

Offensively challenged Twins want some hitting to go alongside combination of splendid pitching and instinctive fielding



3. Minnesota Twins (83-79): Winners of back-to-back-to-back division titles, the Minnesota Twins were again favorites to repeat in the AL Central heading into last season. Manager Ron Gardenhire, only the fourth Skipper in baseball history to win a division title in his first three seasons, saw his team get passed on by the Chicago White Sox and Cleveland Indians. It meant a third place finish, despite an above .500 record of 83-79. Even in extra inning games, the Twins went a healthy and hearty 15-8. Fielding wise, the Twins are terrific, flashing the leather and earning style points time after time. On most of the nightly highlight reels you find center fielder Torii Hunter, an exceptional player with his speed that's been known to rob a number of people of a home run at the wall. There are plenty of base stealers, too. Minnesota had 102 stolen bases, placing them fourth in the AL. As far as the pitching goes, it's very steady – both in the rotation and bullpen. Where do they need to improve then? Swinging the bats.

A Case of the Runs: Minnesota scored the lowest total of runs (688) in the American League last season. In addition, they were 13th in both batting average (.259) and slugging percentage (.391).



The Minnesota Twins will be playing with a heavy heart this season in remembrance of Legend Kirby Puckett, who passed away earlier in 2006. (Photo Courtesy of John Dunn/Associated Press)

At the front of the rotation we find 2004 Cy Young award winner Johan Santana. Last season, Santana, arguably the league's best pitcher after the All-Star break, went 16-7 with a 2.87 ERA and an astonishing 238-45K/BB ratio. However, his strikeout-to-walk ratio wasn't the most impressive on the team. That honor belonged to Carlos Silva (9-8), who was truly Mr. Control. Using a near unhittable sinking fastball, Silva issued just nine walks in 188.1 innings and struck out 71 guys in his 27 starts. One of baseball's most

durable and best location pitchers, right-hander Brad Rake had maybe his worst season in recent memory. Radke (117-23K/BB ratio) went 9-12 with a 4.04ERA and was one of four Minny starters that had a WHIP under 1.20. The other turned out to be Scott Baker, who could either be a solid #4 guy in the rotation or settle to battle talented 22-year-old left-handed prospect Francisco Liriano for that last spot. Kyle Lohse's quality mechanics figures to keep in the mix after a 9-13 season.

Ever since Gardenhire arrived as Manager, Minny's had a fabulous bullpen. Closing the door is Joe Nathan [doesn't he make you think of Nathan's hot dogs?], who saved 43 games and won seven more. Nathan's elite slider helped him en route to a 0.97WHIP and holding opposing batters to a .183 average. Relievers Jesse Crain (12-5, 2.71ERA) and Juan Rincon (2.45ERA) could decide the outcome of quite a few games – more with a positive result than negative. With the loss of J.C. Romero, a lefty reliever must emerge and the most probable one is Dennys Reyes unless Liriano gets shifted to the pen. Offensively, the Twins had one of the worst hitting groups in the big leagues. In order to change that, first baseman Justin Morneau and catcher Joe Mauer have to deliver some runs. Losing Jacque Jones opens up a spot in the outfield for Michael Cuddyer and Lew Ford to share in attempt to fill that void. Juan Castro and Jason Bartlett need to give them more production out of the shortstop position, while the addition of second baseman Luis Castillo gives them a much welcomed .300 hitter. Castillo's wheels are slowing down... is his bat, though? His stolen bases total has dropped significantly over the past few years, whereas hitting remains a nice plus. Hitting in front of Castillo will be leadoff guy Shannon Stewart, the team's left fielder who had 151 hits in 132 games. Hunter (23SB) knows he can improve on his .269BA and 14 home run total. After a year in Japan, Tony Batista returns to the state to play third base for the Twins. His stroke and Rondell White's – coming over following a .313 hitting season in Detroit – should give them a chance to be more consistent at the plate driving in runners.

Bottom Line: In my mind, the key to Minnesota's season will be the hitting from Mauer and Morneau. Provided those M&M's are delightful, the Twins certainly can re-claim the top spot of a division that was theirs from 2002-04.

**Projected Order: LF Shannon Stewart
2B Luis Castillo
C Joe Mauer
CF Torii Hunter
DH Rondell White
1B Justin Morneau
3B Tony Batista
RF Michael Cuddyer/Lew Ford
SS Jason Bartlett**

**Projected Staff: L Johan Santana
R Brad Radke
R Carlos Silva
R Kyle Lohse
R Scott Baker/L Francisco Liriano**

Pick: 3rd in the AL Central; finish two games behind the White Sox.