

NL WEST:

Return of Gagne and addition of Nomar fuel the Dodgers' chances of capturing this wide open NL West



1. Los Angeles Dodgers (71-91): New Dodgers GM Ned Colletti did some spending in the off-season, and can you blame him? LA began last season with a 12-2 record, the best in all of baseball. They finished out with 59 wins and 89 losses as the injury to closer Eric Gagne, ineffectiveness of their hitting (10th or worse in eight categories) and spotty fielding behind their pitchers deflated them completely. So another makeover was in order and LA addressed its needs with the signings of popular infielder Nomar Garciaparra, All-Star caliber shortstop Rafael Furcal and third baseman Bill Mueller – the '04 AL batting Champ. It didn't stop there as they brought in a new Manager in Grady Little, who was last seen in Gm. 7 of the 2003 ALCS when the New York Yankees made their incredible comeback to defeat the Boston Red Sox. Vets Kenny Lofton and Sandy Alomar Jr. bring even more experience, while pitchers Jae Seo and Brett Tomko now fill vital rotation slots. Most importantly, Gagne – if at pre-injury form – ensures it being lights out when he comes into a game with the lead.



Derek Lowe (28HR's allowed) and the Dodgers got off to a 12-2 start last season. This year they hope to get off to a similar start and be able to maintain that level of success.

Seo, acquired in the off-season in exchange for reliever Duaner Sanchez, is the only one in the Dodgers five-man rotation that did not have more losses than wins in 2005. He went 8-2 with a 2.59ERA in 90 innings as a member of the Mets. Tomko may have lost 15 games last year and fail to deliver a huge season in his career, but he is good to go 170-200+ innings. Derek Lowe, Odalis Perez and Brad Penny are not overpowering type pitchers. After all, Perez had just 74 strikeouts in 108.2 innings and Lowe got lit for 223 hits in 222 innings. That being said, all three have more wins than losses in their, meaning they're good enough to keep them well above .500. Of course, one or two struggling badly for a period of time would be rough. LA may lack that ace for now

[unless Seo busts out], though as long as they those guys do their job, the incentive will be there for management to attempt to acquire one.

Having a healthy Gagne would give them the best closer and maybe bullpen in the entire National League. Even if Gagne cannot his usual self, the Dodgers have two guys in Danny Baez and Yhency Brazoban that combined for 62 saves in '05. LA's goal is to get its starter to hold the lead through six innings and then they can salt away the last three for wins.

LA ranked 15th in batting average (.253) and bringing in those three .300 caliber hitters certainly should help. Furcal had 46 stolen bases and 11 triples; Mueller and Garciparra both hit over .280. What the Dodgers do with Gold Glove caliber infielder Cesar Izturis when he's available will be interesting. The infield, which also includes a possible future Hall-of-Fame second baseman in Jeff Kent (.289Avg. 29HR, 105RBI), is pretty crowded and the team probably knows that Izturis still holds trade value. They'll be able to move him out if they'd like too because Willy Aybar has gotten good reviews down in the minors. Plus, it doesn't hurt that LA's bench has some pinch hitting weapons. Olmedo Saenz had 15 homers and 63RBI as a temporary starter. Hee-Seop Choi must be thought of pretty highly since he was traded for Derrek Lee a couple years ago and hit 15 homers. Those two guys, along with outfielders Ricky Ledee and Jayson Werth, ought to get opps to be difference makers in close ball games. Once regarded as a future star, J.D. Drew has disappointed many along the way. He played in only 72 games, but had he played a full season he would've been on pace for 30+ homers and maybe a batting average around .300. Outfielders Jose Cruz Jr. and catcher Dioner Navarro could make or break the offense whether they perform up to par, over achieve or under achieve.

Bottom Line: A breakout season by Seo would elevate this team's pitching staff and enhance their chances of making a second playoff appearance in three years. Because they feel with the bullpen they have and the moves that were made during the winter, they're more well rounded overall. The key for LA will be getting production out of its outfield and establishing a bona-fide power hitter to lead them offensively. Oh yea, keeping that Gagne guy healthy is another key, perhaps the #1 priority of this season.

Projected Order: SS Rafael Furcal
CF Kenny Lofton
RF J.D. Drew
2B Jeff Kent
1B Nomar Garciparra
3B Bill Mueller
LF Jose Cruz
C Dioner Navarro

Projected Staff: R Derek Lowe
R Brad Penny
L Odalis Perez
R Brett Tomko
R Jae Seo

Pick: NL West Champs; fall to Atlanta in the NLDS.