

While chasing Ruth & Aaron on the all-time home run list, Bonds has remained the center of discussion revolving steroids in Major League Baseball



2. San Francisco Giants (75-87): When the name Barry Bonds comes up, what is the first thing you think of? It used to be his single-season, record breaking 73-home run season of 2001. And with it came all the enormous accolades and achievements in an illustrious baseball career. Not anymore. Now the first thing is most likely steroids. Truly sad when you think of the stage he is at in his career, the stage the Giants are at – coming off one of its worst seasons in recent memory – and where the sport is because of all the steroid dirt.

38: That's the number of day games the Giants are scheduled to play after night games this coming season. It's a number that will take on a more grueling look as the season progresses for the NL's oldest team.

Competition in center field will be interesting as you've got an older vet in Steve Finley battling the younger Randy Winn, who hit for the cycle last season. Winn (.359BA with San Fran in 58 games) became the first Giants player to hit for the cycle since Jeff Kent did it vs. Pittsburgh in 1999 and only the 23rd player in team history to achieve the feat. Rounding out the outfield will be Moises Alou (.321BA, 19HR and 63RBI), son of Manager Felipe Alou. The infield will seem empty to some of the die-hard Giants fans as it's the first season in quite a while without J.T. Snow lining up at first base. It'll be a battle between Lance Niekro (12HR in 278AB) and Mark Sweeney, recently acquired from San Diego. In order to get Finley, they had to give up Edgardo Alfonzo and that sits okay with Giants fans because the versatile Pedro Feliz can be an everyday third baseman or line up wherever an injury arises. Up the middle, shortstop Omar Vizquel isn't getting any younger, but his glove work remains marvelous. Ray Durham now can return to his traditional position at second base instead of having to hold down center field. Catcher Mike Matheny kind of puts up inflated, misleading offensive numbers as he's much defensively than with the bat. Off the bench they'll turn to Jose Vizcaino, a well traveled reserve that has played for such teams as the Yankees, Astros and these Giants back in 1997. Look for 25-year-old outfielders Fred Lewis and Todd Linden to get a chance to play soon, too.

In the rotation they welcome right-hander Matt Morris, a sharp performer for St. Louis over the years having gone 206-101. That's not even mentioning – which we will now – that Morris has pitched 18 career complete games, including eight shutouts. The key to this staff may be reliable right-hander Jason Schmidt, widely considered one of the National League's best and possibly the top starting pitcher in the division. Schmidt went 12-7 last year and saw his ERA balloon to 4.40. While he did strike out 165 guys in 172 innings, he also walked 85 and there are concerns that he could be deteriorating. Even if he is on the decline, he's still pretty effective. And the Giants have two young stars in the making to throw out there with lefty Noah Lowry and righty Matt Cain. Both have the

potential to win 15 games and Lowry can say he was two shy of it last year, earning a 3.78ERA and going 204+ innings. Brad Hennessey will do as the #5 starter and has decent stuff that they're hoping molds together under pitching coach Dave Righetti. In the bullpen, the Giants had their share of woes. If not for the Diamondbacks' miserable pen, this might've been baseball's worst. San Fran managed to record 46 team saves, but they also let a few more get away. Tyler Walker, once a starter down in the minors, did pretty well for them by making 23 saves. That was until he blew a few and now looks like a middle relief guy along with lefty Steve Kline, a big pickup to help ease the loss of Scott Eyre, and Tim Worrell. Then there's closer Armando Benitez (19 saves). They absolutely, under no circumstances, can afford him blowing his chances and not staying healthy. When he did pitch in 30 games, he had an ERA of 4.50 and that won't work.



Noah Lowry is on par for a breakout season after recording a team-high 172 strikeouts last season.
(Photo Courtesy of Ben Margot/Associated Press)

Bottom Line: Even though they probably have the best roster make-up in the division from a talent perspective, the Giants' window of opportunity will shut completely if Bonds cannot play in excess of 100 games and be the impact hitter he's always been. Remember, this team has a lot of age on it as a number of players are in their mid-to-late 30's; a couple in their 40's. It not only says that they could be a step slower than everyone else, but also they're more prone to injuries. Advanced age wise or not, the Giants are a threat to win this division. Why? Because the younger prospects are starting to come into their own and Bonds has been such a dominant force in the past that his presence alone might propel them to 85+ wins.

Projected Order: CF Randy Winn
SS Omar Vizquel
2B Ray Durham
LF Barry Bonds
RF Moises Alou
3B Pedro Feliz
1B Lance Niekro
C Mke Matheny

Projected Staff: R Jason Schmidt
R Matt Morris
L Noah Lowry
R Matt Cain
R Jamey Wright/R Brad Hennessey

Pick: 2nd in the NL West; finish 4-7 games behind LA for first.