

**A's might have to win a bunch of close one's without the likes of Zito & Mulder, who helped Oakland to five straight 91+ win seasons**



**4. Oakland Athletics:** When you lose two-thirds of a pitching rotation that helped you win 91+ games in five consecutive seasons, do not expect 90+ wins without them. Granted the A's have some promising young pitchers, this American League West has become an offensive division. Unless those youngsters like Rich Harden and Danny Haren really blossom fast I see Oakland finishing in second place at the very, very best, or placing in last. Barry Zito, the last remaining of the big three, was mediocre last season, period. Zito went 11-11, had a 4.48ERA, struck out 163 in 213 innings, and his location and command looked completely different than in past years. It was as if he got discouraged as the Angels got closer, and closer, and finally won the division. At age 26 we now find out what kind of leader he is in 2005, a 'house-money' kind of year.

The A's have one of the best #9-hole hitters (if that is where he indeed does hit) in Eric Brynes. A better than mediocre defensive player, Brynes hit .283, had 20 homers and drove in nearly 80 runs last season. He offers extra-base potential, too.

Believe it or not, their season could hinge on closer Octavio Dotel. Dotel, who has had elbow questions, must pick/select his pitches better. If he (ex-Astro, Met and Tide) does that he will be blowing fewer saves and converting more for the A's in 2005.



**Reigning AL Rookie of the Year Bobby Crosby (AP)** proved he can hit for power by scorching 22 homers in 151 games. Now he needs to become a superior overall batter; improve the .239 average from a year ago.

**Deceptive Power:** Second baseman Keith Ginter - who hit 19 home runs in just 113 at-bats as a member of the Milwaukee Brewers last season. Out of all second basemen with at least 100 plate appearances, Jeff Kent was the only one with more homers per at-bat.

Rounding out the outfield with Byrnes will be center field and leadoff guy Mark Kotsay (.314AVG 15HR 63RBI), and ROY candidate - Nick Swisher. For Kotsay - we want to see more coming across the plate as he scored only 78 runs a season ago. Part of that has to do with the middle part of the lineup. Eric Chavez, an All-Star third baseman, hit 29 homers and had 77RBI, but missed 37 games. Crosby and Erubiel Durazo swung for the fences a tad too much. Still, the A's and Ken Macha would like to see Kotsay running more. Case and point - the A's stole only 47 bases, 43 fewer than the American League average. Part of that may have had to do with Mark Ellis being hurt, but you cannot lean back on excuses. Because had Ellis not got hurt (not to say it was a good thing) we would have never saw Marco Scutaro play as well as he did, drilling 32 doubles in 137 games. Scutaro used to be a pretty good AAA player with the Norfolk (Mets farm system) and Syracuse (Blue Jays system), nothing more than that. He'll now likely be regulated back to pinch-hitting and pinch-running duties with Ginter in the mix.

Someone Oakland like hitting wise is Charles Thomas. The ex-Braves outfielder has good hitting tools and values pitches. Another person that does an outstanding job of valuing pitches is Scott Hatteberg - who practically utilized every at-bat in 2005, striking out a mere 48 times in 150 games. He drove in 82 runs, was walked 72 times, and had 156 base hits. Can he be the bona-fide power hitting they are desperately wanting? Highly doubtful since he is more of a singles guy that can give you about 14-18 HR's.

Jason Kendall was an above-average acquisition, mainly due to the bizarre speed he has for a catcher. Kendall can give the Athletics double-digit steals at that position, but it would not look good if he was the team leader in that department. Their hoping for him to work well with the young starters, and give confidence to relievers Kiko Calero, Ricardo Rincon (good stuff), and Chad Bradford.

**Bottom Line: The bottom line is the fact that they traded away two-thirds of arguably the most devastating starting trio in baseball (at least for the last few years). Harden, Blanton, Haren and the rest of the youngster Billy Beane hopes will pan out may very well turn out to be very good. But they are going to have to win with hitting this year, meaning they will have to out-hit teams and I do not see that happening, especially in that division.**

**Projected Order: CF Mark Kotsay  
C Jason Kendall  
3B Eric Chavez  
DH Erubiel Durazo  
1B Scott Hatteberg  
SS Bobby Crosby  
RF Nick Swisher  
2B Keith Ginter  
LF Eric Byrnes**

**Projected Staff: L Barry Zito  
R Rich Harden  
R Dan Haren  
R Joe Blanton  
L Dan L. Meyer**

*Pick: 4<sup>th</sup> in the AL West; lowest win total in the new millennium for Oakland.*