

Minaya had his spending spree, now we find out whether this group's good enough to get to the playoffs



3. New York Mets: Meet the Mets... the new Mets that is. I know this sounds like a very controversial statement, which it is not intended to be, but how many American born players are on this team? New GM Omar Minaya has just about emptied his wallet in the off-season to get this team better by bringing in new players from many different parts of the world. Pedro Martinez, the most overpowering American League pitcher of the past seven seasons, and 2004 postseason gem Carlos Beltran are the two star names now wearing the Metropolitan uniform. But now arises this question: how will this year's off-season splashes be any different from one's past? New York did it before by getting guys like Mo Vaughn and Roberto Alomar. It changed nothing as Atlanta remained the top team in the division.



GM Omar Minaya (AP) likes the international flavor that he's banking on to return this franchise to the postseason for the first time in five years.

And some people, including myself, believe that Pedro will start to get cranky and struggle after the first couple of months. His arm/shoulder problems could affect the way he pitches around mid-season and Victor Zambrano, who was acquired in the middle of the year from Tampa Bay, is also not 100%. Zambrano's elbow will be watched closely over the next several months. Many believe he can be on the same level the other Zambrano (Carlos with the Cubs) is if he can harness his stuff. Also, this is not a young rotation with a dynamo pitching prospect in AAA (at least yet). Scott Kazmir was the bona-fide pitching prospect the Mets should've held onto, but let go in order to make deals for Zambrano and Kris Benson - the man that could turn out to be their top starter in the rotation in the long run. Tom Glavine will be 40 in March 2006 and no longer pitches like the same Tom Glavine that was a legit Cy Young candidate year in and year out with the Braves. Granted, he did win 11 games (lost 14 though) and threw well for a couple months as his 3.60 season ERA indicates.

Bold Prediction: Mike Cameron (.231AVG 30HR 143K) will have fewer home runs and strikeouts in 2005 than in '04. Defensively he was below average and not a consistent force in the Mets lineup. Cameron, not a great player by any stretch of the imagination, needs to prove himself to people this coming season.

In my opinion, the Mets will go as far as their defensive fielding can take them, particularly in the middle of the infield where you have Jose Reyes and Kaz Matsui. Teaching Matsui a new position in the middle season would not have been fair to him or Reyes for that matter. Reyes returns to the position where he started in AAA Norfolk - shortstop. His biggest problem in 2004 was staying on the field as the 22-year-old played in just 52 regular season games. He has remarkable speed and displayed that at the minor league level. Look for him to steal anywhere from 40-50 bases if not more provided the young man can be durable April through September. Highly thought of third baseman David Wright has the potential of a 25-30 home run guy who can drive in over 75 runs as well. Will this infield be as good as the one in 2000 that consisted of John Olerud, Rey Ordoñez, Edgardo Alfonzo and Robin Ventura? Not defensively, however, it will be much more productive with the stick in their hands and they will run hard on the base pads. Behind the plate is a more comfortable and excited Mike Piazza. Piazza, who returns to the catcher position, probably feels like a new man. Recently married, Piazza no longer will be pitched around with Beltran in front of him. The load on his shoulder has lessened to say the least thanks to the burden now put on the youngsters.

With proper rest and occasional days off, Piazza won't struggle to stay healthy. A big reason, as mentioned earlier, is that he does not have to fill duties at first base. Doug Mientkiewicz, who helped Boston win it all last October, has proven to be serviceable at the very worst manning first base. Don't be surprised to see the Mets put Cameron and/or Cliff Floyd on the trading market if they are not living up to the billing. They'll be looking for a starter in return and a couple middle relievers if they are smart. Braden Looper could lead this division in saves for the simple fact the Mets will generate more runs. However, with little help in the three innings living up to him, he may not get the chances.

Bottom Line: No disrespect to the Mets' relief pitchers, but this bullpen has the makings to be atrocious. Having that said, Looper is capable of being a top-notch closer in the NL. Do not see any problems with the lineup, though the fielding could be an issue once again. Pedro has to stay motivated after the first two months, something I can see him struggling to do. If he performs more like a #2, then the Mets will be in search of an ace and a fifth starter by the break or in the off-season.

**Projected Order: SS Jose Reyes
2B Kaz Matsui
CF Carlos Beltran
C Mike Piazza
LF Cliff Floyd
3B David Wright
1B Doug Mientkiewicz
RF Mike Cameron**

**Projected Staff: R Pedro Martinez
L Tom Glavine
R Kris Benson
R Victor Zambrano
L Kaz Ishii**

Pick: 3rd in the NL East; Mets win 80+ for first time since 2001