in 2005. Outfielder Andrew Jones (.263 51 128), 3rd baseman Chipper Jones (.296 21 72) joined 1st baseman Adam LaRoche (.259 20 78), all star shortstop Rafael Furcal (.284 12 58) and 2nd baseman Marcus Giles (.291 15 63) to provide a fearsome starting lineup. Newcomer Outfielder Jeff Francoeur (.300 14 45) also impressed, joining the team in July.

Pitching has always remained the strongest aspect of every Atlanta team over the past 15 seasons. In 2005, John Smoltz (14-7 3.06 230 innings) returned to the starting pitcher role after closing games between 2001-2004. Several pitchers shared the relief role until the Braves acquired Kyle Farnsworth (1-1 2.19 16 saves) mid-season. Starters Tim Hudson (14-9 3.52), Jorge Sosa (13-3 2.55) and Horacio Ramirez (11-9 4.63) also helped provide quality starts en route to the Braves 14th straight postseason appearance.

Off-Season Moves:

Key Braves losses in the off season include Furcal to the Dodgers, Pitching Coach Leo Mazzone to the Orioles, and closer Kyle Farnsworth to the Yankees. Former big-leaguer Roger McDowell will assume the new role as pitching coach. Atlanta also picked up Edgar Renteria (.276 8 70) from the Red Sox to replace Furcal at short. Pitcher Lance Cormier (7-3 5.11) was also traded from the Diamondbacks for Johnny Estrada in a three-player deal.

2006 Analysis:

The Braves pitching looks to be shaky in 2006. Expect starter Mike Hampton to miss the entire 2006 season due to Tommy John surgery. John Smoltz will be 39 in May, and his right shoulder was subjected to the strain of over 230 innings in 2005, while Tim Hudson has spent some time on the disabled list in both of the last two seasons. Losing Farnsworth leaves a big hole in the

closer's role. Lefty Horacio Ramirez is a solid fourth starter giving the Braves 200 innings that they badly needed last season. Expect Sosa to battle for the fifth spot in the rotation. Bottom line: John Schuerholz will need to get more bullpen help, including a legitimate closer, or the Braves are in serious trouble in 2006.

Offensively, although the loss of shortstop and lead off hitter Furcal to the Dodgers was a huge blow All-Star and Gold Glove winner Edgar Renteria should see a resurgence in 2006, many believed Renteria had difficulties fitting in to the Red Sox team atmosphere – but he did manage an impressive 70 RBI. It's likely that 2B Marcus Giles will move up to the lead-off positive, with Renteria batting second in manager Bobby Cox's newly retooled lineup.

Philadelphia Phillies:

2005 Overview:

The Phillies remained right on the Brave's heels for most of the 2005 season thanks to a potent batting order that included 2nd basemen Chase Utley (.291 28 105) and outfielders Pat Burrell (.281 32 117) and Bobby Abreu (.286 24 102). Shortstop Jimmy Rollins (.290 12 54) and veteran catcher Mike Lieberthal (.263 12 47) also provided the Phillies with a well-balanced lineup. Perhaps the biggest offensive surprise was the emergence of rookie 1st baseman Ryan Howard (.288 22 63), who stepped in to replace the injured power-hitting Jim Thome. Howard hit an impressive .298 mark after the all-star break, launching 19 home runs while playing in 67 games. His .323 batting average against righties helped keep the Phillies close and landed Howard National League Rookie of the Year. The Phillies ended the 2005 season with a respectable 88-74 record, finishing 2 games behind the Eastern Division-leading Atlanta Braves. Philadelphia finished second in the National League with a team batting average of .270 (eighth in MLB).

The Phillies 2005 pitching was led by newly acquired Jon Lieber (17-13 4.20), who was picked up from the Yankees in the 2004 off-season. Lieber posted only an 8-8 record before the all star break but rebounded nicely with a 9-5 record in the second half of the season and a 3.28 ERA. Joining Lieber in the rotation were starters Brett Myers (13-8 3.72), Randy Wolf (6-4 4.39), Vicente Padilla (9-12 4.71 and rookie pitcher Robinson Tejeda (4-3 3.57). Workhorse closer Billy Wagner (4-3, 1.51, 38 saves in 41 save opportunities) appeared in 75 games, posting a microscopic 0.74 ERA in 36.1 innings pitched after the all-star break.

Off-Season Moves:

The Phillies acquired veteran reliever Arthur Rhodes (3-1 2.08) from the Indians for outfielder Jason Michaels to help their 2006 bullpen. Philadelphia also moved oft-injured 1st baseman Jim Thome (.207 7 30 RBI in 59 games) to make room for rookie sensation Ryan Howard. Aaron

Rowand (.270 13 69) was picked up from the White Sox in the trade for Thome. Vicente Padilla was also moved for relief pitcher Ricardo Rodriguez (2-3 5.53), while starters Ryan Franklin (8-15 5.10) and journeyman reliever Tom Gordon (5-4 2.57) were acquired via free agency.

2006 Analysis:

The Phillies will enter the 2006 season with a potent lineup. Picking up Rowand in exchange for Thome will add to an already stacked batting order. Rowand is slated to replace free-agent outfielder Kenny Lofton in centerfield. The Phillies will also be looking to build on Chase Utley and Ryan Howard's breakout seasons. Abreu was included in the trade rumor mill all off-season, but it appears he will be staying in Philadelphia. Abreu is a steady, often-underrated competitor, playing in all 162 games last year. Expect the offense to be even better in 2006, with Howard playing a full season.

The Phillies are most concerned about their pitching. The team lost free agent closer Billy Wagner to the Mets, and reliever Terry Adams to Pittsburgh. Vincente Padilla was also traded to Texas, and it appears Urbina may not be pitching at all in 2006. Lieber, Lidle, and Myers should continue their 2005 form in 2006, although the 4th and 5th starters are very weak. Reliever Tom Gordon has some very big shoes to fill with the departure of Wagner. Gordon hasn't managed to hold down the closer role since 2001 with the Chicago Cubs. Expect the Phillies lineup to dominate the NL and the top 3 pitchers to do well. The bullpen is shaky, but Philadelphia should contend with a strong offensive attack for the East.

