

AL CENTRAL:

Santana led Twins will use exceptional defense, timely hitting and Metrodome benefits to win another division crown



1. Minnesota Twins: Ho-hum, just another division crown set on the sights of the Minnesota Twins and Ron Gardenhire, one of six ex-Tides managing in the big league's. P.S. --- Gardenhire is only the fourth skipper in baseball history to finish in first place in each of his first three seasons. Bet you didn't know that did ya'? Minnesota has won 85+ games in each of the past four seasons, though the farthest they have gone in the postseason is the ALCS in 2002. That season the Twins won 94 games, the highest total under Gardenhire. This talented, somewhat over achieving bunch at times has had their share of opportunities in the playoffs particularly against the Yankees. Up one game to none in the 2003 ALDS, Minny went on to lose the next three games of the series. In fact, it was last postseason that the Twins had the Yanks on the ropes in Yankee Stadium. With a lead in Game 2 and a chance to go up 2-0, the usually reliable Twins bullpen could not seal the deal as they lost a golden game and went on to lose the series.

What's going to get them over the hump in 2005 with Anaheim, Boston and those sulking Yankees all making significant winter deals? Nothing really. It's all going to have to come within since the only two things they did was get SS/3B Juan Castro from Cincinnati and ex-Florida catcher Mike Redmond. Redmond will backup young catcher Joe Mauer, someone that's expected to improve by leaps and bounds in '05. Believe it or not, Mauer is said to be so good that he could be competing with Pudge Rodriguez of Detroit for the starting spot behind the plate in this year's all-star game. The Twins' former backup catcher/occasional starter - Henry Blanco - was one of three players along with shortstop Cristian Guzman and Corey Koskie to flee to other destinations. Outfielders Torii Hunter, Jacque Jones and Shannon Stewart are phenomenal talents. They have to be the leaders of this ball club by becoming complete all-around players.



2004 AL Cy Young winner Johan Santana will try to win that award for second straight season and pitch Minnesota to their fourth straight division crown.

Fantasy Focus: 1B Justin Morneau - This young man will do wonders for this team. He hit 19 homers and drove in 58 runs last season. Good bat speed,

better than average power and is an up and coming lefty batter in baseball. If he can learn to hit lefties well then he could see his numbers double in '05.

Johan Santana (20-6 with a 2.61 Earned Run Average) was simply astonishing last year, primarily down the stretch where he baffled anyone and everyone that stepped in the batters box. What pitches does he throw? Santana uses a fastball that ranges in the 89-94MPH area code; slider around 81-85MPH; and a changeup with good movement. And oh, by the way, saying that changeup is pretty decent would be an understatement. Then you come to another very fine changeup pitcher and just near terrific pitcher overall - Brad Radke. Another season of 25+ total wins and 200+ innings each out of Mr. Radke and Carlos Silva suits Gardenhire and pitching coach Rick Anderson well. Kyle Lohse has quality mechanics and all, but on a bad can give up as many as 5-7 runs. Joe Mays, Minnesota's projected fifth starter, could be destined to AAA Rochester if he cannot stay free of injuries. Last season the 29-year-old right did not pitch at all.

Difference between Cleveland and Minnesota, besides the fact the Indians lineup can be potentially more dangerous, is the bullpen. Not only does Minnesota have arguably the best farm system in Major League Baseball (Cleveland also in the top ten in my opinion), but the Twins 7-8-9 pitchers are lights out. We're talking about long inning guy/7th inning man J.C. Romero, setup dude Juan Rincon (lefty), and ex-Giants closer Joe Nathan (makes you think of Nathan's hot dogs doesn't it?). Romero is probably the least reliable of the three and can be turned into a starter if need be. Other than that, you're looking at three guys that can get it done. Nathan should have another 40+ save year.

Watch out for the four youngsters: Morneau, Michael Cuddyer, Joe Mauer and Lew Ford. Some say, including myself, that Morneau and Mauer will be all-stars if not this year next season. In addition, they'd like Jason Bartlett to be a run manufacturer and the same thing for a Juan Castro or Eric Muson if they are here come October.

Bottom Line: Very much like the Dodgers in the National League, the Twins win with pitching and defense. They are not going to slug a bunch of homers, in fact they have not had anyone hit 30+ (not even Kirby Puckett) in 18 years. They'll need Morneau and Mauer to really emerge this year as big-time run producers.

Projected Order: LF Shannon Stewart	Projected Staff: L Johan Santana
C Joe Mauer	R Brad Radke
CF Torii Hunter	R Carlos Silva
1B Justin Morneau	R Kyle Lohse
DH Lew Ford	R Joe Mays
RF Jacque Jones	
3B Michael Cuddyer	
2B Luis Rivas	
SS Jason Bartlett/Juan Castro	

Pick: 1st in the AL Central; lose to the Yankees (again) in the ALCS