

It's up to Philly's starting pitching and defense to get lively bats Abreu, Rollins & Howard still hitting past the October 1st regular season finale



3. Philadelphia Phillies (88-74): Charlie Manuel's first season as Manager of the Philadelphia Phillies turned out to be a pretty decent one even though his team failed to crash the postseason party. Now they move forward, welcoming in a new GM in Pat Gillick. Gillick made quite a bit of noise in the off-season as the team detracted a number of big names. Jim Thome left for Chicago, Billy Wagner joined the Mets, Vicente Padilla took the cash to go to Texas and outfielder Kenny Lofton fled for Los Angeles. Despite a quality .985 fielding percentage a season ago, the Phillies were dead last in the league in double plays turned. They feel the acquisition of infielder Abraham Nunez, a hitter and force with the glove, can push David Bell at third. Also upgrading their defense is former White Sox outfielder Aaron Rowand, an under appreciated player from last year's Chicago title team. Philadelphia also made an effort to strengthen its bullpen or at least help ease the loss of Wagner with the additions of Tom Gordon, Chris Booker from Detroit, Julio Santana via Milwaukee and Texas' Ricardo Rodriguez. Able to retain lefty Aaron Fultz, who kept opposing batter to a BA under .200, and hard-throwing righty Ryan Madson, this group of relievers will become vital for them to have long lasting success.

1979: The last time that Philly made the fewest errors in baseball. Fielding will go a long way towards making this a playoff team.

The Marlins – one thorn in their side the past couple years – has dismantled, while a new could be developing in the form of the New York Mets. In spite of the fact that the Phillies ranked second or higher in four major offensive statistical categories, including tops in on-base percentage, they stranded more runners than anyone else in the NL. It means that catcher Mike Lieberthal and David Bell – both with averages under .265 – must perform at a higher level with the stick. Bell has struggled mostly vs. right-handers, whereas Lieberthal got better as the year progressed and his knee stopped bothering him. At the top of the order, you have the exciting shortstop Jimmy Rollins. The man that had 55-multi hit games batted .290, stole 41 bags, had 11 triples and enters Opening Day chasing history with a 36-game hit streak. He and right fielder Bobby Abreu, a man that's put together seven 20/20 seasons – second all-time only behind Barry Bonds – are truly the captains of this ball club alongside Lieberthal. Outfielder Pat Burrell has had a problem striking out before, but finally came through in '05 with 117RBI, the second most in the league. Second baseman Chase Utley (28HR, 105RBI, 16SB) is constantly improving and the same can be used for first baseman Ryan Howard. An NL version of David Ortiz perhaps – Howard is due for a bust out season where he'll get a chance to knock 40-50 home runs. The only knock on the potential phenom Howard? He's still learning how to hit lefties (.148Avg. against them) who go at him high and away.

April Answer? The Phillies posted a winning record during month last season except April, going a division worst 10-14. They begin the season with series' vs. the Cardinals, Dodgers and Braves – there playoff caliber clubs.

Philly's starting pitchers will get the run support; they'll also get tested in a stadium that lets the ball fly out quite a bit. Jon Lieber and Cory Lidle cominbed for 30 wins and 270K's. At the same time though, each had an ERA in the 4's and lost a total of 24 games. Brett Myers seems to be a sure-fire guy on the staff as he struck out 208 hitters last year, something a member of the Phillies hasn't done in seven years. They're banking on Ryan Franklin (8-15 in Seattle) transforms into a nice arm changing leagues.



Phillies Shortstop Jimmy Rollins enters the season in pursuit of catching Joe DiMaggio's all-time consecutive games hit streak.
(Photo Courtesy of Jay Drowns/The Sporting News)

Bottom Line: Can the starting pitchers – especially Floyd, Lieber (who normally heats up by September) and Franklin – deliver down the stretch? Fewer strikeouts and showing extra aggressiveness on the base pads are two ingredients for a recipe of success this season. Matching last year's 88-win total will be awfully difficult, but I also doubt this team will quiet on Manuel.

**Projected Order: SS Jimmy Rollins
CF Aaron Rowand
RF Bobby Abreu
2B Chase Utley
LF Pat Burrell
1B Ryan Howard
C Mike Lieberthal
3B David Bell**

**Projected Staff: R Brett Myers
R Jon Lieber
R Cory Lidle
R Ryan Franklin/ R Robinson Tejeda
R Gavin Floyd/ L Ryan Madson**

Pick: 3rd in the NL East; finish on the outside of the playoff picture.