Florida Marlins:

2005 Overview:

Most Florida fans never expected another repeat of the 1997 season when management completely gutted the World Champion Marlins, but that is exactly what happened during the 2005 off-season. Despite finishing tied with the Mets for 3rd place with an 83-79 record, Florida decided it needed to dramatically reduce payroll in the hopes of focusing on a new stadium plan. In just 12 short days between November 24-December 7, the Marlins dumped millions off their payroll by moving six everyday starting position players, two front-line pitchers, a closer, and a setup reliever. When the dust finally settled, only superstars, Miguel Cabrera (.323 33 116) and Dontrelle Willis (22-10 2.63) remained.

The 2005 offense was led by Cabrera, who posted almost identical numbers to his 2004 season-ending totals. Cabrera was joined by newly acquired first baseman Carlos Delgado (.301 33 115) and outfielder Juan Encarnacion (.287 16 76), while pesky lead-off hitter Juan Pierre (.276 in 162 games with 57 stolen bases), third baseman Mike Lowell (.236 8 58), and newly signed catcher Paul Lo Duca (.283 6 57) rounded out the rest of the starting lineup.

Willis simply dominated in 2005, starting the season with a 5-0 record and a 1.29 ERA. Dontrelle entered the all-star break with an impressive 13-4 record and 2.39 ERA. Starters Josh Beckett (15-8 3.37), A.J. Burnett (12-12 3.44), and newly acquired Brian Moehler (6-12 4.55) joined reliever Todd Jones (1-5 2.10 40 saves in 45 save opportunities) to complete the rotation.

Off-Season Moves:

Newly appointed manager Joe Girardi and be surrounded by fresh, new faces in his 2006 debut. Hanley Ramirez is a top rookie prospect who was obtained in the Beckett trade from Boston, Ramirez has only played in two major league games and spent most of the 2005 season at AAA, where he batted .271 with six home runs, 52 RBI, and 26 stolen bases. Baseball America ranks Ramirez 10th on the Top 100 prospect list, and he will likely get the starting shortstop position, moving Cabrera to third base, his natural position.

The Marlins are also excited about outfielder Jeremy Hermida, who was the team's first-round pick in the 2002 draft, and Eric Reed and Chris Aguila, who are expected to get consideration in center and left field. Former New York Met Mike Jacobs (.310, 11 home runs in 30 games), obtained in the Delgado deal, and Wes Helms (.298 4 HRS in 2005) are expected to platoon at first base, while Josh Wilson (.257 17 82 in 143 games at Triple-A Albuquerque in 2005) will compete for the starting job at second base.

2006 Analysis:

The Marlins will start 2006 with a bunch of fresh new faces. The fire sale provided the team with a bunch of untested talent, making the 2006 roster look more like a AAA minor league team than anything else. New Manager Girardi will need to carefully evaluate who is ready to step into a full-time role on the team. Starting pitcher Dontrelle Willis is coming off his best year ever, so he will be expected to shoulder the load once again, with Yusmeiro Petit, Sergio Mitre, Jason Vargas, Anibel Sanchez, Josh Johnson, and Scott Olsen all getting consideration for a slot in the starting rotation. Scouts have recognized Johnson as a No. 2 starter, and Olsen, a left-hander, is also highly regarded.

New York Mets:

2005 Overview:

Rookie Manager Willie Randolph and General Manager Omar Minaya entered the 2005 season with two new key acquisitions. Pedro Martinez and Carlos Beltran arrived via free agency, hoping to improve the Mets' lineup and rotation. Martinez (15-8 2.82) certainly impressed, posting a 10-3 record prior to the All-Star break. Beltran (.266 16 78), on the other hand, struggled for most of the

season. The Mets finished the season with an 83-79 record, seven games behind the Atlanta Braves.

Outfielder Cliff Floyd (.273 34 98) enjoyed a renaissance in 2005, reaching a career-high in home runs. 3rd baseman David Wright (.306 27 102) also came into his own, while Mike Piazza (.251 19 62) ended his 8-year career as a NY Met batting only .232 after the all-star break. Shortstop Jose Reyes (.273 7 58 60 stolen bases) was able to play a full season and impress, but the rest of the Met's offense suffered injuries and spotty output. Japanese import Kaz Matsui (.255 3 24) Mike Cameron (.273 12 39), and newly acquired 1st baseman Doug Mientkiewicz (.240 11 29) did little to provide the Mets with any stability in the everyday lineup.

Along with Martinez, Tom Glavine (13-13 3.53) was able to finally show a glimpse of the pitcher he once was by compiling a 7-6 record and 2.22 ERA after the all-star break. Starters Kris Benson (10-8 4.13), Víctor Zambrano (7-12 4.17), and Jae Seo (8-2 2.59) were helped by the aging Roberto Hernandez (8-6 2.58) and the emergence of Aaron Heilman (5-3 3.17) in the bullpen. Unfortunately, closer Braden Loper (4-7 3.94 28 saves) struggled for the entire season, converting only 28 of 36 save opportunities.

Off-Season Moves:

The Mets finally picked up the 1st baseman they wanted by acquiring Carlos Delgado (.301 33 115) from the Marlins. Catcher Paul Lo Duca (.288 6 57) was also netted from the Marlins fire sale, while Mets GM Omar Minaya landed the closer free-agent left-hander Billy Wagner (4-3 1.51 38 saves) from the Phillies. Mike Cameron was moved to the Padres for new right fielder Xavier Nady (.261 13 43), and the ageless wonder Julio Franco (.275 9 42) was signed via free agency to a 2-year contract. Starting pitchers Jae Seo and Kris Benson were also dealt while relievers Jorge Julio (3-5 5.90), John Maine (2-3 6.30) and Duaner Sánchez (4-7 3.73) joined the bullpen.

