

Do I hear 14 consecutive division titles?



1. Atlanta Braves: That's right - the Atlanta Braves are going for an unprecedented 14th consecutive division title. No team, not even the Yankees, has held such stranglehold on a division for so long. Manager Bobby Cox and pitching coach Leo Mazzone are two big reasons why the Braves have been so good for so long. They demand performance out of their players and get it back along with great respect. Every year they have their doubters, but somehow, some way they find a way to get into the playoffs again. Having success in the postseason has been hard as they've only won the whole thing once during their impressive regular season run. Built for the regular season, yes, postseason... a completely different story over the past several years.

This year it will be tough as it always is. Atlanta has some problems to solve, including the one in right field where they now have to replace J.D. Drew, who replaced usual MVP candidate Gary Sheffield. Raul Moñdesi and Brian Jordan, two older veterans, are the guys Atlanta will look to at that position. Neither may have much left in the tank, if anything at all. What they do know is that they will be under a microscope (a small one at that) much of the year. If they do not perform then they could be gone and a younger player may be forced to complete an outfield that already include all-stars Chipper and Andruw Jones. Atlanta's got two of the steadiest middle infielders in the game in second baseman Marcus Giles (.311Avg and 118 hits) and shortstop Rafael Furcal (103 runs, 29 stolen bases and 27 career triples). The speedy double play combination very seldom commits errors. Key for Giles is not playing too aggressive where he can get hurt. Last season he was sidelined for about two months due to a broken collarbone.



Former A's pitcher Tim Hudson (left) likely becomes the ace of the Atlanta staff. Question is will he help the Braves reach the World Series for the first time since 1999?

Behind the plate Atlanta has what I consider one of the two top catchers in the game under the age of 30. The other one is Victor Martinez, 26, of Cleveland and Johnny Estrada, 28, is the Braves' guy in his fifth season. All of your best catchers seems to be over 30 in Javy Lopez (34), Jason Varitek (32), Jorge Posada (33), Pudge Rodriguez (33) and Mike Piazza if you want to call him a catcher at age 36. Estrada hits equally well for power as he does average. His .314 BA was mighty impressive and even more so is the fact that September was the only month where he did not reach .300. They expect maybe

5-10 more home runs in '05, plus another season with 35+ doubles and 75+ RBI's.

Will Chipper Jones return to his normal third base position this season? Not if the vets or Ryan Langerhans fail to step up. Chipper, a former MVP of the National League, is coming off arguably the worst season of his pro career. Despite a .248 average though, he was able to crank out 30 dingers in 137 games and keep his strikeout total under 100. It would not surprise me to see the Braves go after an effective outfielder or try to bring back Vinny Castilla and put Chipper back in left. Adam LaRoche (13HR 45RBI), 25, has the making of a nice first baseman for now, but could be turned into a utility player down the road with the potential of pitching some.

Moving John Smoltz back to the rotation might be an outstanding move with the addition of ex-Brewers closer Danny Kolb, an all-star caliber reliever. In his 1988 rookie season, Smoltz went 2-7 and had a 1.67WHIP. Amazingly, his WHIP has never been higher than 1.30 in the 15 subsequent seasons with the Braves. He's pitched over 200 innings in a season seven different times and has made 144 saves over the past three years. Dennis Eckersley-like? You betcha'. Not to mention, Timmy Hudson can alleviate some of the pressure on Smoltz by being the #1 guy and letting the soon to be 38-year-old righty from Warren, Michigan be the #2 man. As far as the rest of the rotation goes, Mike Hampton can give you more quality starts than not when he is keeping his pitches low and inside the strike zone, while Horacio Ramirez looks set for a break-out campaign. After three previous stops with Colorado, Texas and the Mets, John Thomson has resurrected his career in the Georgia state. He'll be going for a third straight season with double-digit wins and over 130 K's. Rounding out the fine bullpen with Kolb will be righties Kevin Gryboski and Chris Reitsma, and lefties Tom Martin and the well-traveled Gabe White.

Bottom Line: A front-end rotation of Hudson, Smoltz and Hampton is not too shabby. Also, it would not shock me the least bit to see Ramirez come through with a break-out year. The Braves will manufacture runs and occasionally win with the long ball. May be one power player away from getting to and winning the World Series.

**Projected Order: SS Rafael Furcal
2B Marcus Giles
3B Chipper Jones
CF Andruw Jones
1B Adam LaRoche
C Johnny Estrada
RF Raul Mondesi
LF Brian Jordan/Ryan Langerhans**

**Projected Staff: R Tim Hudson
R John Smoltz
L Mike Hampton
R John Thomson
L Horacio Ramirez**

Pick: NL East Champions; Lose to San Diego in 5 in the NLDS