

Kazmir, Upton and the super fast Crawford are the young Rays' future



4. Tampa Bay Devil Rays: The pieces are there. That is for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays to make a legitimate run the next two seasons after this. Tampa's youth movement just might payoff under Manager Lou Piniella, too.

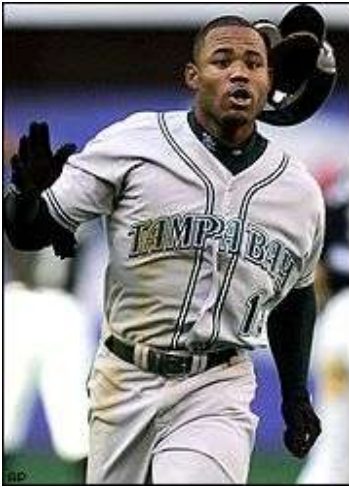
Center fielder Rocco Baldelli will probably be out until May with an injury. When he returns the D-Rays can only welcome him with open arms. Reason being you cannot count on the Jose Cruz Jr. and Danny Bautista's of the world to be consistently good. Bautista, the Diamondbacks' best postseason hitter statistically during the 2001 World Series, played in over 101 games for the first time in his career last year. Can he do it again? Big question mark, one thing that is not is his arm, one of the top three in baseball if you ask me, trailing only Ichiro and Vlad Guerrero noticeably. Gone is usually errorless Jose Cruz Jr.; now in Arizona after making ten errors in his first season with Tampa. They won't have problem making up for the lost speed with some of the rising prospects they have and Mr. Carl Crawford. I'm telling you, I don't think there are three more electrifying baseball players than him. We know about the steals and triples; none do it better than Crawford as far as those two stats are concerned. What some don't know is that he hit 11 homers in the leadoff spot and batted right around .300 while scoring 104 runs.

The talent and speed does not end with him. Shortstop B.J. Upton, out of Chesapeake, Virginia, stole 17 bags in AAA Durham before his call-up. He's due to hit around .275 this year and maybe better the following season. Right now he is going to have to share the position when given the chance alongside Julio Lugo. Lugo saw his career in Houston end on a sour note, though has been revived moving closer to his Puerto Rican birthplace. The numbers depict it, too: .275AVG, 41 doubles, 52 extra base hits in all, and 21 steals. Really, when you think about it long and hard, the only thing they lack is an elite switch hitter. Prospects are aplenty, including Delmon Young, a big part of their future, and another big-time base runner in Joey Gathright.

Scary Statistic: Tampa Bay had a 41-39 home record in 2004. Away from Tropicana (orange juice) Field they went 29-52. Good thing is 14 of Tampa's first 19 games are at home. Rays must take advantage of a possible great start.

Behind the plate is a questionable/gray area. Kevin Cash hits only .193, but is much better on defense than .255 hitter Toby Hall. And in a division with Baltimore, the Yankees, and Red Sox all having All-Star type catcher you need someone near that status to compete. They've got an All-Star caliber doubles man in Aubrey Huff (.297AVG 29HR 104RBI), who has 99 doubles over the past three seasons including 47 during 2003. In that '03 campaign he played in all 162 games and was two hits shy of 200. They don't have that marquee name protecting him (i.e. hitting in front of or behind Huff). Although, Jorge Cantu, 23, is player to watch out for he does not fit the billing of superstar slugger at this point. Scott Kazmir, the team's top left-hander, will be their ace in 2006.

As for now, it looks like Mark Hendrickson or Dewon Brazelton will be counted upon to hold down the fort. Scouts love Brazelton because he's the kind of pitcher that, if he's doing well, can get stronger as the game goes along. When you have someone like that it makes it easier on the lineup, the bullpen, their other starting pitchers and Piniella. Former NBA basketball player Mark Hendrickson can win ten games and also lose ten. Had an outstanding June before faltering in August and September. Likelihood of the Rays' 4th and 5th starters winning between 8-12 games in not real good. GM Chuck LaMar made one of his best moves by getting Danny's Baez as the team's closer. Baez saved 30 games, but you have to wonder will Tampa Bay deal him to a contender since they have two adequate relievers waiting in wing - Lance Carter and Jesus Colome?



Devil Rays outfielder/leadoff man Carl Crawford (left - AP) almost became the first guy since Willie Mays in 1957 to lead the big's outright in triples and steals. His 59 stolen bases and 19 triples were tops in the AL.

Bottom Line: Tampa Bay and their management is looking at 2006-2007 as their time to make a move in the American League East division. 2005 has to be a stepping stone for where they want to go in the future. A more than solid foundation is in place with Crawford, Baldelli, Brazelton, Upton and Kazmir. Question is will Piniella be there for the long-run or not?

**Projected Order: CF Carl Crawford
2B Jorge Cantu
LF Aubrey Huff
DH Josh Phelps
SS Julio Lugo
1B Travis Lee
RF Danny Bautista
3B Alex Gonzalez
C Toby Hall**

**Projected Staff: L Mark Hendrickson
R Dewon Brazelton
L Scott Kazmir
R Doug Waechter
R Rob Bell**

Pick: 4th in the AL East; win between 68-75 games once again.