2006 Analysis:

While Minaya failed to land Manny Ramirez after all the rumors, he was able to add a legitimate power hitter in Delgado. Expect Wagner to be a tremendous upgrade over Loper. Lo Duca should perform well alongside backup catcher Ramon Castro (.244 8 41). However, the Mets starting pitching may prove to be a bit thin. Trading both Seo and Benson may have been a mistake. Look for Heilman to join the starting rotation after a strong effort in winter ball and Steve Trachsel (1- 4 4.14) to also return. If the Mets remain healthy and their rotation doesn't fall apart, they will contend with the Phillies and Braves in 2006.

Washington Nationals:

Washington Nationals

2005 Overview:

Contenders for much of 2005 before finishing .500, Frank Robinson's Washington Nationals (a.k.a. Montreal Expos) were the talk of the National League East prior to the all-star break. The D.C. community embraced the "Nats" as the team was happy to find a permanent home stadium after splitting much of their games in 2004 between two different stadiums in Montreal and Puerto Rico. Despite holding onto first place in the National League East through the month of July, Washington fell quickly, finishing their 2005 season with an 81-81 record and ending their year 9 games behind the first-place Atlanta Braves.

The 2005 starting lineup was led by the newly acquired outfielder Jose Guillen (.283 24 76) and 1st baseman Nick Johnson (.289 15 74). Outfielders Brad Wilkerson (.248 11 57) and Preston Wilson (.261 10 43) joined catcher Brian Schneider (.268 10 44) to provide the team with the rest of their offense.

Starting pitchers Livan Hernandez (15-10 3.98) and former NY Yankee Esteban Loaiza (12-10 3.77) joined John Patterson (9-7 3.13), Tony Armas (7-7 4.97) and closer Chad Cordero (2-4 1.82 47 saves in 74 games) to stabilize the 2005 pitching staff as the team greatly improved on their losing 67-96 2004 record.

Off-Season Moves:

The "Nats" lost Esteban Loaiza to the Oakland Athletics and traded away Brad Wilkerson for Alfonso Soriano (.268 36 104) to help improve their offensive production, which was the lowest in baseball in 2005. Washington also traded for San Diego's [Brian Lawrence](#) (7-15 4.83) and the signed free agent [Ramon Ortiz](#) (9-11 5.36) in order to help bolster their rotation. The Nationals will also have a newcomer at third since [Vinny Castilla](#) (.253 12 66) was traded to the Padres in the deal for Lawrence. Veteran Mike Stanton (3-3 4.64) was also added to help strengthen the bullpen as he was signed as a free agent late in the off-season.

2006 Analysis:

The loss of Loaiza will hurt the team's starting pitching. He provided the Nationals with 217 innings in 2005, and Washington has yet to make any significant moves that will replace those innings. While Washington did acquire two additional starting pitchers, there is little chance that either will prove as reliable as Loaiza did last season. Brian Lawrence had a terrible 2005 despite pitching in pitching-friendly Petco Park, and Ramon Ortiz was released by Cincinnati Red, who became frustrated with his ability to deliver any quality innings. Soriano should prove to be a great pickup, but he will not go quietly into the outfield with José Vidro (.275 7 32) or newly acquired free agent Marlon Anderson (.264 7 19) expected to start the season at 2nd base.

The Nationals' bullpen was very good last season, with Chad Cordero establishing himself as one of the game's best young closers last year after compiling 47 saves. Stanton should also be a nice addition. The starting pitching is weak, but Washington should be expected to score more runs in 2006.

CENTRAL DIVISION:

Houston Astros:

2005 Overview:

For the second straight year, the Houston Astros overcame a horrible start and spotty offense to capture the National League wildcard. Houston rolled past the Cardinals en route to becoming National League Champions, but they lost in a four-game sweep to the World Champion Chicago White Sox.

Despite missing the first month of the season, slugger Lance Berkman (.293 24 82 RBI) was able to establish himself as one of the best power hitters in the game, while 3rd baseman Morgan Ensberg (.283 36 101) also emerged as a prime-time offensive force leading the team in HR (36), RBI (101), and slugging percentage (.557). The ageless wonder Craig Biggio (.264 26 69) joined Jason Lane (.267 26 78) and Mike Lamb (.236 12 53) to help complete the rest of the starting lineup.

On the pitching side, starter Roy Oswalt (20-12, 2.94 ERA) combined strong power numbers with excellent control in 2005, while Andy Pettitte (17-9, 2.39 ERA) bounced back from an injury-ridden 2004 season to pitch over 220 innings. Roger Clemens (13-8, 1.87), at the age of 44, still posted respectable numbers, joining superstar reliever Brad Lidge (4-4, 2.29, 42 saves) to provide the Astros with a season-ending 89-73 record.

Off-Season Moves:

The Astros didn't make too many moves in the off-season, only because they really didn't need to. Their biggest acquisition was signing free agent Preston Wilson (.260, 25 90), who was picked up to help provide more offensive stability and potentially replace Bagwell (who may or may not return in 2006). Reliever Trever Miller (2-2 4.06) was also added to help an already strong bullpen.

2006 Analysis:

Many of the same faces will return in 2006, with Craig Biggio (94 Runs) and Willy Taveras, who led the team in stolen bases with 34, setting the table for the rest of the lineup. The Astros hope Taveras will learn to become more patient in his sophomore year and produce more walks. If

Bagwell doesn't come back full-time, Berkman will likely move over to 1B, with the newly acquired Preston Wilson expected to play left field.

Roy Oswalt is expected to once again return as the staff's ace after putting together back-to-back 20-win seasons. 33-year-old Andy Pettitte has lost significant time to injuries in two of the last four seasons, so the Astros are hoping he can be healthy for an entire 2006 campaign. Clemens is not expected to return, and his regular-season performance will be missed. He was not offered arbitration in the off-season.

Houston is looking to their number 3 starter Brandon Backe (10-8, 4.76 ERA) to find more consistency in 2005. While Wandy Rodriguez (10-10, 5.53 ERA) and Ezequiel Astacio (3-6, 5.67 ERA) will remain the likely candidates as the fourth and fifth starters. With Brad Lidge, Chad Qualls, former Met Dan Wheeler, lefty Mike Gallo, and newly signed Trever Miller, the Houston bullpen is deep and perhaps one of the best in all of baseball. Expect the Astros to receive some competition from the Cubs and St. Louis in 2006. If the pitching can hold itself together and the offense at least matches the same numbers as last year, they should find themselves in the thick of things within the NL Central.

