

The Cubs faithful hope they do not catch the injury bug for the second straight year and they have a Red Sox type happy ending to the 2005 season



2. Chicago Cubs: Sammy Sosa basically was a .231 hitter away from Wrigley Field last season. Chicago did what was suggested by me, many of their fans and others around the country --- deal Mr. "It's for real." My question is did the Cubs get enough in return for corky, I mean Sammy? Getting Jerry Hairston and a couple 'nice' players will not get them where they want to go. Plus, losing Moises Alou (36 doubles, 39 homers and 106RBI) may have been an even bigger blow to a Cubs lineup that ranked 11th in the league in stolen bases and on-base percentage.

However, unlike St. Louis, the Cubs experienced injury bug misery. Neither Kerry Wood nor Mark Prior - the two most respected starting pitchers in the Cubs rotation coming into 2004 - threw 150+ innings. Only two Cubs pitchers threw over 200 innings work and they were Greg Maddux (14-time Gold Glove winner) and Carlos Zambrano (16-8 with 107 more strikeouts than walks). Heading into the year the health of Prior, Wood and even closer Joe Borowski does not look all that promising. Borowski's injury is the biggest since he is projected to be out the longest. Chicago saved only 42 games in 2004 (tied for 11th in the National League) and failed to close out games on quite a few occasions. Closer duties now sit with LaTroy Hawkins, a former member of the Minnesota Twins that did his fair share of closing prior to coming to the windy city. Notwithstanding, Hawkins has yet to make that adjustment pitching to National League batters rather than AL guys. His stats last year do not depict such as he went 5-4, had a 2.63ERA, struck out 55 more than he walked and saved 25. What is not often brought up is the fact that he blew nine, count 'em, nine save chances.

Bold Prediction: RHP Angel Guzman will take the place of Glendon Rusch's spot in the rotation. Guzman is simply a better location pitcher and fastball pitcher. That leaves the Cubs with 0 left handed starters heading into opening day.

It's clear the Cubs either take their chances with Hawkins and see how it goes, or go out and try to get a cheap and effective veteran stopper. What the loss to Borowski for about a good two months also does is take Kyle Farnsworth from the middle relief role to setup man. As big as Hawkins looks (6-5 215), Farnsworth, 6-4 240, is even more massive and has the look of a linebacker out there on the mound. Veteran lefty Mike Remlinger will be looked to for leadership in the seventh and eighth innings. The Cubs could use a veteran stabilizing force like him to pinch hit in crucial situations.

Home Run Doubts: Losing both Alou and Sosa, who accounted for quite a bit of runs, the Cubs now have power questions. No team in the NL hit more homers (235) and scored more runs (789 - 7th in the league) off homers than the 89-73 Cubs. Unless this team completely changes their philosophy and approach at the plate, look for Chicago to rely on its pitching most of 2005.



Cubs pitcher Mark Prior went from hero of Game 3 vs. Atlanta in the 2003 NLDS to someone that had just ten decisions in 2004. How Prior holds up is vital for CHC to make a playoff run.

At the top of the order for Chicago is outfielder Corey Patterson, a dazzling type playmaker for them when 100%. Like many of his teammates and members on the Cincinnati Reds, Patterson wants to really work hard this year at limiting the number of strikeouts obtained. At the bottom they've got an above average catcher in Michael Barrett, a pretty under appreciated second baseman in Todd Walker and maybe even Jason Dubois if Hairston cannot bring something special to the team. Dubois looks like another ordinary ball player right now, but don't let that fool you, he can be very good come this time 2006. Nomar has to cut down on the errors, which he should now in a sound setting, and Derek Lee (monster numbers - 32HR 92RBI) has to pick up where he left off. No team, outside their division rival (St. Louis) has a better corner combination swinging the bat than the Cubs do with Lee and Aramis Ramirez. Expect another 30-100 year from Aramis as he tries to become a team's top run producer for the first time in his pro career.

Bottom Line: It appears to me that Manager Dusty Baker is working his young pitchers too much. That is part of the reason why guys like Prior and Wood are unable to say on the field for a full 162-game season. Now it's been reported that closer Joe Borowski will be out for awhile. So for the Cubs to make a serious run in the division they probably have to make a deal before the break, plus find a stopper at the end of the game.

**Projected Order: CF Corey Patterson
LF Jerry Hairston
SS Nomar Garciaparra
3B Aramis Ramirez
RF Jeromy Burnitz
1B Derek Lee
2B Todd Walker
C Michael Barrett**

**Projected Staff: R Mark Prior
R Kerry Wood
R Carlos Zambrano
R Greg Maddux
L Glendon Rusch/R Angel Guzman**