

## AL EAST:

### **A 12<sup>th</sup> consecutive playoff trip looms, but can they snap a six-year World Championship drought?**

NEW YORK

**1. New York Yankees (95-67):** The Boss (a.k.a. George Steinbrenner) was his usual cranky self in the off-season. Was it because the Yankees failed to win the World Series again? Partly. Mostly, though, it had to do with the World Baseball Classic that saw some of his high-dollar players participate in instead of using some of that time to get ready for the '06 campaign. After winning four titles in five years and being just three outs from beating the Arizona Diamondbacks in the '01 Championship, the Boss has become pretty impatient with coming up short. And of course, that led to another major move in the off-season, this one involving a one-time member of their arch nemesis – former Red Sox center fielder Johnny Damon. Bringing in Damon strengthens an already deadly Yanks lineup that scored 886 runs; not an upgrade defensively though. Towards the end of last season, the 32-year-old Damon showed signs of breaking down and the inability to cover ground as well as he has in the past.



**New Yankees center fielder Johnny Damon (18SB) hopes to be New York's missing pieces as they try to win their first World Series since 2000.** (Photo Courtesy of the Associated Press)

What else did the Yankees do in the off-season? Assure themselves that they have one of the most unique, top-notch coaching staffs in the bigs. They've said good-bye to guys like Don Zimmer and Mel Stottlemyre and brought in a cast of Lee Mazzilli, Larry Bowa, Joe Kerrigan, Tony Pena to surround Joe Torre and true Yankees at heart – hitting coach Don Mattingley and pitching coach Ron Guidry. In the bullpen to get to one of the truly great closers of this generation – Mariano Rivera – they added the likes of Octavio Dotel and power pitcher Kyle Farnsworth. The Dotel addition sits well with me; not the Farnsworth one. Tanyon Sturtze and Aaron Small (10-0), who excelled last season as an unheralded starter, will likely fill the other bullpen roles. In the rotation, all left-hander Randy Johnson, a five-time Cy Young winner and co-MVP of the 2001 World Series, did was go 5-0 vs. the Red Sox. Overall, it was kind of an up and down first year in the big apple for him. His numbers were good, but he also allowed quite a few moon shots and struggled to find his comfort zone until around mid-season. Last winter's additions of Jaret Wright and Carl Pavano have proved to be disastrous... so far. At best, it looks as

though Wright will nab the fifth starter position, while Pavano still has a chance to prove himself when he returns from an injury that kept him out most of last year. Mike Mussina gives them another capable 20-game winner to go alongside Johnson at the front end of the rotation. Much of his success will be judged on how he does in the postseason. Shawn Chacon and Chien-Ming Wang look to pitch pivotal innings as they – plus Small – were strangely the saviors for the Yankees from a pitching perspective.

Offensively, the Bronx Bombers have no business not to be at the top or near in most of the categories, particularly home runs. Leading the way are shortstop Derek Jeter, a fan favorite anywhere you look who has come up extremely clutch before in the postseason, and reigning AL MVP Alex Rodriguez (48HR). Sadly, the same can't be said yet for A-Rod in the postseason as he went a rough 0-for-5 in the decisive game of last October's ALDS vs. the Angels. Bernie Williams is on the decline of his superb career and the same was thought to be said of Jason Giambi until he got hot before the All-Star break. Both still can put up worthy numbers and likewise for catcher Jorge Posada. It'll be interesting to see how much Posada catches Johnson since the Big Unit used John Flaherty often in '04. Kelly Stinnett's is this season's Flaherty. Neither Hideki Matsui nor Gary Sheffield would be considered outstanding hitters, but what they do with the lumber gets plenty of people's attention. The two drove in 239 total runs. At 2B, Robinson Cano isn't exactly a savvy, experienced veteran who makes all the right plays at the right time. What he did do and still does is provide stability to a position that was lacking it last year when Tony Womack, a well travel playoff hero for the D-backs in '01, started the year there. No batting order in the majors appears to be more potent than this one.

**Bottom Line: The addition of Damon does more damage to Boston than it helps NYY. That being said, it isn't 'killer' for the rival Red Sox since they still have guys named Ramirez and Ortiz on the roster. Some believe that for the Yankees to return to and win the World Series it'll take a few homegrown talents to be key contributors. Maybe true. In my mind, how the bullpen in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> inning bridges that gap to Rivera in the ninth will be a key. Dotel has the makings to be a very solid setup man like he was in Houston. The staff isn't spectacular, but it's qualified enough to take them far in October. What they get out of the 1B position both offensively as well as defensively, and the DH spot should tell a lot.**

**Projected Order: CF Johnny Damon  
SS Derek Jeter  
3B Alex Rodriguez  
1B Jason Giambi  
RF Gary Sheffield  
LF Hideki Matsui  
C Jorge Posada  
DH Bernie Williams  
2B Robinson Cano**

**Projected Staff: L Randy Johnson  
R Mike Mussina  
R Chien-Ming Wang  
R Shawn Chacon  
R Carl Pavano/ R Jaret Wright**

*Pick: AL East Champs; lose to Oakland in Gm. 7 of the ALCS.*