St. Louis Cardinals:

2005 Overview:

The 2005 Cardinals were led by one of the greatest offensive players in baseball, Albert Pujols (.330 41 117). Joined by outfielders Jim Edmonds (.263 29 89), Reggie Sanders (.271 21 54), and Larry Walker (.289 15 82), Pujols and company assembled a regular season winning record of 100-62. During the playoffs, St. Louis lost in 6 games to the Astros. Tony Larussa's team performed well in the postseason, first by sweeping the Padres in 4 straight games and then with Pujols providing some memorable extra-inning heroics in game 5 of the LCS against Houston. Albert's mammoth home run helped keep the series alive, forcing a game 6 back in St. Louis. Unfortunately, St. Louis couldn't manage another win to force a game seven, and Houston was able to make it to their first World Series appearance in team history.

The pitching in 2005 was led by Chris Carpenter (21-5 2.83), Mark Mulder (16-8 3.64) and Matt Morris (14-10 4.11). Closer Jason Isringhausen (1-2 2.14 39 saves) also performed well, closing 39 of 43 save opportunities in 2005.

Off-Season Moves:

The Cardinals lost a good portion of their offensive production during the off-season as Reggie Sanders signed with Kansas City and Larry Walker retired. Second baseman Mark Grudzielanek also departed for Kansas City, while third baseman Abraham Nunez signed with the Phillies.

Starter Matt Morris signed a lucrative 3-year deal with San Francisco for \$27 million, and the Cardinals also traded lefty reliever Ray King to the Rockies and lost Julian Tavarez, who signed a two-year deal with the Red Sox.

The Cardinals did find a decent hitter and a replacement outfielder in Juan Encarnacion (.287 16 76) from Florida and also picked up Larry Bigbie (.239 in 90 games-splitting time between Colorado and Baltimore) from the Rockies in the trade for King. The pitching staff sought upgrades for 2006 by adding free agent starter Sidney Ponson (7-11 6.21) and former Mets closer Braden Looper (4-7 3.94) as well as Ricardo Rincon (1-1 4.34).

2006 Analysis:

The Cardinals made several off-season free-agent signings for the 2006 season, but nothing terribly significant. The biggest hope for 2006 is that Scott Rolen will be healthy again so he can contribute. Rolen only appeared in 56 games in 2005 and will be called upon to patch up the hole left by the departure of Sanders and Walker. But any lineup with Pujols and Edmonds should do just fine. Expect to see free agent Junior Spivey (.232 7 24) compete for the second base job as the replacement for Grudzielanek.

Ponson may not have much left in the tank, but the 1 million dollars the Cardinals paid to find out is certainly worth the risk. The bullpen picked up two decent arms in Looper and Rincón. Looper blew a bunch of games for the Mets, but the Cardinals hope he'll produce in a setup role for Isringhausen. Expect Carpenter to have another productive year, as the starting rotation will remain mostly unchanged from 2005.

Milwaukee Brewers:

2005 Overview:

The Brewers put together an impressive 2005 season posting a .500 record (81-81). Led by outfielders Carlos Lee (.265 32 114) and Geoff Jenkins (.292 25 86), the Brewers 2005 offense also received help from 1st baseman Lyle Overbay (.276 19 72) and Brady Clark (.306 13 53). Rickie Weeks (.239 13 42) and Bill Hall (.291 17 62) split time at second base, while pitcher Chris Capuano (18 12 3.99) surprised many by posting 18 wins and pitching over 200 innings (219) for the first time in his young major-league career. Helping Capuano in the rotation were Ben Sheets (10 9 3.33) and Tomo Ohka (7 6 4.35), who was acquired mid-season from the Washington Nationals. Newcomer closer Derrick Turnbow (7 1 1.74 39 saves) did very well, posting a microscopic 0.90 ERA after the all-star break.

Off-Season Moves:

GM Doug Melvin continued to carefully build his 2006 team of youngsters. First on his list was trading first baseman Lyle Overbay to make room for newcomer Prince Fielder (.288 2 10). The organization is high on Fielder's potential. The team also picked up starter Dave Bush (5-11 4.49), outfielder Gabe Gross (.250 1 7), and pitcher Zach Jackson, a former first-round pick from the Blue Jays.

The Brewers also traded for third baseman [Corey Koskie](#) (.249 11 36) in exchange for right-hander Brian Wolfe. Melvin also sent pitcher [Wes Obermueller](#) to Atlanta to get back the Brewers' former closer, Dan Kolb (3-8 5.93). GM Doug Melvin continued to carefully build his team of youngsters for 2006. First on his list was trading the first baseman to make room for the newcomer (.288 2 10). The organization is high on Fielder's potential. The team also picked up starter (5-11 4.49), outfielder (.250 1 7) and pitcher Zach Jackson, who was a former first round pick from the Blue Jays. The Brewers also traded to get third baseman (.249 11 36) in exchange for right-hander Brian Wolfe. Melvin also sent a pitcher to Atlanta to get back the Brewers' former closer (3-8, 5.93).

2006 Analysis:

The Brewers GM Doug Melvin continues to impress as he has assembled a team of young, aggressive players. Prince Fielder is expected to join Lee and Jenkins to form one of the more formidable lineups in the NL. The Brewers think so highly of Fielder they moved Overbay to make room for his immediate ascension.

The team hopes Bush will be a good pickup. The pitcher turned around a poor 0-5 start with the Blue Jays and did struggle in September as well, but the Brewers are hopeful a change in scenery will help him. The team's starters ranked sixth in the NL with a 4.02 ERA last year, and the staff should be improved. Expect Koskie to do well in his new uniform. His RBI totals, in particular, should increase with more consistent playing time.

