

AL CENTRAL:

Tribe look to use last year's second half run as a good learning tool in their quest to dethrone the Champion White Sox in '06



1. Cleveland Indians (93-69): Losers of six of their final seven games, the Indians rebounded from a poor start to the season – particularly on the offensive side of things – to catch fire late in the summer and give the Chicago White Sox a scare for the AL Central crown. In the end, their youth and inexperience may have done them in as they were unable to catch the eventual World Series Champs the final week of the regular season. Now they get a brand new, clean start and Manager Eric Wedge has to like his team's chance if they can adequately replace reigning AL ERA Champ Kevin Millwood. They added two veteran right-handed starters in the form of Jason Johnson and Paul Byrd, plus seem to have just as strong a bullpen and lineup as last year; maybe stronger. Prospects such as right-hander Fernando Cabrera and outfielder Brad Snyder could become contributors late in the season, while a favorable schedule that gives them six games at Texas, four games vs. Tampa Bay and two against Kansas City should help down the stretch.



If Travis Hafner can have an MVP type season for the Tribe, it would boost Cleveland's chances of reaching the playoffs and making a World Series push. (Associated Press)

Prospect to Watch: Infielder Andy Marte - The 22-year-old has thrived at the AAA level, drilling 81 home run blasts in four seasons with the Braves farm club at Richmond.

Leadoff guy Grady Sizemore, playing out in center field, makes the Indians attack tick. What he brings to the table are speed, extra base hits and nice defense. On the minus side, Sizemore has to cut down on his 132 strikeout count to improve his overall numbers, including on-base percentage. While Sizemore is their energy man, catcher Victor Martinez is their make-or-break key. Hitting .236 at the break, Martinez was one of the AL's top hitters in the second half of the season. Ditto for DH Travis Hafner (.305Avg, 33HR, 108RBI) and a semi ditto goes out to SS Jhonny Peralta (.292Avg.

24HR, 78RBI). They along with second baseman Ronnie Belliard combined for **113 doubles**. That's unheard of for three guys and the addition on the bench of Brandon Phillips – 24 doubles at AAA Buffalo – has an impact they'll be lethal hitting in the gaps. Eric Wedge and the Tribe do have to adjust to the loss of Coco Crisp in the outfield, meaning 23HR man Casey Blake and 1B Ben Broussard (19HR) will see their roles enhanced. The battle in left field between Todd Hollandsworth and Jason Michaels is a decent one, and third baseman Aaron Broone is looking to prove he still has gas left in the tank.

Cleveland's bullpen was arguably the AL's best last season – recording a 2.80ERA matched by nobody else in the league. What do they do for an encore becomes the question. They do have age in their pen so it'll be challenging for them to carry it over. In there they rely on closer Bob Wickman, who has a history of injuries, unheralded left-handed specialist Scott Sauerbeck, ex-Reds closer Danny Graves and newly acquired setup man Guillermo Mota (.231 career opponents BA). The x-factor of the group will be Rafael Betencourt, the youngster who had 73 strikeouts in 54 games during '05. In the rotation, they have two left-handed starters in C.C. Sabathia and Cliff Lee that tallied a 33-15 record while striking out a combined 304 hitters. Usually left-handed pitching is a concern for some teams, but here how the righties perform will be critical. Jake Westbrook has been at his best after the All-Star break the last few years. The other two guys – Paul Byrd and Jason Johnson – are just looking to break even (.500 winning % or higher) and give the Indians the necessary innings to be a playoff contender. Who knows exactly what they'll bring; there will definitely be less pressure if Westbrook has a good start.

Bottom Line: From a pure adding and subtracting standpoint, the Indians don't really look like they've gotten any better. Keep in mind, sometimes looks are deceiving. I don't expect them to get off to as rough a start as they did in '04, plus the experience and chemistry that is building here should be taken well into account. This was one of the most inexperienced clubs in baseball a couple years back so the 51 homers they jacked last September proves to be a good indicator that they're heading in an upwards direction. Adding one more right-handed bat before the trading deadline might be the confidence booster to put them over the top.

Projected Order: CF Grady Sizemore	Projected Staff: L C.C. Sabathia
LF Jason Michaels/Todd Hollandsworth	R Paul Byrd
SS Jhonny Peralta	L Cliff Lee
DH Travis Hafner	R Jake Westbrook
C Victor Martinez	R Jason Johnson
3B Aaron Boone	
RF Casey Blake	
1B Ben Broussard	
2B Ronnie Belliard	

Pick: AL Central Champs; lose to Oakland in Gm. 5 of the ALDS.