

New approach: less off-season movement equals more stability and possibly a postseason birth under new Manager Charlie Manuel?



4. Philadelphia Phillies: Somewhat disappointing. That's what the Philadelphia Phillies have been under Manager Larry Bowa and now the change has come with Charlie Manuel, the so-called player's guy, stepping in. Granted, the Phillies suffered some injuries in the past that kept them from winning more than 86 games since the dawning of the new millennium. We've seen the Braves continue to dominate within the division, the Mets made it to the World Series in 2000 prior to slumping to mediocrity and Florida won the whole thing two seasons ago as a wild card team. Is this Philly's year to finally crash the postseason party?

To make that run they've got to keep the errors down, leave fewer men left on base and strike out less. Of course, the pitching can always be better and in my opinion, it all starts with Nicaraguan righty Vicente Padilla. His 7-7 record can be better as can his 4.53ERA. Tendonitis kept him from returning to all-star form last year, but nothing will keep him from reaching that level this season. He's got to get ahead in the count more and strikeout twice the number of batters he did in '04. Joining Padilla in the rotation will be Randy Wolf, ex-Yankee Jon Lieber, Brett Myers and Cory Lidle. Albeit posting an average 11-11 record and ERA over 5 ½, Myers throws one of the most crippling curves around. Lieber could find it hard playing here instead of with the Yankees, where he was off-and-on. I've got to believe Wolf can do better than 5-8. Of course, me and others thought he was due for a monster season last year and how did that go? Wild card pitcher of the whole staff is Gavin Floyd, someone very few people around baseball know much about as far as his tendencies go.

Sur-sur-surprising: Phillies infielder Placido Polanco entered Thursday, March 24th fourth in the majors in batting average during spring training. Could be a sign of big things to come for him in 2005.

When you look at the NL East the questionable bullpens in Florida and New York stand out immediately. Philly does not have a glaring weakness in the pen if, and it is a sizable if, Billy Wagner healthy. Recent shoulder problems have bogged him down, and at age 33, some wonder how much the little guy has left in the tank. I say little guy because he is 5-11 195, but don't let that fool you because he easily throws the best heat of any closer in the game. His fastball that tops out around 100MPH can get the best out whether it be righty or lefty. Regardless of how much Wagner can give them for a full season, Manuel has to like the make-up of the rest of his bullpen. As a rookie reliever in '04, Ryan Madson led all NL rookies in wins with nine, while maintaining a semi minuscule 2.34ERA. Madson, 24, may be a future closer and not only gives the Phillies youth in the pen, but also one of the tightest curve pitches in the game. Two 37-year-olds, Tim Worrell and Rheap Cormier, are among the top relievers as far as quality innings go.



Despite not producing with runners in scoring position and consistently throwing out base runners, Mike Lieberthal remains a productive offensive weapon and trade bait for a contending club. (Getty Images)

Chase Utley, the Phillies second baseman, could be a real x-factor at the bottom of the team's lineup when it matters. Many marvel at David Wright's success right away in limited games with the Mets. Well, look at what Utley did in 94 contests. This potential All-Star hit 13 home runs, had 57 RBI's, played 13 games at first base without complaining, and made only four errors. Believe me, the Phillies like the double play combo of him and shortstop Jimmy Rollins (14HR, 30SB, 12 triples and 43 doubles) for years to come. Hitting right behind Rollins is a guy that's been to the playoffs about nine or ten times in Kenny Lofton. Like him as a pinch hitter, pinch runner and every once in awhile filler. Don't think too highly of Lofton, 37, starting every day. Bobby Abreu is one of the rare do-it-all players in baseball. Over 100 runs, hits, RBI, walks and strikeouts for him in the '04 campaign. Plus, the 30 dingers and 40 steals are well worth the price of admission. Jim Thome is today's version of Mark McGwire with Paul Bunyan like frame and super power hitting skills. Key is for someone to emerge with Rollins and Abreu as a .300 or better base hitter. Doubt David Bell, a liability at times, is the guy. Other than maybe Padilla, a 15-game winner does not look evident either.

Bottom Line: Abreu, Thome and Burrell are a nice 3-4-5 middle of the order... if they do not strike out constantly. 390 K's was the 2004 strikeout total for the trio. They tend to get the pitchers enough run support in critical games. What's kept them is their bullpen, particularly last year without a healthy Wagner shutting the door. How well the pen performs could determine whether they win the division, make the playoffs as a wild card or are able to place ahead of another team with a shaky group of relievers - the Mets.

**Projected Order: SS Jimmy Rollins
CF Kenny Lofton
RF Bobby Abreu
1B Jim Thome
LF Pat Burrell
C Mike Lieberthal
2B Chase Utley
3B David Bell**

**Pitching Staff: R Jon Lieber
L Randy Wolf
R Vicente Padilla
R Cory Lidle
R Brett Myers/R Gavin Floyd**

Pick: 4th in the NL East; Phillies finish two games back of NYM for 3rd