The pitcher to watch will be Capuano. His 18 wins and 35 game starts really anchored the rotation in 2005. The Brewers hope he will become a legitimate ace to build their rotation around. The bullpen, other than Turnbow, is somewhat questionable. Kolb is a familiar face and will help set up the closer, but other than that, there isn't much here to depend on. Turnbow posted a 3-0 record after the all-star break and emerged as one of the more reliable closers in baseball. The Brewers are counting on him picking up where he left off in 2005. Brewer fans remain hopeful in 2006 as management builds a quality team.

Chicago Cubs:

2005 Overview:

With the departure of slugger Sammy Sosa, the offensive output for the Chicago Cubs has been replaced by the likes of superstars Derek Lee (.335 46 107) and Aramis Ramirez (.302 31 92). Both players came into their own in 2005, along with the help of Jeremy Burnitz (.258 24 87), catcher Michael Barrett (.276 16 61), and 2nd baseman Todd Walker (.305 12 40). Lee, in particular, impressed in 2005, hitting 27 home runs before the all-star break and leading the league in hitting by the end of the season. Starters Carlos Zambrano (14 6 3.26), Greg Maddux (13 15 4.24), and Mark Prior (11 7 3.67) joined closer Ryan Dempster (5-3 3.13 35 saves) to provide the pitching depth in 2005 as the Cubs posted a 79-83 record to end the season 21 games behind the division-leading St. Louis Cardinals.

Off-Season Moves:

GM Jim Hendry traded for Florida Marlin's Juan Pierre (.276 2 47), who will lead off and play center in 2006, both of which were troublesome spots last year. Hendry also strengthened the Chicago Cubs bullpen with two free-agent signings: lefty [Scott Eyre](#) (2-2 2.63 – obtained from the San Francisco Giants) and right-hander Bobby Howry (7-4 3.47 – acquired from the Cleveland Indians). The Cubs spent \$23 million to lock those two players under contract for the next three years.

Pitcher Wade Miller (4-4 4.95) was also picked up from the Boston Red Sox. The other noteworthy signings were free agent right fielder [Jacque Jones](#) (.249 23 73 from the Minnesota Twins), who will be looked upon to replace the offense for the departed [Jeromy Burnitz](#). John Mabry (.240 8 32) was also traded from the Cardinals to help in the outfield. The Cubs are hopeful he can return to his 2004 offensive form when he tied a career-high in home runs with 13.

2006 Analysis:

The restructured bullpen should help improve the pitching in 2006. Hendry also did well to pick up Pierre and Jones. Pierre improves the defense and lead-off position and should spell more RBI opportunities for Lee and Ramirez. The biggest non-pitching question remains at shortstop, where veteran [Neifi Perez](#) and 23-year-old [Ronny Cedeno](#) will be expected to help provide the answer. Lee and Ramirez will need to continue to provide the bulk of the offense in 2006.

The starting pitching remains a question mark. If Kerry Wood can return and pitch more than the 66.0 innings he did last year and Maddux can improve a bit on his record, the pitching might surprise some fans as a strong point in 2006. If the Chicago Cubs hope to make it to postseason play, they will need to get more from the starters for the recent off-season bullpen moves to work. Hendry hopes the \$23 million spent on Howry and Eyre will be money well invested. Fans should be patient in 2006 – if the team is close at the all-star break, expect a mid-season trade or two to

perhaps make the difference.

Cincinnati Reds:

2005 Overview:

The biggest news for Cincinnati Reds fans in 2005 was that Ken Griffey Jr. (.301 35 92) played an entire season injury-free for the first time in over five full seasons. What was so impressive about Griffey's 2005 performance was his ability to completely return to form, hitting for both power and average. For his outstanding efforts, Griffey grabbed the Comeback Player of the Year Award.

The rest of the Red's 2005 offense was provided by Adam Dunn (.247 40 101), veteran 2nd baseman Rich Aurilia (.282 14 68), and outfielder Austin Kearns (.240 18 67). Unfortunately, the Reds starting pitching didn't offer many wins in 2005. Starters Aaron Harang (11 13 3.83), Brandon Claussen (10-11 4.21), and Ramon Ortiz (9 11 5.36) joined Eric Milton (8 15 6.47) and closer David Weathers (7-4 3.94 15 saves) to handle the majority of the pitching duties during the season. Weathers' was picked up from the Mets and was converted into a full-time closer, where he nailed down 15 out of 19 save opportunities. No real staff Ace emerged in 2005, with Harang leading the rotation with 11 wins. The Reds ended the season with a less than impressive final 73-89 record, finishing 27 games behind the NL Central Champion St. Louis Cardinals.

Off-Season Moves:

The Reds recognized pitching as their main priority during the off-season, so they traded away popular first baseman Sean Casey to the Pittsburgh Pirates for left-handed starter Dave Williams (10-11 4.41). Unfortunately, the Reds did little else to address their starting pitching needs. Veteran Infielder [Rich Aurilia](#) was re-signed, and Cincinnati also traded for utility man [Tony Womack](#) (.249 in 2005), which was designed to give the team some options off the bench in 2006. Lefthanded reliever [Chris Hammond](#) (5-1 3.84) also signed on from the defending NL West Champion Padres.

2006 Analysis:

Expect [Adam Dunn](#) now to move over to first base, leaving the outfield responsibilities to [Austin Kearns](#), [Ken Griffey Jr.](#) and [Wily Mo Pena](#). The Reds really didn't significantly address the starting pitching in the off-season, and the one new starting pitcher they acquired (Williams) will hardly make a difference for the team in 2006. With Harang leading the group with only 11 wins, there is a bunch of work to be done before the Reds can hope to contend. Williams was only a 10-game winner in 2005, so fans shouldn't expect much from him either.

Like many major league teams, the Reds are relying heavily on their youngsters, which include Kearns, Pena, Dunn, shortstop [Felipe Lopez](#), and [Ryan Freel](#). Fans were happy to get the old Griffey back in 2005 and are hopeful he will pick up where he left off when he starts the 2006 season. Dave Weathers is simply not a strong closer, although the team managed to squeeze 15 saves out of him last season. Hammond was a nice pickup and should help out a struggling bullpen - but even more help is needed. Cincinnati Reds fans should expect more of the same in 2006.

