

Off first title since 1917, are Ozzie and the White Sox back for more?

Chicago

2. Chicago White Sox (99-63): The Chicago White Sox figured if the Boston Red Sox can break a title drought over 80 years, why not us? Why not them? They did it convincingly, sweeping the defending Champs in the ALDS and then rebounding from a Gm. 1 to the Angels in the ALCS to reel off eight in a row. Nobody better fits the identity of this team than the Manager, one Ozzie Guillen. A former player himself, Guillen brings a fire, fury and passion about him that makes him lovable to many and strongly disliked by others. Love him or hate him, he and GM Kenny Williams pulled all the right strings. Question is does Chicago still have that special karma that helped them go a Major League best 35-19 in one-run games? Williams' verbal spat with Frank Thomas – now in Oakland – was much talked about and one of several off-season stories. Others included the moves they made.



Freddy Garcia and the reigning Champs are armed and ready for all challengers. (AP)

On paper, this might be a stronger hitting unit with the addition of first baseman Jim Thome, who tore up pitchers in the American League the last time he was this division as a member of the Cleveland Indians. To get the guy capable of powering 40+ balls out of the park if healthy, Chicago traded away sound defensive center fielder Aaron Rowand. When they got rid of outfielder Carlos Lee for hustling leadoff man Scott Podsednik, the White Sox went looking to play the 'small ball' philosophy, or as Guillen says, "smart ball." Now they have a shaky center field spot and that means World Series MVP Jermaine Dye (31HR, 86RBI, 11SB) and 59-stolen base man Podsednik must constantly produce. Not only did they acquire Thome, but they were also able to lure back free agent Paul Konerko. One of the team's most explosive hitters, Konerko went yard 40 times and had 100RBI on the nose. Behind the dish, they're very confident in catcher A.J. Pierzynski as well as third baseman Joe Crede (22HR). Like Crede, shortstop Juan Uribe hit .252 and silenced doubters about his defense. At second base, foreigner Tadahito Iguch provides speed and power in instances, swiping 15 bags and homering 15 times. Remember, Chicago's 200 home runs last season was one more during the regular season than the powerful Red Sox. Keep an eye on their catalyst Podsednik, who begins the year with a strained groin injury.

Chicago's pitching was outstanding last year and we're all wondering can it remain that way? That's a key question, particularly in the bullpen. There a closer emerged in the postseason in Bobby Jenks. The fear with him is that weight problems and a struggle in the spring will carry over to the '06 campaign. Out of the pen go left-handed specialist Damaso Marte and right-hander Luis Vizcaino. It tells me wonderful lefty setup man Neal Cotts (4-0 with 1.94ERA and 58K in 60.1 innings) may have to shoulder more of the load alongside Dustin Hermanson and Cliff Pollitte. What role long reliever Brandon McCarthy, a promising youngster with a future as a starter, has will be interesting to see.

As far as the starters go, there wasn't a better group in baseball for '05, posting the second best team ERA (3.61) in the entire American League. Lefty Mark Buehrle went 16-8 with a 3.12ERA and struck out 149 guys while using a challenging cut fastball in on hitters. Jon Garland emerged from being a #5 starter to go 18-10 and pitch in 228 innings. Taking Orlando Hernandez' spot in the rotation will be Javier Vazquez, who's a proven pitcher that'll throw a lot of innings, as was the case a season ago in Arizona when he pitched 215+ and struck out 192 batters. Jose Contreras came up big in the postseason and so did Freddy Garcia. That combo went 29-15... will they, Garland and Buehrle be able to make last year's results a trend or just a one-year wonder? Guillen and bunch will be the first one's to tell you last season was no fluke. They're out to do it again, and if they do, they'll be the first repeat Champion since the Yankees back in 1999-2000.

Bottom Line: It would be hard to envision any defending Champion, let alone this one with a feisty Manger and unique team chemistry, to not win 80-85 games minimum. However, the one thing the White Sox – or any other team for that matter – cannot anticipate is injuries, particularly to one of their two big boppers (Thome or Konerko) and/or one of their top hurlers. All it takes is for a couple of the starting pitchers to struggle early, the loss of Rowand in center field to affect them and the bullpen blowing a couple of narrow leads – and Chicago could be playing for their playoff lives the entire month of September.

**Projected Order: LF Scott Podsednik
SS Juan Uribe
DH Jim Thome
1B Paul Konerko
RF Jermaine Dye
2B Tadahito Iguchi
C A.J. Pierzynski
3B Joe Crede
CF Brian Anderson**

**Projected Staff: L Mark Buehrle
R Freddy Garcia
R Jose Contreras
R Jon Garland
R Javier Vazquez**

Pick: 2nd in the AL Central; miss out on the Wild Card spot by five games.