

Marlins going for a third World Series in a matter of nine seasons



2. Florida Marlins: Jack McKeon's got a long way to go. That is to catch Connie Mack, who set the mark for oldest Manager in a baseball dugout at the ripe age of 87. McKeon, who's 74, has been around a longtime and I doubt he will go for that mark. In fact, it would not surprise some if the Marlins are to get off to a slow start that they replace him. Though, McKeon knows the potential of this Marlins team, the same potential he saw when he came in to save them in May of 2003. Pudge Rodriguez may not be there, but this is still a team to be reckon with in the National League East and one capable of winning a third World Championship in nine years.



Perilous Power: Carlos Delgado (AP), a left handed batter, has belted out 30 home runs in each of the past eight seasons with the Toronto Blue Jays. Will changing leagues affect him? The Marlins hope not because their entire core of lefties hit a total of 27 dingers over the last two seasons.

Delgado changes the whole dimension of this ball club. They now have someone than can really do damage with the table setters - Juan Pierre (.326AVG 45SB, 221 hits and 12 triples) and Luis Castillo (.291AVG 21 extra base hits, 91 runs and 21 steals) - aboard. There really is too much talent in the Marlins batting order for them not to be successful. After Pierre, Castillo, Miguel Cabrera (33HR) and Delgado, you have Mike Lowell and Paul Lo Duca. Each hit over .290 last season and neither is a liability defensively. Lowell can pull the ball exceptionally well when placed above the knees, while Lo Duca can hit deceptively quick liners (i.e. line drives). Still, how consistent they can be will determine how many runs they can give their pitchers to work with in tense situations. Why? Because Delgado is going to have off nights or games where he is pitched around, there's always the possibility of an injury to some key component and teams are going to make an effort to get Pierre and Castillo off the base pads.

Which means Alex Gonzalez and Juan Encarnacion are going to have to step up at some point in the season as well. If there is a weak part of the Marlins lineup it would be the 7-8-9 hitters. Gonzalez is a pretty powerful shortstop as indicated by his 23 regular season home runs in 2004. Also, it was evident in the 2003 World Series when he hit an

enormously clutch home run to help Florida defeat the Yankees. Though a rangy defensive player, he is prone to making an error at inopportune times. He's not going to steal a number of bases, nor does he have the plate discipline with runners in scoring position. Same for Encarnacion, who can look like an all-star at times and very mediocre in other instances. He's got to try and work the count more for Florida to better off.

When you look at the starting pitching on this team it is rather staggering. Josh Beckett came up big in the postseason two years ago, earning World Series MVP honors. Similar to John Lackey, who pitched a big Game 7 for Anaheim vs. San Francisco in the 2002 Fall Classic, Beckett was brought down to earth. Striking out 152 batters was not bad, yet a 9-9 record and missing a few starts ended up hurting the Marlins. Beckett has the potential to be one of the 10-15 best pitchers in baseball. No question about it, he can be a Cy Young candidate with the overpowering pitches he throws. There are concerns with A.J. Burnett and Dontrelle Willis. Burnett throws a mighty good fastball and Willis' unique delivery makes it hard for teams to prepare for him. What opponents like to do is get to them early and rattle their confidence. Then Florida has to play catch up and hope the bullpen can hold down the fort. Losing Armando Benitez hurts and losing Carl Pavano hurts double.

I personally do not think they can get to the World Series with Al Leiter, a veteran lefty, taking the place of Pavano. He's had a productive career and his stint New York ended sourly with personal attacks at the media for getting him thrown out of town. Antonio Alfonseca and Guillermo Mota are two additional keys that must perform in Florida. Be better than advertised and the fish can make a run like the 2003 one.

Bottom Line: Florida will play competitive baseball if only due to the fact they have table setters with tremendous speed at the top of their lineup in Pierre and Castillo. Their pitchers are very good and bring a tough mindset out onto the mound. Hitting the HR ball and shutting the door are two questionable things for this team, which lost Armando Benitez and ranked 12th in the NL in homers. Delgado can solve one of the problems... will Mota and Alfonseca solve the other?

**Projected Order: CF Juan Pierre
2B Luis Castillo
LF Miguel Cabrera
1B Carlos Delgado
3B Mike Lowell
C Paul Lo Duca
RF Juan Encarnacion
SS Alex Gonzalez**

**Projected Staff: R Josh Beckett
L Al Leiter
R A.J. Burnett
L Dontrelle Willis
R Ismael Valdez/R Ben Howard**

Pick: 2nd in the NL East; Wild Card Marlins are swept by St. Louis in NLDS