Pittsburgh Pirates:

2005 Overview:

Pirate fans had little to cheer about in 2005. The only real bright spot for the club was the continued improvement of outfielder Jason Bay (.206 32 101), who played in all 162 games in 2005 for the team. Beyond Bay there was little offense to speak of for the entire season. Only 1st basemen Daryle Ward (.280 12 63) and newcomer Brad Eldred (.221 12 27) did much, while sophomore 2nd baseman Jose Castillo (.268 11 53) provided the rest of the offense for the Buc's 2005 lineup.

Pittsburgh's starting pitching in 2006 was almost non-existent. Dave Williams (10-11 4.41) led the staff with 10 wins, while Kip Wells (8-18 5.09), newcomers Mark Redman (5-15 4.90) joined Oliver Perez (7-5 5.85), rookie Zach Duke (8- 1 1.81 in 14 game starts) and Josh Fogg (6-11 5.05) to complete the rest of the Pirate rotation. Closer Jose Mesa (2-8 4.76 37 saves) appeared in 55 games to help keep things interesting. The Pirates finished the season with a last place 67-95 record.

Off-Season Moves:

General Manager Dave Littlefield addressed the Pirate's offensive needs by signing free agent slugger Jeromy Burnitz (.258 24 87) and first baseman Sean Casey (.312 8 58), who came in a trade with the Reds for lefty starter Dave Williams. Third baseman [Joe Randa](#) (.275 17 68) was also signed via free agency from San Diego. The Pirates also picked up free-agent reliever Roberto Hernandez (2.58 ERA in 67 appearances for the Mets in '05) to fill out the rest of their 2006 bullpen.

2006 Analysis:

Expect Jason Bay to have another big year for the Pirates. The addition of Casey Randa and Burnitz for a small market team is impressive. All three players should be able to add to their 2005 numbers in this lineup. Randa, in particular, will be interesting to watch. Expect Jose Castillo and Ward's numbers to also increase with the better protection they will receive from the additions.

Hernandez enjoyed a comeback season with the Mets, proving to be a reliable arm in their bullpen. The Mets didn't want to take the chance that he would repeat his 2005 performance, so they allowed him to leave via free agency. The Pirates are hopeful that the Mets' loss is their gain. Hernandez maintained good velocity throughout the season and kept the Mets in the race for the 2005 NL East.

Of course, Littlefield has improved his power from his corner infield spots, and since Randa and Casey are respectable at getting on base, the Pirate offense should be better in 2006. The Pirates will rely on Duke to pitch in more games in 2006 and hope he is a player they can build the rotation around. Still, the starting pitching is shaky. The Pirates will be looking to get to at least a .500 record in 2006, somewhere they haven't been since the 1992 season. They remain a young team with a lot of pluses.

WESTERN DIVISION:

San Diego Padres:

2005 Overview:

In 2005, the NL West Champion San Diego Padres accomplished more with less. Despite a new ballpark, the team's offense was spotty all season. Ryan Klesko (.248 18 58) led the team with 18 home runs, while Mark Sweeney (.284 8 40), Brian Giles (.301 15 83), shortstop Khalil Greene (.250 15 70), and catcher Ramon Hernandez (.290 12 58) completed the better parts of the lineup. The Padres' pitching was the most solid aspect of the team, led by rookie Clay Hensley (1-1 1.70 in 47.2 innings pitched). Hensley was called up in July and helped starters Jake Peavy (13-7 2.88), Woody Williams (9-12 4.85), and reliever Akinori Otsuka (2-8 3.59) post an 82-80 final record, which was good enough to clinch the NL West.

Off-Season Moves:

Padres GM Kevin Towers made sure to re-sign [Brian Giles](#) then moved on to strengthen the already solid bullpen by re-signing closer [Trevor Hoffman](#) (1-6 2.97 42 saves). Towers also traded third baseman [Sean Burroughs](#) to the Devil Rays in exchange for pitcher [Dewon Brazelton](#) (1-8 7.61), then upgraded their offense at third by trading pitcher Brian Lawrence to the Nationals for Vinny Castilla (.253 12 66). The Padres also improved their outfield defense and added some offense by trading Xavier Nady for the Mets' Mike Cameron (.273 12 39 13 stolen bases). Second baseman Mark Loretta was also moved to the Red Sox for catcher Doug Mirabelli (.228 6 18),

which became necessary with the loss of free-agent catcher Ramon Hernandez, who signed with Baltimore. Starter [Adam Eaton](#) and reliever [Akinori Otsuka](#) were also traded to the Rangers in a 6-player deal for starter Chris Young (12-7 4.36) and backup outfielder Terrmel Sledge (.243 in 20 games). Catcher Mike Piazza (.251 19 62) and pitcher Shawn Estes (7-8 4.80) also joined the team as free agents in January.

2006 Analysis:

The Padres had a busy off-season, looking to keep their team strong for another playoff run in 2006. The rotation, the best part of the team in 2005, may be a bit shakier in 2006 without Eaton and Lawrence. Newcomers Young and free-agent pickup Shawn Estes (from Arizona) aren't quite on the same level. The staff ace, [Jake Peavy](#) will be expected to shoulder much of the load again. The bullpen will be without Otsuka, Chris Hammond, and Rudy Seanez, but the addition of Hoffman was a solid pickup for the team. The weak offense has improved, with Castilla and former Met's Cameron and Piazza added. The Padres gave up very little to pick up Cameron, who missed all of August and September due to a devastating collision with center fielder Carlos Beltran. Cameron will return to his natural position at center field in 2006. Piazza is also a good pickup. When rested, he can still provide decent power numbers, although he still remains a defensive liability when it comes to throwing. If he is used carefully, there is no reason why he can't make a positive contribution.

