

Now that the Red Sox & White Sox have done it, is this year finally the Cubs' turn?

CHICAGO

3. Chicago Cubs (79-83): First it was the Boston Red Sox winning it all in 2004. Then the city rival White Sox did it last year. Now is it the Cubs' turn? That question can be answered with another question. Will pitchers Mark Prior and Kerry Wood stay healthy for an entire season or at the very least, when it matters most? Because Chicago's best chance – maybe only chance – of doing it is with those guys towing the rubber for major innings and being the type of effective hurlers they were during the team's 2003 postseason push. That year their season came to an end in the NLCS as they were only outs away from reaching the World Series when the infamous Steve Bartman incident took place. That set to rest, the Cubbies have to do a better job of running the bases as a collective unit and must shy away from that injury bug to be in the thick of this NL Central race.



Derrek Lee had a memorable 2005, but the same couldn't be said for his team. Can he transform them into a playoff contender? (AP)

Last season, Prior and Wood combined for 265 strikeouts and did so in less than 40 total starts. Imagine how much damage that could do whiffing batters if each could make a combined 60-70 starts. Manager Dusty Baker, whose been clearly on the hot seat since joining the team after helping San Francisco make the 2002 World Series, would even sign for about 50 starts at this point. Because they have another dominant starter to go with them in right-hander Carlos Zambrano (202-86K/BB ratio), now the team's ace. Zambrano allowed only 170 hits in 223.1 innings and kept his ERA to 3.26 while going 14-6. Greg Maddux has hit 40 and really hasn't shown any signs of slowing down. With 15 career Gold Gloves at the pitcher position and 318 career victories, Maddux managed to win 13 games [again] and had a 136-36K/BB ratio. Right now they've got four good arms when healthy that they can count on in the rotation. Hope just is that the number doesn't decrease down to three or worse... two.

85: Number of day games the Cubs played last year, going 41-44.

Adding quick outfielders Jacque Jones from Minnesota and Juan Pierre from Florida helps the Cubs in one category more than anything else: stolen bases. The entire team stole 65 bags last year, while these two speedsters had 70 by themselves – 57 of which were Pierre's. Jones also hit 23 home runs in '05 and Pierre, as good a bunter in

the bigs, finally gives them that leadoff hitter they've been looking for the last few years. Those two should also benefit from having a weapon like first baseman Derrek Lee in the heart of the lineup. Lee came into last year with a lifetime BA of .266 and saw it shoot up to .335 – tops in the National League. Not only did he lead the league in batting average, but also first in double with 50 and had an outstanding .662 slugging percentage. In addition, the one-time member of the Florida Marlins that beat the Cubs in that '03 postseason had 46 homers (2nd in the NL) and 107RBI. His pursuit of the triple crown ended late in the summer, but it gave fans something to monitor and enjoy. Third baseman Aramis Ramirez struggles at times in the field, but not with the bat. While batting .302 and recording 30 doubles, Ramirez blasted 31HR's and batted in 92 runs. Catcher Michael Barrett, coming off a season where he bombed 16 balls, drove in 61 runs and batted .276, is the key to a bottom of the order that looks pretty suspect.

Bullpen wise, there are mixed feelings about the Cubs' group. Neither Joe Borowski nor LaTroy Hawkins proved to be the consistent guy that they could hold on to long-term so both are gone. Ryan Dempster went from starter to reliever and somewhat excelled, saving 33 games and posting a 3.13ERA. Can he do it on an every-other-day basis in '06? Could happen. What might be more of a key is how they bridge that gap to him during the 7th and 8th innings. Lefty Scott Eyre was acquired from San Francisco and Bob Howry joins the team after a year in Cleveland. The two each had ERA's under 2.70, each walked less than 30 batters and combined for 165 relief appearances.

Bottom Line: Since both Prior and Wood are two terrific talents with fragile arms, it's excruciatingly hard to think the Cubs could compete without them. But adding Pierre and Jones improves the outfield, especially when it comes to stealing bases, and Ramirez as well as Lee are fine hitters. Not to mention, Zambrano has been a driving force on the mound for the Cubs in the absence of Prior and Wood. So the negatives about the Cubs? Their fielding impresses few and the bullpen hasn't been reliable at all. It's not far fetched that Baker is the first Manager to get the axe if things don't start well for the guys playing on north side of Chicago.

**Projected Order: CF Juan Pierre
2B Todd Walker
1B Derrek Lee
3B Aramis Ramirez
RF Jacque Jones
C Michael Barrett
LF Matt Murton
SS Rodney Cedeno**

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

Pick: 3rd in the NL Central; finish 6-8 games behind Milwaukee.