

Big Red machine in desperate need of pitching to make the engine rumble



6. Cincinnati Reds (73-89): Over the past six seasons, the Cincinnati Reds have won 80+ games only once and it did not result in a World Series berth like they had hoped when they made the splash acquisition of Ken Griffey Jr. several winters back. In retrospect, management probably wishes they never paid the price they did to bring in the ex-Mariners center fielder with Hall-of-Fame credentials, and have the team's success hinge on his performance. In the 36-year-old's defense, it isn't his fault for sub-.500 season after sub-.500 season. The man does have 536 career home runs to his credit and somehow suited up for 128 games last year. Often battling through injuries [and seemingly always since he left Seattle], Griffey earned NL Comeback Player of the Year honors in 2005 by batting .301, driving in 92 runs and knocking 35 home runs. Until the adequate amount of reliable pitching comes to the table, they will continue to sit at home during the month of October while others are playing playoff baseball. It really is that simple.

1/3 Of The Way There: During the months of July and August, the Reds went a pretty respectable 32-23. However, those two months make up only one-third of the season. If they can hover around .500 for the first three months and put together a strong September, then reaching that 80-win plateau is very conceivable.

Two seasons ago, Cincy's 343 strikeouts with RISP (runners in scoring position) was second most in baseball history. Though, the offense isn't this club's problem. After all, they did lead the National League in runs, home runs and total bases. So in those categories, they were better than the 100-win Cardinals, who have outright won this division three of the last four years, and an Astros team that captured the NL pennant a season ago. The good news too is that the only significant bat gone from the attack is first baseman Sean Casey, replaced by Adam Dunn (.247Avg. 40HR, 101RBI) moving to first. That was until March when the team dealt outfielder Willy Mo Pena to Boston in exchange for pitcher Bronson Arroyo. A guy with guts and toughness, Arroyo helps the Reds in the sense that they gain another arm. But on the other hand, they lose some hitting to an already fragile outfield to begin with and have an arm that will likely get hit for HR's by lefties in that ball park. Because he's capable of playing five or six different positions, Ryan Freel gives them versatility. At one outfield spot they'll have Austin Kearns, a power hitter that clobbers home runs and also strikes out (107K) quit a bit. Kearns must improve his .240 batting average and become selective at the plate. Defense up the middle has been a weakness for a while so they're hoping Felipe Lopez flashes the leather and swings the bat well enough to be their best infielder since Barry Larkin.

If only somehow the Reds had premier pitchers to go with the electric bats that have come through Cincinnati. Cincy's 1-2-3 staff of Aaron Harang, Eric Milton and Paul Wilson fared a combined 20-33. Fourth and fifth starters Brandon Claussen and Dave Williams each went 10-11 with ERA's over 4.20. Manager Jerry Narron has pluses and

minuses with these guys. The plus: all with the exception of Wilson should go 150+ innings. Another words, the spots in the rotation are basically solidified. The minus: opposing batters hit worse than .261 on all of them. With no defined All-Star ace and an ERA a full 1.15 over the league average – there in lies the problem. Another problem happens to be an unproven closer. Second-year player Todd Coffey could turn out to be their answer in the ninth inning and will compete for that ninth job alongside David Weathers, the team’s save leader with 15. Despite a 6.11ERA, right-hander Ryan Wagner knows how to throw heat and be a pleasant middle reliever. Chris Hammond (5-1) comes in from San Diego and should get out left-handers out for the Reds.



Reds center fielder Ken Griffey Jr. showed last year with his swing, which led to 35 home runs and five MVP votes, that his career isn’t done just yet. (AP)

Bottom Line: Not enough proven pitching to finish near the top of the division... for now. Claussen still has a chance to become something for them and with a couple of mid-season acquisitions, the Reds could build some momentum in August and September for 2007. Of course, doesn’t everybody prefer to win NOW?

**Projected Order: 2B Tony Womack
SS Felipe Lopez
CF Ken Griffey Jr.
RF Austin Kearns
1B Adam Dunn
LF Ryan Freel
3B Edwin Encarnacion
C Jason LaRue**

**Projected Staff: R Aaron Harang
L Eric Milton
L Brandon Claussen
R Paul Wilson
L Dave Williams**

Pick: 6th in the NL Central; finish one game back of Pittsburgh for fifth.