

## **Pinball machine ballpark only thing holding back Rockies from charging hard in the NL West**

### **COLORADO**

**5. Colorado Rockies (67-95):** Bet you didn't know that the Rockies' 30-28 record the final 58 games of the regular season was the best for anyone in the National League West division. That speaks volumes to the ineptitude of the division a season ago... and it's not much better. However, if the young players for Manager Clint Hurdle have matured like some think they have, then this ball club is better. GM Dan O'Dowd certainly is hopeful they can get things headed in the right direction. In a market where relief pitching is at a premium and playing in a ball park that watches balls fly out at a record pace, the Rockies lured veterans Jose Mesa and Ray King to an already semi stable bullpen. Soon to be 40, Mesa has years of experience and saved 27 games last season, while King could be one of the major's leaders in the 'holds' category (that is holding a lead for some of you unfamiliar with it). Right-hander Mike DeJean should be a decent middle innings guy, and fresh off a season where he converted 31 of 33 save tries, lefty closer Brian Fuentes looks like he is continuing to improve. Fuentes brings a 17 save streak into the 2006 campaign. But the x-factor in the whole equation remains Coors Field – the most disliked park to pitch in if you are... well... a pitcher. Colorado used to be a powerhouse offensive team and not that they have dropped off significantly or anything – it's just they've got more average hitters than ever.

First baseman Todd Helton has been one of baseball's most productive players ever since he came into the league about a decade ago. A lifetime .337 hitter, Helton is coming off one of the least productive years in his career. The ho-hum stats? More like influential any team you put them on. Just a .292BA, 20 homers, 79RBI and a league best .445 on-base percentage. Those are things most teams would dream of getting out of their first baseman. Colorado doesn't really have a super #2 hitter to go with him, but there are some possibly developing. Outfielder Matt Holliday went off for a .307 batting average, 19 homers, 87RBI and 14 stolen bases. Fellow outfielders Cory Sullivan and Brad Hawpe must step up to make this outfield as good as others in the division (i.e. Arizona's, San Francisco's and San Diego's). As a rookie, third baseman Garrett Atkins quietly led the team in runs driven in with 89, while shortstop Clint Barmes masked 17 errors by hitting .289. Jamey Carroll can play up to four positions for the Rockies and be a nice utility options in the infield or outfield. More guys like him and the roster will be well-rounded and fare better in the long run.

Kim's Byung-Hyun and Sunny aren't exactly the #4 and #5 starters a team would want, but Colorado really has no choice. The good news is that the three-some of Aaron Cook, Jeff Francis and Jason Jennings could combine for upwards of thirty wins without strain. Cook's sinker has devastating velocity and helped him go 7-2 through his first 13 starts. He doesn't get guys out with K's; instead with groundouts and flyouts. Francis unusually did better at home than on the road, where he posted an ERA above six. His 14 wins, 183.2 innings and 128 strikeouts were team highs. Finally, you have Jennings, the

franchise's best pitcher since he came to them back in 2001. Why wouldn't he be? Because if he wasn't, he'd probably have been long gone by now. His 75-62K/BB ratio should get better this coming season. Manager Clint Hurdle and co. have their work cut out for them.



**To stay out of the cellar of the National League West, the Rockies will need impact plays at the plate from Clint Barmes, who'll bat near the top of the order this season. (AP/Ben Margot)**

**Bottom Line:** Usually we're talking about the Rockies pitching, especially in that spacious ball park, holding them back from taking charge and making a playoff push. This time it could be their offense, particularly away from Coors, that hurts them. In the past it has been pitching on the road or at home, but I see the trio of Cook, Jennings and Francis as one of the more underrated group of throwers in the bigs. Playing blast ball (high scoring games) means you have to have a solid bullpen and I'm not sure about that either. I'll be very surprised if Colorado finishes .500.

**Projected Order:** SS Clint Barmes  
2B Luis A. Gonzalez  
1B Todd Helton  
LF Matt Holliday  
3B Garrett Atkins  
RF Brad Hawpe  
CF Cory Sullivan  
C Yorvit Torrealba/J.D. Closser

**Projected Staff:** R Jason Jennings  
R Aaron Cook  
L Jeff Francis  
R Byung-Hyun Kim  
R Sun-Woo Kim

*Pick: 5<sup>th</sup> in the NL West; finish 70-92 and fail to qualify for the playoffs.*