

Life without Leo officially begins as Atlanta chases a 15th straight division crown



2. Atlanta Braves (90-72): That's right – the Atlanta Braves are going for an unprecedented 15th consecutive division title. No team, not even the Yankees, has held such a stranglehold on a division for so long. Excellent pitching, Manager Bobby Cox and longtime pitching coach Leo Mazzone have been the main reasons why the Braves have remained in first place since the early 1990's. Now they'll have to go at it without Mazzone, who departed in the off-season to be the pitching coach at Baltimore. Yes, no more rocking back and forth in the dugout beside Cox – a man with over 1000 career victories. What will be important is how some of the younger pitchers, such as 22-year-olds Joey Devine and Kyle Davies, now develop. It's a good thing they have proven vets like John Smoltz, a Cy Young performer from the past as both a starter and closer, and fellow 14-game winner Tim Hudson. Smoltz, a pitcher who has thrown in nearly 3000 innings, has that reliable guy at the front-end of the rotation to go with him in Hudson, who was acquired from Oakland before last season to fill the void left by long-time successful Braves starters Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine. Now they just need consistency from lefty Horacio Ramirez and right-hander John Thomson. Ramirez usually gets guys out with grounders and flies rather than strikeouts, whereas Thomson has a deceptive sinker pitch. Atlanta starters had the fewest K's in the NL last year so that'll be a point of emphasis to improve without Mazzone there instructing them.

Coming off a monster hitting year is Braves center fielder Andruw Jones, who belted 51 homers and drove in 128 runs – both tops in the NL. Hard to believe that Jones doesn't turn 29 until later in April; this for a guy that made his postseason debut back in 1996. Around back then too was Atlanta third baseman Chipper Jones, who turns 34 one day after Andruw's 29th birthday. A perennial .300 hitter ever year that once won MVP honors, Chipper hit .296 a season ago and managed to bounce back from a rough 2004 by connecting for 21 home runs in 109 games.



Adam LaRoche, shown sliding into home plate, will have to be a key player all season long in Atlanta's attack for the Braves to continue its streak of division titles. (AP)

Keeping up with the Jones's will be hard for many to do. But Atlanta is much more than those two. Losing Rafael Furcal doesn't really affect them because they brought in shortstop Edgar Renteria, an exceptional NL player during his days in Florida and St. Louis. His double play partner will be arguably the league's best second baseman in Marcus Giles (45 doubles), a .291 hitter with some power, aggression, hustle and solid defense as well as speed in the form of 16 stolen bases. LaRoche solidified the first base position last year with his ability to hit the opposite way. He was one of several homegrown talents for the Braves that came up last season and had a contribution. Another was Jeff Francoeur, maybe a star in the making following a rookie campaign that saw him bat .300, hit 20 doubles and hit 14HR's in just 70 ball games. Kelly Johnson and Ryan Langerhans together totaled 17 dingers and 82BI to provide sound outfield depth, and good things are still anticipated from backup infielder Wilson Betemit.

Chris Reitsma had 15 saves last year as the team's part-time closer, splitting the role with the departed Danny Kolb. In comes the likes of ex-Diamondbacks Lance Cormier and Oscar Villarreal. Even though he saw limited action last year as a reliever, Villarreal is someone that has the ability to be an under the radar innings eater. They were acquired in exchange for catcher Johnny Estrada, who left to open room for new catcher Brian McCann. McCann was a catching sensation in September and the opening round of the playoffs; he'll be backed up by valuable vet Todd Pratt.

Bottom Line: The Mets have been the one's with closer problems in the past; not Atlanta. Times could be changing and I'm not sure that Reitsma is the answer. Devine is the guy I see potentially blossoming late in the year to get them the Wild Card slot, but not the division crown. Whether or not Ramirez and Sosa can be solid #3 and #4 starters in the rotation should tell us a lot as to how well the Braves do in pursuit of reaming the beast of the NL East. If they're in a hitting rhythm come September, it's a distinct possibility that Atlanta reaches their first World Series since 1999.

**Projected Order: 2B Marcus Giles
SS Edgar Renteria
3B Chipper Jones
CF Andruw Jones
1B Adam LaRoche
RF Jeff Francoeur
LF Ryan Langerhans
C Brian McCann**

**Projected Staff: R John Smoltz
R Tim Hudson
L Horacio Ramirez
R Jorge Sosa
R John Thomson/R Kyle Davies**

Pick: 2nd in the NL East; fall in Gm. 6 of the World Series to Oakland.