

## NL CENTRAL:

### **Red Bids are still strong one season after winning a Major League best 105 games**



**1. St. Louis Cardinals:** Any reason to believe this team will falter in 2005? Yes and no, however, it's more likely that they will be right atop this division once again when it's all said and done. Cincinnati, the Cubs and maybe even Houston will challenge them throughout the '05 campaign. What boggles me is that some people believe they will be horrible just because St. Louis no longer has key contributors Woody Williams, Mike Matheny, Dan Haren, Tony Womack, Steve Kline and shortstop Edgar Renteria (the most devastating departure). Before you put a whole lot of emphasis on losing those guys just look at who's added to the mix for a team that won a Major League best 105 games in 2004. St. Louis brings in hard working middle infielders Mark Grudzielanek (Cubs) and David Eckstein (Angels), moves Einar Diaz to backup catcher behind the rising Yadier Molina, gets Mike Myers from Boston to potentially take Kline's spot in the pen and traded for lefty ace Mark Mulder.

St. Louis finally has that #1 starter, something they did not have when Matt Morris started to falter down the stretch and Chris Carpenter (15-5 with a 3.46ERA) went down prior to the postseason due to injury. So the way I look at it losing Williams and getting Mulder is a tremendous upgrade to a rotation that does not have to do a whole lot because of a potent lineup. Mulder's 4.43ERA was not only barely better than average in the AL, but also the worst in his career since his 2000 rookie season. Same goes for his WHIP and opposition's batting average. Still, this is a guy, a young guy (28), that already has 668 strikeouts to his credit, almost twice as many wins as losses, 22 complete games pitched and eight shutouts. Mulder, who now could possibly be the best lefty starter in the National League, gives Tony La Russa innings, rest for the pen and quality starts. Carpenter has been named the opening day starter, but it is clear to me that Mulder is the most dangerous starter in the St. Louis pitching rotation.

Offensively nobody was even close to the Cardinals. They were fourth or better in practically every major offensive category except men left on base. The only thing that will keep STL from scoring runs is injuries. Center fielder Jim Edmonds, one of the sweetest web gem guys around, turns 35 in June. Outfielder Reggie Sanders turned 38 back on December 1<sup>st</sup>. Left-handed pinch hitter John Mabry is 34, Grudzielanek will soon be 35 and right fielder Larry Walker was born precisely one year before Sanders (meaning he is 39). When you get older your body no longer functions as well as it did when you were in your 20's. That's why Albert Pujols and Scott Rolen, two guys that combined for 80 homers and 247 runs batted in during the '04 campaign, have to keep putting up fat numbers. Hitters 3-6 for St. Louis are deadly and arguably the toughest outs in the heart of the order in all of baseball. You cannot give them all free passes and when you walk one of them another burns the guy out on the rubber.



**Albert Pujols (.331 133R 51 2B 46HR 123RBI) has been in the running for MVP the last couple seasons. This year Pujols plans to beat out Mr. Bonds for the prestigious honor.**

Jeff Suppan, Jason Marquis and Matt Morris must provide good outings for the Cardinals. They don't have to shut out batters. What they do have to do is not lose the ball game. All three each won 15 games or more and Morris might be able to thrive in his role as the #3 starter. The Cardinals have a pretty favorable schedule the first two months of the season. I believe Morris could be on the way up and improve even more for the Cardinals this coming season. St. Louis' bullpen has been a question mark for quite awhile now. Closer Jason Isringhausen, 32, throws tight and in on lefties and can make right handed batters chase things. After him, Ray King (5-2, though may walk close to as many as he strikes out) and Myers, the pen is somewhat weak. Granted, it's better than what it was in the middle of the 2003 season. Julian Tavarez along with Cal Eldred and maybe one of the team's farm prospects (Anthony Reyes, Blake Hawksworth or Adam Wainright - all starters that could be relievers for a September run) will counted upon to spell the others in the bullpen. If you want to beat St. Louis you're not going to do it by drilling them in the mouth on defense. Speed kills and you better have speed playing STL.

**Bottom Line: What's the one thing you cannot gauge or predict with any team in any sport? Injuries. St. Louis for the most part stayed injury free in 2004 before Carpenter went down. All it takes is a couple pitchers getting hurt and one or two key sluggers to miss some games for St. Louis to return to their 2003 form. And if they are not playing up to par around the all-star break, which I think they will be, you better believe Walt Jocketty is going to unload some of that payroll that's in the \$80-85 million dollar neighborhood.**

**Projected Order: SS David Eckstein  
RF Larry Walker  
1B Albert Pujols  
CF Jim Edmonds  
3B Scott Rolen  
LF Reggie Sanders  
2B Mark Grudzielanek  
C Yadier Molina**

**Projected Staff: R Chris Carpenter  
L Mark Mulder  
R Matt Morris  
R Jeff Suppan  
R Jason Marquis**

*Pick: NL Central Champions; lose to San Diego in the NLCS in 7.*