

Buckaroos better get off to a nice start otherwise we could be watching another season of cellar dwellers



5. Pittsburgh Pirates: Pirates left hander Oliver Perez was the big return prize for Pittsburgh in their trade a couple years ago with San Diego that sent outfielder Brian Giles to the Padres. During the off-season, a number of teams including the New York Yankees coveted Perez. But credit Pittsburgh's front office crew for not letting him get away by declining all trade proposals for the 23-year old from Culiacan, Mexico. His numbers in 2004 on an average at best baseball team were fairly staggering. He ranked fourth in the league in K's with 239 and was one of just six NL starters that held an ERA under 3.00. Plus, opposing batters hit just .187 off him at Pittsburgh's PNC Park. And better defense will make him a better pitcher, too. That's why it is so important for guys like 3B Ty Wigginton, outfielders Jason Bay and Tike Redman, and second baseman Jose Castillo catch the baseball.

Bay-Watch: Pirates outfielder Jason Bay, (26HR 82RBI .908OPS) a Canadian, recorded an 8-RBI game in two different pro seasons. The only other active player to accomplish such a feat is Cubs shortstop Nomar Garciaparra.

One of the Bucs' best overall players is shortstop Jack Wilson. Expect the 27-year-old born in Westlake Village, California to be a perennial all-star for years to come. His .308 batting average, 53 extra base hits and 157 games played were among the elite in the National League. Wilson will flat out hustle for 155-160 games a year and make some satisfying defensive plays as well. He and Perez are two guys management definitely wants to build this franchise around, or should I say re-build this franchise around. One half of the battery will be newly acquired catcher via Kansas City - Benito Santiago. Well traveled yes, insignificant player no. Santiago unquestionably works his tail off day in and day out. Very few current catchers have been as successful for such a long period of time like Santiago has been. The 40-year-old Puerto Rican born catcher really made an imprint with San Francisco in 2002. His numbers are not the greatest in the world, but he can be a stable replacement to one Jason Kendall (now in Oakland). From the bench they will look to Rob Mackowiak and Freddy Sanchez for positive production in late innings. Big problem the Pirates may not be able to solve is zero outfield depth. If someone is not playing up to par or an injury arises, then someone might have to play out of position - never, or should I say very seldom, a good thing.

Did You Know? Pirates first baseman/outfielder Craig Wilson was hit by a pitch more times (30) than he hit a pitch out of the ball park (29)?

Wigginton is the x-factor in my mind. We know Jack Wilson is going to hit around .300, play good defense and be an all-star caliber shortstop. We also know Craig Wilson and Jason Bay are going to get theirs. It's important they get better than average play on offense and defense from guys such as Wigginton (.285 - has to avoid too many ground-outs), Redman (18SB - needs more with proficiency), and Matt Lawton (20HR 70RBI 23SB). Lawton will hit well in the leadoff spot, but there are concerns about his

fielding. If it becomes such a big problem then the exceptional base knocker and runner could find himself on the bench as a pinch hitter/runner. For a team that ranked 13th in the National League in five different offensive statistical categories, the Pirates have to become more consistent. We know they can perform, now do it on a day-to-day basis.

After Perez, the necessary pitchers appear there thanks to a trade that brought in ex-A's starter Mark Redman. But Redman only went 11-12 with a 4.71ERA on a team that won 91 games. What some people call a 'finesse pitcher', Redman does not have the devastating/dominating fastball to go to when the strikeout is needed. That's one of the reasons why he had only 102K's in 191 innings of work. Kip Wells got off to an excellent start only to win five games on the season after grabbing three by the middle of May. Josh Fogg can give you five or six solid innings. Will you be up by then, though? Back-end of the bullpen was sufficient with Jose Mesa (43 saves, 3.25ERA) and Salomon Torres. Mesa's save-to-blown save ratio will be around 3-to-1 or 4-to-1.



Can Pirates lefty Oliver Perez (12-10) make Lloyd McClendon's team into a .500 ball club for 2005?

Bottom Line: 'Sleeper' possibly? Possibly. Although, the Brewers and Reds also could be in a division that looks more wide open for second place as each day goes by leading up to the season. Five runs per game is what they need to strive for in 2005. [If] they do that they've got a better shot than many think to finish .500.

**Projected Order: RF Matt Lawton
SS Jack Wilson
LF Jason Bay
1B Craig Wilson
3B Ty Wigginton
CF Tike Redman
C Humberto Cota/Benito Santiago
2B Jose Castillo**

**Projected Staff: L Oliver Perez
R Kip Wells
R Josh Fogg
L Mark Redman
L Dave Williams**

Pick: 5th in the NL Central; could be a surprise team (could - operative word).