

O's will try to put to rest a wild 2005 and move forward with high hopes for the future under Perlozzo



5. Baltimore Orioles (74-88): How strange was the 2005 campaign for the Baltimore Orioles? Stranger than strange; more bizarre than anyone could've ever imagined. And it went from good to worse as the season rapidly progressed. At the end of May, the O's sat atop the American League East all alone with a 31-20 record. The young starting pitching was super sweet, second baseman Brian Roberts (career high 18HR, 45 doubles and 27SB) was a shocking MVP candidate, and the offense was superb – much to the delight of front office brass that spent big money in the winter. All was going good, fine and dandy. Then injuries to a couple of the young starting pitchers set in, the bullpen around now departed closer B.J. Ryan got lit up a few a times, and that's just the beginning friends. Baltimore finished the regular season a disappointing 43-68 and the ax came down on Manager Lee Mazzilli. That's not all. Going for his 18th consecutive 120+ hit campaign, we found out Viagra commercial guy Rafael Palmeiro was taking something else besides the blue pill. After waving his finger at a congressional hearing in front of TV cameras, insisting he's never taken steroids, Palmeiro later eventually tested positive for... you guessed it... steroids. Pitcher Sidney Ponson got caught for DUI – again – and his return never came. Finally, outfielder Sammy Sosa slowly but surely faded away and shortstop Miguel Tejada – the only reliable guy on the team it seems – has expressed unhappy feelings. Hey, look on the bright side, at least you Baltimore fans out there can say you sat through an eventful '05 campaign.

82: Number of games Miguel Tejada needs to play in for 1000 consecutive, which would make him only the 7th player all-time to accomplish such a feat.



Orioles second baseman Brian Roberts looks to make it two All-Star game appearances in a row after breaking onto the scene in a major way last April. (Photo Courtesy of Rick Bowmer/Associated Press)

The offense has a little bit different look to it, though still can be effective for Manager Sam Perlozzo. Few in the majors can say they have a double play tandem that matches up with Baltimore's of Tejada and Roberts. That duo combined for 375 hits and weren't as disturbing in the field as previous Orioles double play combos. At third, you've

got Melvin Mora, someone with versatility that helps him play many different positions if needed. Two years ago Mora led the AL in on-base percentage. Javy Lopez and Ramon Hernandez are true lumberjacks – power guys that can switch between playing DH and catcher. Corey Patterson comes from the Cubs trying to dispel the theory that he’s nothing more than an average center fielder. He’ll be pushed by Luis Matos, whereas Jeff Conine and Kevin Miller could alternate between first base and left field throughout the season. Baltimore’s bench doesn’t have a lot of punch to it so they can ill afford injuries.

Rarely does the biggest acquisition for a team come in the form of a pitching coach, but most will agree that Leo Mazzone is the exception. For years he molded the Braves’ pitchers into forces who helped them reach the playoffs year after year. One guy that Mazzone may help turn into a stud is Daniel Cabrera. Off a 10-13 season where he struck out 157 batters, Cabrera displayed great stuff in the spring. It wouldn’t be too much of a stretch to say he had the sharpest stuff in the spring for any AL East pitcher. We’re all waiting for Kris Benson, now split-up from controversial wife Anna, to bust out for 15 or 20 wins in a season. Now would be as good a time as any with no guarantee that Erik Bedard, Rodrigo Lopez or Bruce Chen – a collective 34-30 – will click simultaneously. Hayden Penn is their best prospect in the organization and how much he do for them this year seems to be 15-20 starts max. Baltimore’s bullpen has a worse image with the losses of Ryan and middle reliever Jorge Julio. LaTroy Hawkins can be a decent setup man, but if he has to close games that could be a disastrous situation.

Bottom Line: Everything became problematic at some point or another for the O’s last season. This is a team that needs new leadership, a new direction and that could mean Tejada is on his way out the door. Depending on the value they get back for him, that might be a wise idea on management’s part if he’s going to be disgruntled for the entire course of 2006. All in all, the losses of Ryan, Sosa, Palmeiro and Ponson among others will be too much to swallow with teams clearly more talented and deeper than them.

**Projected Order: 2B Brian Roberts
3B Melvin Mora
SS Miguel Tejada
RF Jay Gibbons
DH Javy Lopez
1B Jeff Conine
LF Kevin Millar
C Ramon Hernandez
CF Corey Patterson**

**Projected Staff: R Rodrigo Lopez
L Erik Bedard
R Kris Benson
R Daniel Cabrera
L Bruce Chen**

Pick: 5th in the AL East; fail to qualify for postseason play.