

Signing of Piazza puts some power into pitcher friendly Petco. Enough to repeat as Division Champs, though?



3. San Diego Padres (82-80): ‘How the West was Won’

would be a decent title if you were putting together a story of last year’s San Diego Padres, a team that broke through to win the National League West with nearly as many losses as wins. Heck, you count the three postseason losses to St. Louis and it was 82 up; 83 down. Astonishing to think how mediocre the division was last year compared to the season before when Bruce Bochy – one of the game’s longest tenure Managers – and his Pads won 87 games, yet finished in third place. Credit Bochy and GM Kevin Towers, who made a conscious effort to get San Diego back in the playoffs for the first time since 1998 when they were swept by New York in the World Series. Towers made some shake ‘em up moves during the off-season, none bigger than adding future Hall-of-Famer Mike Piazza to the equation. An interesting move when you consider they needed some home run hitting ability that’s plagued them ever since the opening of spacious Petco Park. The San Diego offense is still not powerful enough, even though Piazza will give them a much desired punch. They also were able to retain outfielder Brian Giles and add Mike Cameron, who’ll join steady/heady leadoff guy Dave Roberts. That trio will hit .270+ and help drive in about 35-40% of the runs if not more.



San Diego’s Jake Peavy has become the clear-cut, bona-fide ace of this Padres pitching staff. (AP)

On the mound, Jake Peavy went from National League ERA Champ in ’04 to the NL’s strikeout king with 216 for ’05. Peavy can get hammered down the heart of the plate occasionally [see NLDS vs. St. Louis], but when he’s on he’s as good as any pitcher around – potentially placing himself in the Cy Young discussion. The rotation as a whole has probably weakened with the departures of Adam Eaton and Brian Lawrence. Granted, neither Lawrence nor Eaton became the All-Star [at least in their stay here] that Peavy did. What they did do was give them a shot to win most times out. Not everyone is sure Shawn Estes, Chan Ho Park and Chris Young will do that. Ho Park had his

moment last year and in an NL pitchers' park, he could have a few sterling performances left in him. He also could have a few eight hits and seven runs allowed in 3-4 innings. Only time will tell there. After posting seven straight winning seasons, lefty Woody Williams – who replaced David Wells before the season – had a rough 9-12 mark. The quicker Tim Stauffer can make it onto the staff, the better. Then there's Dewon Brazelton. He had a 1.17ERA during spring training after going 1-8 with an ERA in the 7's for Tampa Bay last season. Don't rule out Brazelton taking away one of those rotations spots or becoming the 7th inning guy in that Pads bullpen. Speaking of which, how good can that pen be? Over the past several years, it's been very sound, thanks mostly to closer Trevor Hoffman. Hoffman is chasing Lee Smith's all-time saves record of 478 and projects to catch it by 2007. Gone from the pen are Akinori Otsuka and Chris Hammond, meaning tremendous righty reliever Scott Linebrink (8-1, 1.83ERA in 73.2IP) could log even more games than usual.

What'll it all come down to? The hitting. Bochy believes you have a chance every time out to win with pitching and defense because it'll show up more consistently than the hitting, which often times comes and goes. It needs to hang around longer in '06. Shorstop Khalil Greene might be there make or break difference maker. Greene needs to play persistently like the impact player he was as a 'rook. It's very possible, but at the same unlikely the guys around him generate enough runs. Ryan Klesko has had a real fine career and appears on the decline, while new third baseman Vinny Castilla's limitation of home runs is around 20 instead of 40 [where it was about five years ago]. Adding Mark Bellhorn helps for power at second base, but his .216BA hurts, whereas Mark Loretta was a much better contact hitter. Losing guys like Loretta, Ramon Hernandez, Xavier Nady, 3B's Sean Burroughs and Joe Randa could take time to replace.

Bottom Line: Where does the power come from? San Diego has some guys who have put up big home run numbers in the past in Castilla, Cameron, Klesko and Giles. What's strange is that Piazza hit only 19 last season for the Mets and would've been San Diego's top long ball hitter as they were led by the 18 dingers Klesko hit. The dimensions at Petco Park aren't suitable to someone hitting 40-50 homers, but someone should be able to get at least 25-30 or else this San Diego team, which looks a little weaker in the rotation, could come up on the short end of the stick in some one-run ball games. Star in the making – 23yr. old Josh Barfield.

**Projected Order: LF Dave Roberts
CF Mike Cameron
RF Brian Giles
C Mike Piazza
1B Ryan Klesko
SS Khalil Greene
3B Vinny Castilla
2B Josh Barfield**

**Projected Staff: R Jake Peavy
R Chris Young
L Shawn Estes
R Dewon Brazelton
R Chan Ho Park**

Pick: 3rd in the NL West; no playoff repeat for the Pads.