

## AL WEST:

**Will the 'Moneyball' concept finally pay off and bring a title back to the bay area?**



**1. Oakland Athletics (88-74):** From 2001-2003, the Oakland Athletics won a total of 301 regular season games and made three playoff appearances. The problem? Their playoff failures, which go without mentioning. Actually, let's quickly mention them. Series flameouts to the Yankees, Twins and Red Sox have done them in as they've yet to cash in on GM Billy Beane's 'moneyball' method, using a lower payroll than most contenders and getting similar results. After two seasons where they won 91 and 88 games, the A's want playoff success. Despite a miniature decrease in wins over the past three years, they believe they're close to getting over that hump into the ALCS and beyond. Manager Ken Macha, who maintained the level of success when he inherited Art Howe's team, has a ball club that has won 88+ games each of the last six years. What's a little concerning is that there have been quite a few empty seats at times in Oakland and a move to Las Vegas would seem logical to some. A World Series run and holding off the Angels in the AL West would quiet those talks.

**Coming through in the Clutch: The key for the A's this year, as it has been for the last few seasons, will be coming through with timely hitting. Last season the A's won nine games in the final at-bat and their pitching as well as the pinch hitters on the bench will allow them to produce more.**

In order to beat out the Angels, Mariners and Rangers in what should be another fun-filled AL West race, the A's must make the necessary improvements at the plate. Oakland left 1170 men on base (12<sup>th</sup> in the AL), were 11<sup>th</sup> in batting average and hammered 155 home runs. Worst of all, they were **dead last in the majors in stolen bases with 31**. To put into perspective how poor the figure was, the next two closest teams – Boston and the Cubs – had 45; the Angels led the league with 161. Really, when you get down to it, that's all that is separating them from passing their division state rival. Adding two power men in Frank Thomas and Milton Bradley should help since they got practically nothing out of the DH position last year. Also positive is the fact that there were no significant subtractions from the offense and they hope to get a full season out of exciting shortstop Bobby Crosby (2004 AL ROY), who committed just seven errors in 84 games. Oakland topped the league in fielding percentage with .986, plus held opposing batters to a .241 average. Another fielding star for the A's is third baseman Eric Chavez, a winner of five straight Gold Gloves and team leader in homers, RBI and doubles. Jason Kendall gives them virtually no power (0HR in 601AB's), but mans the position behind the plate admirably and has displayed uncanny speed for a catcher throughout his career.

Switch-hitter Nick Swisher (21HR and 32 doubles) was their second best producer and would become a really complete player by boosting his below average .236BA. Jay Payton turned out to do quite a bit for the team when he was acquired from Boston, Mark

Ellis bounced back very well from injury and Mark Kotsay (.280Avg.) earned an extension for his instinctive play out in center. A guy people will learn cannot be overlooked near the bottom of this order is Dan Johnson, who has great patience and upside. Oakland might have the best reserve in all of baseball in second baseman Marco Scutaro. In pinch-hitting situations or occasional starting roles, Scutaro sprays hits all over the field and had six game-winning hits last season.

Joe Blanton had the American League's second lowest ERA after the All-Star break, only bettered by Minnesota's Johan Santana. He and 14-game winner Danny Haren kind of get forgotten with high profile names Barry Zito, Rich Harden and Esteban Loaiza. The bullpen is sound with closer Huston Street (1.72ERA, 23 saves), All-Star Justin Duchscherer, lefty Kiko Calero and trade bait/spot starter Kirk Saarloos (10 W's).



**Oakland's Rich Harden is one of the best bright young pitchers the game of Major League Baseball has to offer.**

**Bottom Line: What I like most about the A's is that all five starters are capable of 10+ wins. Playing in an offensive era and a league loaded with power teams, bullpen pitching is essential for a postseason run. Their pen looks fine enough to get it done. As long as one stays healthy and the other keeps his emotions in check, Thomas and Bradley should bring much needed power to a lineup that's lacked it the past several years. Maybe they're the missing pieces to put Oakland over the top because pitching has been the one constant you can count on here.**

**Projected Order: 2B Mark Ellis  
CF Mark Kotsay  
SS Bobby Crosby  
3B Eric Chavez  
DH Frank Thomas  
RF Milton Bradley  
1B Dan Johnson  
C Jason Kendall  
LF Nick Swisher**

**Projected Staff: L Barry Zito  
R Rich Harden  
R Esteban Loaiza  
R Danny Haren  
R Joe Blanton**

***Pick: AL West Champs; World Series Champions!!!***