

**Far removed from a 2001 World Series title and 274 wins over a three-year span, the Diamondbacks are anxious to get back into playoff contention**



**4. Arizona Diamondbacks (77-85):** A 26-game win improvement usually is something to be very pleased with, but not the case when you won 51 games the season before. In a mediocre at best NL West, the Diamondbacks tried to stay competitive and did for a short while. Then reality set in as they finished 77-85 and went a division worst 36-45 at home in Bank One Ballpark. More than anything else, the D-Backs' troubles can be attributed to one thing: the bullpen. Awful, atrocious, hideous, horrendous – you pick the adjective. Simply, it was baseball's most dreadful bullpen last season. And please, Arizona relievers, don't take it personally. Would better relief performance have guaranteed them winning 85-90 games and easily capturing the division? Probably not. What it would've done was boost their confidence and they needed all the confidence they could get as evidenced by their 9-19 August record. But in 2001 when the Diamondbacks won the World Series, they didn't use their bullpen all that much. That's because they had two absolutely, awesome starting pitchers named Curt Schilling and Randy Johnson that pretty much carried them through October and on to a title. Arizona could use some stronger starts from the rotation guys, particularly Russ Ortiz, who saw his first year in the desert result in a 5-11 record and ERA approaching seven. Manager Bob Melvin has a good mixture of youth and experience on the roster – but is it the right mixture?



**Ever since Steve Finley departed, center field has been a position that's been kind of weak for the Arizona Diamondbacks. Patrolling it this year will be Eric Byrnes, whose been known to dive all out for a fly ball.** (Photo Courtesy of Chris Bernacchi/The Sporting News)

Hitters such as Connor Jackson, Justin Upton, Carlos Quentin and Stephen Drew are the future for the Diamondbacks. With the future also comes some newcomers like catcher Johnny Estrada and AL Gold Glove second baseman Orlando Hudson among others. Hudson joins shortstop Craig Counsell [versatile, fields good and works count really] to make a super middle of the infield defensively. At third base they lost quite a bit of power in Troy Glaus, who helped AZ rank third in the league in homers. He'll be replaced by Chad Tracy (.308Avg. 27HR and 72RBI), who split time at first base last year

with Tony Clark (.304BA, 30HR and 87RBI). If Counsell has to lead this team in stolen bases again, they're in trouble. Right now they don't have the necessary speed and will have to make up for it with hustle. One hustle player that they got in the off-season was center fielder Eric Byrnes, an aggressive, intense player that'll quickly become a fan favorite if he brings that energy he had in Oakland. Also in the outfield are two terrific hitting forces in ex-All-Stars Shawn Green and Luis Gonzalez, the hero of Arizona's '01 Championship. Depth outside of Clark being a pinch hitter might be a problem until some of the younger players are called up and mature.

Pitching wise, the Diamondbacks really have a #2 pitcher as their ace in my opinion in Brandon Webb. The right-hander went 14-12 last season and had a 3.54ERA to go with a 172-59K/BB ratio. Out from the rotation are Shawn Estes and Javier Vazquez; in are Miguel Batista and Orlando Hernandez. A member of the team's '01 title squad, Batista would be a last resort to the bullpen since he saved 31 games last year. On the flip side, he may be need for much more innings and showed five seasons ago that he can be a capable #3 or #4 guy. Both Ortiz and Brad Halsey weren't that effective in '05 and are determined to show progress. In the bullpen, Jose Valverde emerged as the closer late last year and could be the man again. Valverde, who saved 15 games, will likely battle out with Brandon Lyon. Despite an ERA of 6.44, Lyon was pitching well before he went down with an injury around mid-season. Greg Aquino should bring heat at the very least, while Luis Vizcaino comes in with a winning attitude after spending a season on the World Champion White Sox.

**Bottom Line: Besides the bullpen having to make major improvements from a season ago, the health of the outfield consisting of Gonzo, Green and Byrnes will ultimately be this squad's biggest key. Jackson, Upton, outfielder Carlos Quentin and Stephen Drew are the future for the Diamondbacks. And even though Colangelo no longer sits in the front office – and brilliant starters of the past Schilling and Johnson toe the rubber for other teams – the chances of this franchise competing down the road are fair.**

**Projected Order: CF Eric Byrnes  
SS Craig Counsell  
LF Luis Gonzalez  
3B Chad Tracy  
RF Shawn Green  
1B Connor Jackson  
C Johnny Estrada  
2B Orlando Hudson**

**Projected Staff: R Brandon Webb  
R Russ Ortiz  
R Miguel Batista  
R Orlando Hernandez  
L Brad Halsey/ R Claudio Vargas**

*Pick: 4<sup>th</sup> in the NL West; finish three games behind San Diego for third.*