

Something special may be Brewing in Milwaukee off pleasantly surprising .500 record



2. Milwaukee Brewers (81-81): Off the franchise's best year in 13 seasons, the Milwaukee Brewers feel they are ready to take that next step and be a legitimate playoff contender. That's because Manager Ned Yost squeezed every ounce he could out of a team last year that was expected to finish in the middle of the NL Central pack; not an even 81-81. It became more impressive when you factor in that the brew crew stood six games under .500 heading into July and saw All-Star first baseman Lyle Overbay tail off down the stretch. But thanks to the emergence of young first baseman Prince Fielder – Cecil's son – a starting rotation that produced three double-digit game winners and a bullpen that more than held its own, the Brewers bring momentum into '06. They went a solid 16-12 during the month of July and 16-11 in September. Pretty good when division Champion St. Louis' 13-13 record in the month of September is taken into account. As for losing Overbay, Wes Helms and a couple relief pitchers, don't expect it to phase them. They added third baseman Corey Koskie from Toronto to help a fielding percentage that was dead last in the NL. Plus, with the experience the pitchers and other young players gained a year ago, staying together should do them quite well.

Glove-less: It's been 24 years since Milwaukee had a Gold Glove winner. Who? It was Hall-Of-Famer Robin Yount, who led them to a pennant that same exact year.

At the head of the rotation are Ben Sheets (141-22K/BB ratio), Chris Capuano and Doug Davis, a trio that went 39-32. Even though Sheets (22 starts) begins the season on the 15-day DL, he's guaranteed to throw flame when he returns. Since the start of '04, the lefty Davis has gone an even 23-23 and made 69 starts. Oddly enough, he went .500 each year and was able to strike out 208 bats-men in '05. Capuano, an ex-member of the D-Backs, had the best year of the group by going 18-12, though didn't pitch a complete game. Tomo Ohka currently has the #4 spot in the rotation down, while the fifth spot is very much open for competition with Dave Bush the clubhouse leader.

Starting out in center field is the team's leadoff man, Brady Clark, a guy that showed power, contact and was a threat to steal when he got on base. Thunder will come from Fielder and the outfield duo of Geoff Jenkins and Carlos Lee, acquired last season from Chicago in exchange for Scott Podsednik. That Lee/Podsednik deal turned out to be a good one for both clubs. Lee has belted 94 homers over the past three seasons and had a team-high 114 RBI – 28 more than team fixture Jenkins, who's 17 hits shy of 1000 for his career. Milwaukee's middle of the infield combination of exciting shortstop J.J. Hardy, who had a strong finish to last year, and talented second baseman Rickie Weeks (13HR, 42RBI and 15SB) ought to hang around for years. Tells you something when Bill Hall (.291Avg, 17HR, 62RBI and 18SB) has to come off the bench to make room for those two. Outfielder/third baseman Corey Hart (17HR, 79RBI and 31SB in AAA Nashville)

also provides a spark off the bench. Chad Moeller can fill in at catcher when the starting guy behind the plate, Damian Miller, struggles with the bat, and third baseman Jeff Cirillo has earned valuable experience over the years that'll come in handy during any slumps or injuries to a starting player.

The bullpen looks much more equipped this year to hold the fort down with Danny Kolb, who was the team's closer two years ago, returning after a one-year trial in Atlanta. Kolb can now be the setup man to the underrated Derrick Turnbow, who went 7-1 with a 1.74ERA and saved 39 games while blowing only four. In the 39 games he pitched in last year, 30-year-old Matt Wise showed he's capable of pitching in the 7th or 8th inning as well.



Milwaukee left-hander Doug Davis is good for another 200+ inning season for the Brew crew.

Bottom Line: How do they live up to lofty expectations and handle pressure? Remember, there's still a lot of youth on this roster – none of which are stepping into a winning environment at this level. They'll have to be the one's who change the Brewers' past fortunes.

**Projected Order: CF Brady Clark
2B Rickie Weeks
RF Geoff Jenkins
LF Carlos Lee
1B Prince Fielder
3B Corey Koskie
C Damian Miller
SS J.J. Hardy**

**Projected Staff: R Ben Sheets
L Chris Capuano
L Doug Davis
R Tomo Ohka
R Dave Bush**

Pick: 2nd in the NL Central; finish second to Atlanta in Wild Card race.