Arizona Diamondbacks:

The Padres had a busy off-season, looking to keep their team strong for another playoff run in 2006. The rotation, the best part of the team in 2005, may be a bit shakier in 2006 without Eaton and Lawrence. Newcomers Young and free-agent pickup Shawn Estes (from Arizona) aren't quite on the same level. The staff's ace will be expected to shoulder much of the load again. The bullpen will be without Otsuka Chris Hammond, but the addition of Hoffman was a solid pickup for the team. The weak offense has improved, with Castilla and former Mets Cameron and Piazza added. The Padres gave up very little to pick up Cameron, who missed all of August and September due to a devastating collision with center fielder Carlos Beltran. Cameron will return to his natural position at center field in 2006. Piazza is also a good pickup. When rested, he can still provide decent power numbers, although he still remains a defensive liability when it comes to throwing. If he is used carefully, there is no reason why he can't make a positive contribution.

2005 Overview:

Rebounding from a truly disastrous 111-loss season in 2004, the Arizona Diamondbacks improved

their 2005 season record to 77-85, including a final 8-2 record to finish the last 10 games of the year. Led by a balanced offense, the team improved on their 2004 record thanks to the surprise performances supplied by 1st baseman Tony Clark (.304 30 87) and Chad Tracy (.308 27 72). The Diamondbacks also received much-needed help from Troy Glaus (.258 37 97), Luis Gonzalez (.271 24 79), and outfielder Shawn Greene (.286 22 73).

Arizona's starting pitching was spotty for much of the season, with starters Brandon Webb (14-12 3.54), Javier Vazquez (11-15 4.42), and Brad Halsey (8-12 4.61) providing the majority of the quality starts in 2005. Relievers Brandon Medders (4-1 1.78) and Lance Cormier (7-3 5.11) joined Brandon Lyon (0-2 6.44 14 saves), Brian Bruney (1-3 7.43 12 saves) and Jose Valverde (3-4 2.44 15 saves) who combined to save 41 games in total.

Off-Season Moves:

Arizona moved aggressively in the off-season by shipping [Javier Vazquez](#) to the White Sox for [Orlando Hernandez](#) (9-9 5.12), and also trading power hitter [Troy Glaus](#) to the Blue Jays for closer [Miguel Batista](#) (5-8 4.10 31 saves) as well as Gold Glove second baseman [Orlando Hudson](#) (.271 10 63). The Diamondbacks also picked up catcher Johnny Estrada (.261 4 39) in an off-season trade with the Atlanta Braves. The team signed free agent center fielder [Eric Byrnes](#) (.226 10 40) to help improve the as well.

2006 Analysis:

The Diamondbacks addressed their need for a legitimate closer by aggressively trading Glaus in the off-season. Although Glaus' hitting will be greatly missed, the Diamondbacks will get far more reliability with Batista than any of the options they used last year. The team is relying on youngsters like Chad Trady and first baseman [Conor Jackson](#) to pick up the slack left by Glaus.

Arizona also extended Webb's deal for another 4 years, which was a smart move. Webb is a solid workhorse-type pitcher and is the ace of the staff. In 2005, he led the team in both ERA (3.54) and Wins (14). The pickup of Orlando Hernandez will, at a minimum, eat up more innings in 2006. But fans shouldn't expect many wins from him or this rotation. Eric Byrnes is another nice addition, but the offense really isn't, nor ever was, this team's problem. The lineup is solid, and Luis Gonzalez and outfielder Shawn Greene should project similar numbers in 2006, even without Glaus in the lineup.

The Arizona Diamondbacks' biggest problem in 2006 will be their pitching. The team did very little to improve its starting rotation and, in fact, may have actually weakened it to improve its bullpen.

Aside from Webb, the starting pitching needs much more help. The team shouldn't be considered a serious contender for the NL West until the pitching receives a significant upgrade.

San Francisco Giants:

2005 Overview:

The 2005 San Francisco Giants struggled to score runs and find an identity without all-star Barry Bonds in their lineup. Newcomer Moises Alou (.321 19 63) didn't quite match his 2004 numbers with Chicago when he hit 39 homers and drove in 106 runs, but his bat proved a reliable addition. Joining Alou in the 2005 lineup were Mike Matheny (.242 13 59), Pedro Feliz (.250 20 81), and Ray Durham (.290 12 62), with rookie 1st baseman Lance Niekro (.252 12 46) providing the majority of the offense.

Giant pitching in 2005 was led by Jason Schmidt (12 7 4.40), who fell from his 18-win season in 2004. Joining Schmidt for the bulk of the pitching duties were Noah Lowry (13-13 3.78), Brett Tomko (8-15 4.48), and newcomer Brad Hennessey (5-8 4.64). The bullpen remained stable with Tyler Walker (6-4 4.23 23 saves) and closer Armando Benitez (2-3 4.50 19 saves) combining to save a total of 42 games between the two of them.

Off-Season Moves:

The Giants sought starting pitching help in the off-season and look to improve with the signing of right-hander Matt Morris (14-10 4.11 with the Cardinals in 2005). Morris was signed for three years, \$27 million dollars. Longtime starter [Kirk Rueter](#) was released, and Brett Tomko signed as a free agent with the Dodgers. San Francisco traded for Baltimore's [Steve Kline](#) (2-4 4.28) and signed [Tim Worrell](#) (1-2 4.07). The team lost Scott Eyre to the Cubs via free agency. Veteran first baseman [J.T. Snow](#), who played for 9 seasons with the Giants, moved on to the Red Sox, clearing the way for young [Lance Niekro](#) to play in more games. Steve Finley (.222 12 54) was also acquired via trade with the Angels in exchange for 3rd Baseman Edgardo Alfonzo. The Giants also picked up Free Agent Mark Sweeney (.294 8 40), who matched his career high in RBI with the Padres in 2005.

2006 Analysis:

The return of slugger Barry Bonds alone should mean a better offense in 2006. Expect the Giants to be better than their 75-87 record in 2005. Finley is an interesting pickup. In 2004, he hit 36 home runs, which was a career high. The Giants are hoping that Finley can have a rebound year and can perhaps hit 30 or more home runs alongside Bonds and Alou. Sweeney might surprise

fans is allowed to hit regularly. Niekro also should blossom with better hitters around him. The lineup is much improved with healthy Bonds returning.

