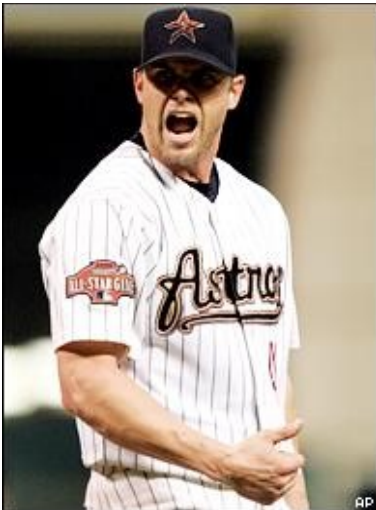


**If another slow start results in a third straight Wild Card berth, third NLCS appearance in a row and second consecutive World Series – Houston will take it**

*Houston*

**4. Houston Astros (89-73):** Two years ago, the Houston Astros strengthened its pitching staff to make a playoff run. The start was not what they had in mind, beginning 52-52 before waking up. From there, they won 40 of their final 58 regular season games, won a playoff series and got to Gm. 7 of the NLCS vs. St. Louis. Last year it was very similar... except a little worse to start and a further run in the playoffs. Through two months of play, Houston had a 19-32 record, in jeopardy of falling into a 100-loss type team. Then they caught fire over June and July, going 38-16 and capturing the Wild Card for a second consecutive year. This time they beat St. Louis in the NLCS, advancing to the World Series where it all came to a crashing end vs. the Chicago White Sox. Not a high run producing type team, the Astros will need to tweak its identity and discover more offense in '06 to once again be playing deep into October.

Houston's 3.51 team ERA was second in the league, while their .246 opponents batting average was #1. Can they get similar results this year? Maybe, but it'll be awfully tough. Going for his third straight season of posting 20 wins or more, Roy Oswalt has finally assembled himself among the game's great pitchers if he hadn't already. His performances late in '05 and during the postseason acted as oxygen for Phil Garner's team, which is hoping to put together another winning season – with or without 'Rocket Man.' No, not Elton John, but rather Roger Clemens. For his age, Clemens pitched super human and Oswalt is writing a career similar to him and left-hander Andy Pettitte (17-9 and a 2.39ERA). When not on the DL, Brandon Backe forms a good 1-2-3 front of the staff with Pettitte and Oswalt. Backe (4.76ERA) finished with 10 W's. Helping out the pitchers more so than the offense was definitely the way they caught the ball. Houston had a .985 fielding percentage, which tied for second in the league. And they did that with some aging players in the killer B's – Jeff Bagwell, Craig Biggio and Lance Berkman.



**Better control would go a long way towards Brandon Backe having a better record in 2006 than his 10-8 mark of '05. (AP)**

Despite losing utility tool Jose Vizcaino, the Astros like their depth on the bench. Chris Burke and Mike Lamb could be two of the finest reserves anywhere around, and Eric Bruntlett came up nicely in pinch-hitting scenarios. Some are fooled, but don't be: Houston has yet to have a serious power outage hitting the long ball. Biggio and outfielder Jason Lane had 26 homers apiece, Berkman delivered 24 himself and they gain 25 from outfielder Preston Wilson – destined to love that short porch in left at Minute Maid Park. That's not even mentioning third baseman Morgan Ensberg, the biggest All-Star snub of them all last year as he hit trotted around the bases 36 times and had a team-high 101RBI. Ensberg was named on to the All-Star team as a replacement, but should've been there to begin with when the team was first announced. His defense could use some work as might be the case with Wilson. Finally, the catalyst of this team as a rookie was leadoff man and center fielder Willy Taveras. Taveras contributed 34 stolen bases, 30 bunts and 71 stolen bases – all franchise rookie records. His presence made this team a more aggressive one in '05, and as long as he gets the bat on the ball, it'll help in '06.

There may not be a more reliable regular season closer in the National League than Houston's Brad Lidge, whose 43 saves placed him only behind San Diego's Trevor Hoffman and the Nationals' Chad Cordero in the NL standings. Lidge still has some to prove in the postseason, though with 103 strikeouts in 70.2 innings, he's become lethal. Fellow relievers Dan Wheeler and lefty Mike Gallo showed improvement, becoming dependable inning eaters alongside Chad Qualls and 37-year-old vet Russ Springer. Excluding Lidge, Qualls most intrigues me. He is developing into a legit setup man and one day should take the reins as closer whether it's here or elsewhere.

**Bottom Line: There are some free swingers in this lineup and that might end up being more of a minus than a plus when the season is done. For the first few months of last season, this team's offense was non-existent and that has to be a concern, especially with no Clemens for the time being. Wilson is the key to the batting, while how Lidge rebounds from a meltdown in the postseason will be interesting to watch as the season progresses. Overall, Garner and co. have their work cut out for them because they won't return to the Fall Classic with a .256BA.**

**Projected Order: 2B Craig Biggio  
CF Willy Taveras  
1B Lance Berkman  
3B Morgan Ensberg  
LF Preston Wilson  
RF Jason Lane  
C Brad Ausmus  
SS Adam Everett**

**Projected Staff: R Roy Oswalt  
L Andy Pettitte  
R Brandon Backe  
L Wandy Rodriguez  
R Taylor Bucholz/R Ezequiel Astacio**

*Pick: 4<sup>th</sup> in the NL Central; fail to reach the postseason.*