

## **Sosa, Tejada & Lopez give the O's offense to make a playoff run. Just one problem: who's going to pitch?**



**3. Baltimore Orioles:** Says ESPN's Peter Gammons, "It doesn't matter, they're gonna score runs." Gammons was referring to the team's loaded lineup compared to their lackluster pitching. Since Cal Ripken Jr. left the Orioles faithful had very little to get excited over. In the past two years management has been willing enough to get sluggers such as Miguel Tejada, Javy Lopez and most recently Sammy Sosa, who was acquired via trade with the Chicago Cubs. What type of Sosa will we see? In Cameron Yards, a hitters type ball park with decent dimensions, Sosa can have an impact hitting 40+ homers or less than 25. How? Manager Lee Mazzilli, entering his second year as skipper, can either bury him in the lineup or hit him cleanup. Cleanup could be the ideal spot for Sosa, right between Tejada and Rafael Palmeiro.

Oddly these additions, excluding the one for Tejada, do not look like they will pay dividends defensively. Their fielding percentage last season was .982 and only three other American League teams turned more double plays than Baltimore's 161. But is a Sosa a gold glove or right or even an above average defensive player? Playing in Wrigley Field he was sometimes a liability, and when you have the pitchers Baltimore does you better be able to field well. Arguably the team's most valuable asset after Tejada (34HR 150RBI) - Melvin Mora - hopes to settle in at third after spending so many years at different positions. Albeit 33, Mora knows how to hit, when to hit, and was the AL's leader in on-base percentage at .419. Palmeiro (551 career HR and 1775RBI), 40, like Sosa denied ever using steroids at the congressional hearings in Washington, D.C. Expect his average to drop right around .250 as it has declined every year since hitting a personal best .324 with Texas in 1999. Supposing he's healthy, you can anticipate another 120+ hit campaign, which would be the 18<sup>th</sup> consecutive for the Viagra commercial guy.

The O's pitching x-factor is 29-year-old lefty reliever B.J. Ryan. Once considered a mediocre pitcher, Ryan has worked at establishing better command out there on the mound and can get basically any left-handed hitter out. Even your elite righties have trouble hitting his hurried slider pitch. Jorge Julio made 22 saves the entire 2004 season, which means he could be pushed out of the closer role by Ryan if things do not progress with the Venezuelan born reliever. Steve Kline - been in nearly 550 games since 1998 and plain knows how to get the job done. Sidney Ponson (11-15 5.30ERA), the Orioles' most highly regarded starter, has had recent trouble publicly. Not only did he hurt his right hand, the one he throws with, in a restaurant but he also was pulled over on a DUI charge. Hopefully, for Baltimore's sake, he can put it behind him at on the mound this season.

**Quietly Good: Leadoff hitter/second baseman Brian Roberts nailed 50 doubles last season, third only behind Lyle Overbay of the Brewers and St. Louis' Albert Pujols. His 641 at-bats and 29 steals were also in the top ten in the AL.**



**Baltimore is ecstatic about their addition of Sammy Sosa. They just hope he has about 40 homers left in him.**

From top to bottom this lineup might be as potent as New York and Boston's. It will be if the bench comes up big in pinch hitting situations, and the fringe starters (Larry Bigbie, Luis Matos and Jay Gibbons) produce. Bigbie and Gibbons combined to drive in 115 runs last season. Either is capable of really benefiting from the success of the upper half of the lineup, more likely Bigbie. What it all comes down to in my mind is how Rodrigo Lopez and Daniel Cabrera play. Work the strike zone correctly and the Orioles could be in the hunt all the way to September.

**Bottom Line: Baltimore is going to score runs and next to Tejada the best guy in the lineup might be Mora instead of Sosa, Palmeiro or Lopez. Since Baltimore does not have the front-end guys at the rotation or even the #4 and #5 adequate starters. Unless the Red Sox fall off the face of the earth and Rodrigo Lopez stops throwing so many high pitches that are clobbered, the O's will be right around .500... say something like 82-80.**

**Projected Order: 2B Brian Roberts  
3B Melvin Mora  
SS Miguel Tejada  
RF Sammy Sosa  
DH Rafael Palmeiro  
C Javy Lopez  
1B Jay Gibbons  
LF Larry Bigbie  
CF Luis Matos**

**Projected Staff: R Sidney Ponson  
R Rodrigo Lopez  
R Daniel Cabrera  
L Erik Bedard  
L Bruce Chen**

*Pick: 3<sup>rd</sup> in the AL East; in any other division... expect 81-81 in this one.*