If Schmidt rebounds and Matt Morris turns in a similar performance as he did last year (14 wins) then the starting rotation will be solid as well. Expect Lowry and Hennessey to also improve in 2006 with more innings under their belts. The Giants are also looking for a full season from closer [Armando Benitez](#), which should also help the bullpen. The Giants should be much better in 2006 and will chase the Padres for the NL West title.

Los Angeles Dodgers:

2005 Overview:

Led by newly signed 2nd baseman Jeff Kent (.289 29 105), the Dodgers posted an unimpressive 71-91 record in 2005. 1st basemen Olmedo Saenz (.263 15 63) and Hee-Seop Choi (.253 15 42) joined outfielder Milton Bradley (.290 13 38) and late-season pickup Jose Cruz (.301 6 22) to provide the majority of the team's offense for the year. Catcher Jason Phillips (.238 19 55) and outfielder J.D. Drew (.286 15 36) also helped add some pop in the lineup as Los Angeles ended 2005 a full 11 games behind the Division Champion San Diego Padres. Pitchers Jeff Weaver (14 11 4.22), Derek Lowe (12 15 3.61), and Brad Penny (7-9 3.90) combined to provide a majority of the team's quality starts, while reliever Yhency Brazoban (4 10 5.33 21 saves) anchored the back end of the bullpen.

Off-Season Moves:

The Dodgers signed a bunch of free agents in the off-season to address their needs. Free agent [Nomar Garciaparra](#) (.283 9 30) was signed to play first base, [Bill Mueller](#) (.295 10 62) to play third, Rafael Furcal (.284 12 58) to play shortstop, and [Kenny Lofton](#) (.335 2 36) to play center field. [Milton Bradley](#) was sent to the A's, and the team added NY Met Jae Seo (8-2 2.59) and Giants free agent [Brett Tomko](#) (8-15 4.48) to the starting rotation. The LA Dodgers addressed their bullpen needs by picking up closer [Danys Baez](#) (5-4 2.86) and reliever [Lance Carter](#) (1-2 4.89) signed by the Tampa Bay Devil Rays.

2006 Analysis:

[Mueller](#), [Garciaparra](#), and Furcal were all solid pickups and should help reduce the need for Kent to do all the scoring in 2006. The Dodgers are hoping Garciaparra can play healthy for a full season, and they expect him to surprise skeptics who believe he is damaged goods. Furcal is an anchor in

the infield and has an absolute canon for an arm. Fans should expect him to step up his game another notch in 2006 after the Braves let him get away.

Seo had perhaps the best 2nd half of the Mets pitchers last season. The Mets felt his 2005 season was essentially a fluke, so they were willing to trade him for reliever Duaner Sanchez. The Dodgers hope Seo can provide a significant number of quality innings in 2006. Fans shouldn't expect Tomko to do much better than last year, but the Dodgers still need him to improve on his 8-15 record, though. Fans also should be confident that the off-season bullpen signings will help. Both Baez and Carter will be welcome additions. Baez, in particular, was chased by a few different teams, and the Dodgers were lucky to grab him.

If a few of the offensive pieces can come together, the Dodgers might surprise some people in the NL West. However, most experts would point out that the starting pitching is still too shaky to pick the team for serious contention in 2006.

Colorado Rockies:

2005 Overview:

The Colorado Rookies suffered through a tough 95-loss season, ending the year 15 games behind the NL West Champion San Diego Padres. The 2005 offense was led by first baseman Todd Helton (.320 20 79), outfielder Dustan Mohr (.214 17 38), and young third baseman Garrett Atkins (.287 13 89). Shortstop Clint Barmes (.289 10 46) and Matt Holliday (.307 19 87) also contributed to the lineup.

The 2005 Rockies pitching was as thin as the air in their home stadium, Coors Field. Beyond youngsters Jeff Francis (14-12 5.68) and Aaron Cook (7-2 3.67), the rest of the starting pitching suffered to provide quality starts throughout the entire year. Starters Jamey Wright (8-16 5.46), Byung-Hyun Kim (5-12 4.86), and Jason Jennings (6-9 5.02) all failed to impress. On the upside, closer Brian Fuentes (2-5 2.91 31 saves) did manage to convert 31 saves in 34 save opportunities, and was an impressive 14 out of 14 in save opportunities at Coors Field. It's not an easy task when a pitcher must close games in a notorious stadium for late-inning comebacks and blown saves.

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Off-Season Moves:

The Colorado Rockies didn't make many moves in the off-season. However, they did add some veteran experience to the bullpen by signing free agent closer Jose Mesa (2-8 4.76). The Rockies also re-signed starter Byung-Hyun Kim and reliever Mike DeJean (5-4 4.48) and traded for St. Louis left-hander Ray King (4-4 3.88). Catcher Yorvit Torrealba (.234 3 15) was also picked up to upgrade the position.

2006 Analysis:

Growing pains are to be expected with a team this young. Rockie fans need to be patient and allow youngsters such as third baseman [Atkins](#), and shortstop [Barnes](#) the time they need to grow into their positions. Look for right fielder [Brad Hawpe](#) (.262 9 47) and outfielders [Matt Holliday](#) and Dustin Mohr to be expected to contribute more in 2006. Both players proved they were capable of handling major league pitching during the 2005 season, and both are expected to be an important part of the Rockies future.

Colorado is reluctant to abandon its game plan, and with so many young prospects, no one can blame it. Management remained overly cautious in the off-season and passed by the opportunity to add a bunch of new faces.

One newcomer to the pitching staff will be pitcher Ray King. He will help, but the starting rotation shouldn't be expected to provide much better numbers than they did in 2005. Francis and Cook should start more in 2006, and the Rockies closer Brian Fuentes ended the season very strongly. In August and September, Fuentes was an impressive 15 for 15 in save opportunities. The Rockies are looking for a few breaks to go their way, and if the starting pitching can impress, the offense should be able to score runs. The Rockies are still a few years and starting pitchers away from being considered a legitimate contender for a division title or wildcard spot.