

AL WEST:

We could see the Thunderstix and Rally Monkey out again come this October



1. Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim: First off, let me get this off my chest. I think this Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim thing is totally ridiculous. In my opinion, it makes no sense. So I'm going to refer to them as Anaheim till as long as I want to, that okay with you all? Wonderful. Three years removed from winning a World Series, Anaheim may be at it again to win their 3rd division crown since then and possibly a second championship in a four season span. Arte Moreno and GM Bill Stoneman have been able to keep the nucleus of this young team (that also has experienced vets) together. Sprinkle in some Steve Finley in center field, replace Troy Glaus at third with talented lefty Dallas McPherson and use one fan favorite (Francisco Rodriguez) to take another fan favorite's (Troy Percival) place at closer and the Angels should be right there with Boston and New York to reach the Fall Classic. Also, the herniated disk injury to McPherson's lower back won't keep him from winning the starting job at third over Rob Quinlan.



Garrett Anderson (L) and Vladimir Guerrero each hit over .300 and combined to drive in 201 runs. No matter who's pitching, that person will have a hard time getting these guys out back-to-back.

And nobody wants to face these guys in the postseason because everybody's numbers rise then. Just take versatile first baseman Darin Erstad for example. His postseason OPS is nearly 200 points higher than that during the regular season. Plus, Rodriguez can practically come in the game in any inning and whiff even the best hitters, such as Barry Bonds shown in the 2002 World Series. John Lackey, who went 14-13 with a 4.67ERA in 198.1 innings last season, has been terribly inconsistent at times, but is also dangerous in a playoff series. Lastly, if you're looking for a David Ortiz hero come October 2005 then there is no need to look further than Vlad Guerrero. Guerrero experienced his first taste of the playoffs last year and played pretty well. The 2004 MVP, Guerrero is on pace to crank out another 35+ dingers, drive in anywhere from 115-145 runs and be a threat on the base pads as well as with the Rawlings glove.

How is this team defensively? Well, they may have gotten better by adding Orlando Cabrera, a Gold Glove caliber shortstop, to replace tiny David Eckstein. Also,

don't forget about Finley in center. Albeit turning just 126 double plays (fewest in the league), these Angels had a .985 fielding percentage. Not much gets past them literally and figuratively for that matter. Their best defensive asset might be Guerrero in right, who in my opinion has the second best arm in all of baseball only behind Ichiro.

Lets take a closer look at the Angels pitching shall we? Bartolo Colon won a bunch of games one season ago, 18 to be exact. He also lost 12 and sported an ERA over 5. Kelvim Escobar was the exact opposite of Colon. Escobar went 11-12, but had an impressive (somewhat) 3.93ERA and 33 more strikeouts in the same number of innings pitched as Colon. After those two and Lackey you've got Paul Byrd, whose had some past health questions, and young lefty Jarrod Washburn - an erratic pitcher at times. Entering his eighth big league season, Washburn, 30, relies heavily on his fastball. Must include the changeup and slider to be effective against right handers.

Their bullpen and bench look promising to say the least. Adam Kennedy is the one of the more forgotten guys in baseball. A former member of the St. Louis Cardinals, Kennedy had a monster ALCS in 2002 vs. Minnesota, where he was named MVP of that series. Having him come off the bench along with OF Tim Salmon (290 career HR's), who's recovering from left knee surgery, and Jose Molina gives them better than adequate pinch hitters that can always be dealt to improve some certain area on the team. Meanwhile, Kennedy, who had right knee surgery, should be a factor as well once he gets off the 15-day DL in his infield spot duties. As far as the pen in concerned, Brendan Donnelly and Scott Shields are pleasant relievers to have prior to the ninth inning. In fact, the trio of Donnelly, Shields, and K-Rod might be the best 7-8-9 pitchers in the business. Getting Brett Prinz, Kevin Gregg, and Esteban Yan to fit in will somewhat key for this year's version of the LA Angels.

Bottom Line: Anaheim set the standard for what now is an offensive division. It used to be pitching won the AL West, but with Mulder and Zito departing from Oakland offense will now win out. Unlike a few teams such as Baltimore and Detroit that have ½ of a great lineup, the Angels are one of three (other two being the Yanks and Sox) that have an excellent top-to-bottom order. Their .282 batting average in 2004 was best among all AL teams.

**Projected Order: 2B Chone Figgins
1B Darin Erstad
RF Vladimir Guerrero
LF Garrett Anderson
CF Steve Finley
3B Dallas McPherson
DH Casey Kotchman
SS Orlando Caberera
C Bengie Molina**

**Projected Staff: R Bartolo Colon
R Kelvim Escobar
L Jarrod Washburn
R John Lackey
R Paul Byrd**

Pick: AL West Champs; lose to the Yankees in the ALCS