

With a new influx of pitching talent and power hitters like Dunn & Kearns in the lineup, it's no longer all about Griffey



3. Cincinnati Reds: No longer is this the case with the Cincinnati Reds: they will go as far as Ken Griffey Jr. can take them. In retrospect, management probably wishes they never paid the price that they did to bring the ex-Mariners center fielder and hinge the farm on his back. Only thing is it has not been his back that's been plaguing the Reds. Excluding starting pitching, or the lack there of, Cincy has seen Griffey (501 career home runs - 20th all time) suffer injury after injury. Last season things got considerably better for him, but it did not translate into a whole lot more victories. A matter of fact the Reds have only won 80+ games once in the past five seasons. And by things getting better for Griffey we mean he finally played more than half the season - 83 games. In those 83 games he hit 20 homers, drove in 60 runs and batted just over .250. All in all, it was good enough to earn him a trip the mid-summer classic of baseball's best stars.

Despite a payroll expected to be under \$50 million bucks come opening day, the Reds look like a much improved ball club for a number of reasons. One is the fact there really is no place to go up but up after another sub-par finish, 76-86. Kudos to management, who went out and got good players at bargain prices. Some of them include former Royals third baseman Joe Randa, a solid base hitter and consistent fielder, starters Eric Milton and Ramon Ortiz, and three new relievers (Kent Mercker of the Cubs, Ben Weber of the Angels and Florida's David Weathers). Need to bother getting a closer? Nope - Danny Graves made the transition from starter to closer rather well a few years back; witnessed by the 41 saves he made in 68.1 innings last year.

The addition of Milton is really sharp in my opinion. A former Philadelphia and Minnesota Twin left hander, Milton went 14-6 with a 4.75ERA in 201 innings pitched. My prediction is Milton will likely lead the team in wins, including more than ex-Met Paul Wilson (11-6) Ortiz has to be one of the hardest pitchers to get a read on. Say that simply because is so hot and cold you never know what Ortiz will show up at the ball park. It's all irrelevant, especially if Cincinnati continues to lack persistently tough #4 & #5 starters. Lefty Brandon Claussen has the best stuff and maybe even patience of the three guys contending for those last two rotation spots. Plus, it does not hurt that Claussen was in AAA Louisville, where Dave Miley managed before taking over here.

Despite striking out an horrendous 195 times, Adam Dunn torched most pitchers. He had 151 hits, 34 doubles, 46 homers, 102RBI, and was walked 108 times. Teaming with a healthy Austin Kearns can help, too. Depth in the outfield poses a dilemma for Miley. Who does he start and how much times does he give the others? Ryan Freel (37 SB) has a future in the infield or outfield, Willy Mo Pena is truly scary good, and room must be there for Griffey, right? Jason LaRue continues to make strides behind the plate and is an above average contact hitter. Sean Casey shot 25 out of the park and batted .324 while striking out only 36 times. Nobody has been more consistent over the last several years in a Reds uniform than Casey. Remember, Barry Larkin is gone so the

leadership role might be turned over to him. Felipe Lopez has the shortstop duties for now, but many wonder how long will he have the job. Lopez must get the barrel of the bat on the ball more consistently, become more alert in general, and make an effort towards going for the extra base.



Even if he was to never play another game, Ken Griffey Jr. (AP) would go down in my book as one of the all-time greats in Major League Baseball history.

Fantasy Focus: Middle reliever Ryan Wagner - There's no doubt about it, Wagner has the stuff to become a closer down the road if he chooses to be one. But there are not many middle relief guys that can be as devastating as he can.

Bottom Line: Staying healthy is obviously the key for the Reds. That includes their key pitchers, Griffey and everyone else that is projected to play an integral role. But unlike in years past I think this team is more equipped for a postseason run even if injuries arise. Similar to Philly, the Reds must lower the strikeouts. Cincy's 343 strikeouts with RISP was second most in baseball history. Ouch! Through it all, [Cincy is] one pitcher away from being a serious contender!

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| Projected Order: 2B D'Angelo Jimenez | Projected Staff: R Paul Wilson |
| RF Austin Kearns | L Eric Milton |
| 1B Sean Casey | R Ramon Ortiz |
| CF Ken Griffey Jr. | R Aaron Harang |
| LF Adam Dunn | L Brandon Claussen/R Luke Hudson |
| 3B Joe Randa | |
| C Jason LaRue | |
| SS Felipe Lopez | |

Pick: 3rd in the NL Central; finish three games back of the Cubs for 2nd place.