

Will the Thunderstix and Rally Monkey be out again come this October?



2. Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim (95-67): One bad call away from taking a commanding 2-0 series lead on the Chicago White Sox and making their second trip to the Fall Classic in four years, the Angels were unable to recover. They couldn't recover from the loss to Chicago in Gm. 2 of the ALCS and ended up losing the remainder of their series playoff games. On the bright side, the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim have had their share of success since 2002. They won a World Series that year for the late Gene Autry's wife, Jackie, and followed that up with an ambitious off-season of spending on free agents. In came Vladimir Guerrero (305 career HR's), who won the 2004 AL MVP, and also a starting pitcher by the name of Bartolo Colon, last season's Cy Young award winner that had a league-best 21 victories. Under well-respected Manager Mike Scoiscia, a former big league catcher, the Halos have made the playoffs in three of the last four seasons. And is it that much of a surprise? They're coached well, play smart small ball and management continues to accommodate their fans with fresh faces, which keep them in the thick of contention.



Angels reliever Scott Shields won ten games and pitched over 90 innings in 2005. (Photo: Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images)

The 1-2 punch in the rotation of Colon and John Lackey (AL best 199K's) combined to strike out 356 batters and produce a 35-13 record. How well the staff as a whole is will be determined on the success of Kelvim Escobar and 23-year-old sophomore Ervin Santana. Will they be reliable #3 and #4 starters? We'll have to wait and see. Escobar offers good stuff and is a versatile pitcher that has relief experience. Santana benefited from a call-up that let him get his confidence going en route to a 12-8 record. Left-hander Jarrod Washburn departed for Seattle. His arm could be sorely missed if they are desirous of some left-handed pitching to get the big hitters of the AL out.

Shortstop Orlando Cabrera, who had only seven errors all season and a ML-best fielding percentage .988, would welcome a move back up higher in the order. His offensive proficiency wasn't nearly what it has been in the past, though his 21 stolen bases was a sampling of how aggressive the Angels were. Anaheim led the bigs in stolen bases

with 161, often taking risks to get runners in scoring position. And you know what? Those risks usually paid off, too, none more successful than utility starter Chone Figgins. Willing and able to play just about any position you ask him, Figgins stole 62 bases and recorded ten triples while hitting .290 for the season. Some are joking that Guerrero looks like the 'tin man' in that his body is already breaking down as he's hit 30. Not quite true. His arm still guns guys out at the plate, he stole 13 bases, hit 32 homers, drove in 108 runs and batted .317 in 141 regular season games. It'll be important Garret Anderson remains a factor with him back-to-back in the order. Anderson somewhat quietly hit .283, drove in 96 runs, had 17 homers and 34 doubles. They want him, Darin Erstad, Adam Kennedy and Edgardo Alfonzo to not let age affect them to regress. The return of Tim Salmon from injury puts pressure on guys like Dallas McPherson, Juan Rivera (15HR), Robb Quinllan and Casey Kotchman to perform. These are all individuals that need to come through with two outs and runners in scoring position. Jose Molina and Jeff Mathis are scheduled to battle for the starting catcher's job, once held by the departed Bengie Molina. That spot and what they get out of first base as well as DH are important areas to watch this season on O'.

Closer Francisco Rodriguez [a.k.a. K-Rod] saved 45 of his 50 regular season saves, proving he could be brilliant in filling the spot Troy Percival held for so many years. K-Rod has been able to throw dangerous heat ever since he burst onto the scene in the '02 playoffs, where he impressed people when he faced Barry Bonds. Don't forget about Scott Shields and Brendan Donnelly either. Because they've been able to pitch virtually every day and tally 19 wins in '05 out of the pen, the Angels' 7-8-9 ranks among the very elite. Many aren't sure about Esteban Yan and Kevin Gregg filling out the other spots in the pen. But by acquiring lefty J.C. Romero from Minnesota, they now may be able to solve left-handed hitters in late game situations.

Bottom Line: Will the Angels be able to produce enough runs outside of Anderson and Guerrero? We know Figgins is going to make plays happen with his legs and the defense shouldn't be an area to worry about considering they finished tied atop the AL in fielding percentage at .986. It's going to be up to guys like Kotchman, McPherson, Erstad and Cabrera to string together some key hits.

**Projected Order: 3B Chone Figgins
CF Darin Erstad
RF Vladimir Guerrero
LF Garret Anderson
SS Orlando Cabrera
1B Casey Kotchman
DH Dallas McPherson/Juan Rivera
2B Adam Kennedy
C Jeff Mathis/Jose Molina**

**Projected Staff: R Bartolo Colon
R John Lackey
R Kelvim Escobar
R Ervin Santana
R Jeff Weaver**

Pick: 2nd in the AL West; earn Wild Card berth and fall in ALDS.