

Not the same Astros team that went on a rapid rampage to end the regular season and go into the postseason



4. Houston Astros: This is not the same baseball team that I picked last season to win their division before the year started (which they didn't) and finish runner-up in the National League playoffs (which I was right expect it was to St. Louis not San Diego). Nor is it the same club that rebounded from a 52-52 start to win 40 of their final 58 regular season games without starters Andy Pettitte and Roy Oswalt. It's not even the usually productive unit that makes its traditional first round exit from the postseason when expectations were higher. It's not a major overhaul, though losing center field gem Carlos Beltran, Wade Miller and Jeff Kent hurts immensely. What really kicks in is the age of the Astros. Pettitte, who will be 33 in June, and Roger Clemens (43 in August) are not getting any younger or stronger. Jeff Bagwell and Craig Biggio, each Astros for most of their career, are both over 35 years old. To top it all off, catcher Brad Ausmus, a better defensive player than hitter well indicated by his .248 BA in 2004, will be 36 by the time Houston finishes its initial road series of the season.

Opposite field power. That's something the Astros do not have when Berkman is in the lineup, and with Kent and Beltran gone for good. As mentioned earlier, Bagwell and Biggio cannot continue to pound out 120+ hits every season. So it's now up to some unfamiliar players like Adam Everett, Chris Burke, Jason Lane and maybe the most promising of them all - Morgan Ensberg. Burke can have an impact right away and Ensberg already has the potential of a 25 and 100 guy (homers + RBI's). Willy Taveras could push Lane for center fielder dubs. As one highly respected ESPN writer put it, he will either be like Esix Snead or Coco Crisp. Taveras can learn a thing or two from the veterans in practice, during BP (batting practice), and has looked okay in spring training.



Astros right-hander Roger Clemens (pictured) won his 7th Cy Young award in 2004. Houston simply cannot rely on the arm of the 42-year-old to return to the postseason. So it's up to some youngsters like Brandon Backe to get the job done.

When you look at the rotation it might not be up to Clemens and Pettitte to get the job done. Their ace on opening day is Roy Oswalt, who could have just as easily won the

Cy Young award as Clemens did. Clemens of course 18 of 22 decisions, sported an ERA under 3.00, and struck out 218 in 214.1 innings. Oswalt won an NL best 20 games last season, plus had 206 strikeouts, sixth most in the entire league. The scouting report on him is he throws the fastball, more often than not, around 92-99 MPH. His curve breaks downward exceptionally well and the changeup pitch he throws can catch batters off guard in must swing situations. Two other pitchers people love on Houston are Brandon Backe and closer Brad Lidge. Both were terrific during the postseason and can be fantasy studs in 2005. Baring any major injuries or numerous one's, Houston's biggest problem will not be pitching. According to my crystal ball, it could be swinging the bat, primarily without Berkman for the first 30+ games. Ensberg, Lane, and Burke all must produce and Taveras might have to leadoff for a good 70-80 days.

Houston Will Win 80 Games If... shortstop Adam Everett represents the National League at that position in the All-Star game. He needs an above average year, scratch that, an excellent season. It's also going to be interesting to see what kind of role 44-year-old John Franco takes on in the Astros bullpen.

When it comes to getting big-time plays from their bench, look no further than well-traveled outfielder Orlando Palmeiro and infielder Jose Vizcaino. Each can get you key base hits at key junctures of a baseball game. In fact, it was Vizcaino, then a member of the Yankees, delivering vs. the Mets in the 2000 World Series. Like Vizcaino, Palmeiro has over ten years of playing experience and is winding down in his career. Manager Phil Garner must use him properly; that means face him opposite shaky right-handed relievers that throw an abundant amount of pitches up in the strike zone. Defensively, this team can be pretty sharp in the infield and behind the plate with Ausmus. Having him helps with younger pitchers. My only real question mark concerning the defense could be in the outfield. We don't really know, and I don't think Garner knows, how much Biggio will play in the outfield compared to the infield. That'll be key.

Bottom Line: With Berkman out till May, the Astros are going to need to win with pitching the first few months of the season. In my opinion, Backe is the key and needs to raise his game to that next level for Houston to be successful.

**Projected Order: LF Craig Biggio
SS Adam Everett
1B Jeff Bagwell
RF Lance Berkman
3B Morgan Ensberg
CF Jason Lane
2B Chris Burke
C Brad Ausmus**

**Projected Staff: R Roy Oswalt
R Roger Clemens
L Andy Pettitte
R Brandon Backe
R Pete Munro/R Tim Redding**

Pick: 4th in the NL Central; Astros win about 15-20 fewer games this year.