

## NL CENTRAL:

**After posting consecutive 100-win seasons, what could possibly be in store for an encore? Opening the new Busch Stadium with a bang by winning it all**



**1. St. Louis Cardinals (100-62):** Back-to-back 100-win seasons rarely result in the way the last two postseasons came to an end for the St. Louis Cardinals. For a franchise that has won the second most World Series Championships ever only behind the New York Yankees all-time, these Red Birds can now say they know how the Bronx Bombers feel coming up empty-handed the last five years. Following a 105-57 mark, Tony LaRussa's team got to the World Series in 2004, only to be swept in stunning fashion by the Boston Red Sox. LaRussa and co. saw it as an opportunity to get back in '05 and take care of unfinished business. Then after star player Albert Pujols hit a towering game-winning homer in Gm. 5 of the NLCS vs. Houston, the Cardinals' new life experienced a painful death when the Astros' pitching shut them down in Gm. 6. St. Louis made some suttee changes during the off-season and we'll see how they pan out... come October.



**Albert Pujols finished in the top three in the National League last season in batting average, home runs and RBI.**

Leading the way for the Red Birds is Albert Pujols, who's becoming a HOF type of steady offensive performer. Pujols' numbers in '05 as he earned his first Most Valuable Player award were nothing short of brilliant, especially with third baseman Scott Rolen sidelined for 106 regular season games. The trio of Pujols, Rolen and center fielder Jim Edmonds (29HR, 89RBI and 37 doubles) when healthy makes for the NL's best 3-4-5 order. At the top of the lineup, shortstop David Eckstein led the majors in two-strike hits and the league in two-hit base hits. His hustle is admired by many in the business. With the retirement of outfielder Larry Walker and the free agent departure of Reggie Sanders, it now opens the door for So Taguchi and Juan Encarnacion to get results right away swinging the stick. Behind the dish, catcher Yadier Molina doesn't give them All-Star type hitting, but has been a stable battery piece for LaRussa. GM Walt Jocketty may need to address the second base position at some point in the season, while adding another bench or bullpen piece wouldn't hurt either.

Known for their explosive potential swinging the bats, the Cardinals' pitchers often get overlooked, none more than the ace of the staff, Chris Carpenter. After some injury plagued seasons – including an injury that kept him out of the '04 postseason – Carpenter (213-51K/BB ratio) is now probably the most underpaid top-notch pitcher in the game. Over the past two seasons, Carpenter has gone 36-10. Lefty Mark Mulder, acquired from the A's before last season, would be the ace of most staffs in baseball. He's the ideal #2 guy for this team, coming off a season where he went 16-8 and pitched three complete games – surprisingly four fewer than Carpenter. Jeff Suppan had to be the quietest 16-game winner all of last year and even during his days in Kansas City, he has flown under the radar. Of all the players they lost in the off-season, none may be missed more than starter Matt Morris. How well Jason Marquis and Sidney Ponson – both capable of double-digit wins, but each with more losses than wins in '05 – perform could be critical in St. Louis retaining the division title and possibly earning home field advantage yet again.

St. Louis' pitching has proven to get the job done, indicated in last year's numbers that saw them rank first in ERA and second in saves. Closer Jason Isringhausen blew a save in the first game of the NLDS vs. San Diego. They're hoping he resembles the Izzy that made batters dizzy during the regular season, saving 43 games. If he doesn't nab a spot in the rotation, right-handed prospect Anthony Reyes may be used to help out in the bullpen. Braden Loper was acquired from the Mets to be a possible setup guy that gets right-handers out, while LHP Ricardo Rincon knows how to work out of a jam and get a big out vs. lefties. So far in their run of NL Central dominance, the Cards haven't had problems with their bullpen and defense.

**Bottom Line: Nobody (at least I'm not) questioning the Cardinals' ability to win upwards of 90 games once again and be one of the few threats in all of baseball to get 100. When the playoffs come, can they win it all? This is a determined team with the necessary talent to win the World Series, but losing some key components might very well have an effect chemistry wise. We know what Pujols, Edmonds and Rolen – when he's healthy – are all about. That said, who else steps up in the clutch now that Sanders has left and the bullpen isn't exactly lights out material?**

**Projected Order: SS David Eckstein  
LF So Taguchi  
1B Albert Pujols  
CF Jim Edmonds  
3B Scott Rolen  
RF Juan Encarnacion  
C Yadier Molina  
2B Junior Spivey**

**Projected Staff: R Chris Carpenter  
L Mark Mulder  
R Jeff Suppan  
R Jason Marquis  
R Sidney Ponson**

***Pick: NL Central Champs; lose to the NY Mets in the NLDS.***