

NL EAST:

Minaya made major moves for a second consecutive winter; now does it translate into a playoff run on the field?



1. New York Mets (83-79): Meet the Mets... the diverse Mets. 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 the past two off-seasons to get this team better by bringing in new plays from many different parts of the world. To say Minaya is banking on the international flavor would be an understatement. One guy that is out from the old Mets is veteran catcher Mike Piazza, a fan favorite since he came to the big apple. Now the team can officially be turned over to starting pitcher Pedro Martinez, who went a pleasant 15-8 with a 2.82ERA and struck out 208 men in his New York debut. With him in the rotation you have lefty Tom Glavine, another player that has put up Hall-of-Fame like numbers during his storied career, Steve Trachsel, Victor Zambrano and fast rising 25-year-old prospect Brian Bannister. Having not made a single start in his Major League career, Bannister is going to be rushed into the fire quickly as the team dealt Kris Benson – along with controversial wife Anna – to Baltimore in exchange for reliever Jorge Julio; Zambrano has already suffered a minor injury before the season's start; and nobody is real sure what to expect from the 35-year-old injury prone Trachsel. Plus, don't forget Jae Seo went to LA in a trade. What it could mean is that Aaron Heilman (5-3 with 106K's in 108 innings) and colorful veteran Jose Lima might make their share of starts before the year is done or they go the route of adding someone before the deadline.

The initial plan with Heilman is to use him in the eighth inning so that they have a 7-8-9 of Duaner Sanchez, him and newly acquired left-handed closer Billy Wagner. As a member of the Phillies and Astros, Wager has 284 career saves, including 38 last year in a Philly uniform. His fastball makes him one of the most dominant relievers in the game and this bullpen has now gone from being a mediocre type one to maybe a strength before the season is all said and done. How ex-Oakland A's reliever Chad Bradford, Juan Padilla and Julio perform could determine the completeness of this group. Down on the farm, Cuban prospect Alay Soler, 22-year-old Michael Pelfrey and '04 top draftee Phil Humber all have relatively bright futures.

As far as the hitting part of the game goes, the Mets didn't quite deliver the good a season ago. They were 11th in the NL with a .258 batting average and tied for 12th in on-base percentage. Center fielder Carlos Beltran got rewarded big bucks for a nice postseason with the Astros in '04 and hit just .266 with 16 dingers and 78RBI last year. Bigger numbers are expected from him this coming season and the addition of first baseman Carlos Delgado (33HR, 115RBI), a fearsome power force throughout his career, from Florida should only help. Also new to the mix is sharp contact hitting catcher Paul Lo Duca, while Xavier Nady comes from San Diego to platoon in right with Victor Diaz.

The satisfying stat for the Mets last year? They led the NL in stolen bases with 153, thanks in large part to the 60 bags from shortstop Jose Reyes, who also had a major-league high 17 triples. Third baseman David Wright (.306Avg. 27HR 102RBI) joins Reyes as one of the game's most exciting young players. Wright has shown he's a steady hitter for power as well as average. At second base, they've got another young guy overtaking Kaz Matsui in Anderson Hernandez – more of a boost with his glove than bat. The bench will be a key factor for this time and although they like Chris Woodward as a pinch-hitter and defensive sub, I don't see guys like soon-to-be 48-year-old Julio Franco as the answer. Maybe they'll get OF Endy Chavez, formerly of Washington, and backup C Ramon Castro to over achieve off the bench for second-year Manager Willie Randolph.



With new bats in the lineup to surround him, Carlos Beltran might very well flourish in his second season as a member of the Mets. (Jim McIsaac/Getty Images)

Bottom Line: For the Mets to live up to my prediction and win this division, they'll have to get the necessary starts as well as consistency from April thru September out of both Pedro and Glavine. Part of me says it won't happen, but the other part of me says they'll be able to find other starters to step up when they're not clicking. In terms of swinging the bats, this ball club should be among the NL's elite so that aspect of the game isn't much of a concern. Going over the top and getting to their first Fall Classic since 2000? That'll require better than anticipated fielding and solid pen performances leading up to Wagner in the ninth.

Projected Order: SS Jose Reyes
CF Carlos Beltran
1B Carlos Delgado
LF Cliff Floyd
3B David Wright
C Paul LoDuca
RF Xavier Nady/Victor Diaz
2B Anderson Hernandez

Projected Staff: R Pedro Martinez
L Tom Glavine
R Victor Zambrano
R Steve Trachsel
R Brian Bannister

Pick: NL East Champs; fall to Atlanta in NLCS