

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



4. Tampa Bay Devil Rays (67-95): Replacing the always entertaining Lou Piniella as Manager is ex-Angels bench Joe Maddon. His task: taking a franchise, which since its inception in 1998, has yet to reach .500 and make them competitive in quite possibly baseball's toughest division. And he better get started right away too with two series' against Baltimore and one hosting Kansas City. That's because after that there's road trips to Boston, Texas and New York. Maddon won't go at it alone as he holds one of the game's most promising young aces in lefty Scott Kazmir (10-9 with a 3.77ERA, 174K and 186IP). Kazmir gets strikeouts and finds himself tagged very seldom for home run bombs. Fans look to him and a bevy of highly thought of prospects to change their past fortunes. It won't be easy because the Devil Rays have had nothing but 90-loss seasons every time in the eight-year of their franchise.

PREDICTION: That ends this year as I envision them winning 71-77 games.

Offensively, the D-Rays added third baseman Sean Burroughs from the Padres and get hard working Italian outfielder Rocco Baldelli back in the lineup after an injury plagued '05. The rest of the Rays outfield consists of two blue-chip players in All-Star Carl Crawford (105 stolen bases + 34 triples over the past two years) and Jonny Gomes. Not even 25, Crawford has hit consistently in the 300's, been at or near the top of the majors in steals plus triples, and is a run producer as his 81 RBI and 101 runs from last year indicate. Gomes, picked third in the AL ROY voting, had 69 extra base knocks and slugged .534. His 21 homers in 101 games also gave the O' a lift. Another significant ingredient to long-term success? Has got to be B.J. Upton. Brother of Arizona's Justin Upton, B.J. needs to start making an impact by the end of the season. TB was better when Julio Lugo led off, but how long does he hold off Upton at shortstop? It's something we'll find out eventually. Tampa's also very excited about what rookie outfielder Delmon Young (65 hits in 52 games at AAA Durham) has to offer. Bursting onto the scene last year was second baseman Jorge Cantu. At only 24 years of age, Cantu's 28 blasts out of the park placed him tops on the team in that category. If nothing else, you have to enjoy the fearlessness and aggression with which the Rays play.



Coming off a season where he hit 22 home runs and played at four different positions (1B, 3B, DH and OF), Tampa's Aubrey Huff is a valuable hitting asset no matter where he lines up.

Lugo had 36 doubles and 39 stolen bases a season ago, while outfielder Joey Gathright provided even more speed with 20 stolen bases in 76 contests. Aubrey Huff is one of those guys that gets the opportunity to drive in some of these fast Rays. Huff has connected for 125 doubles over the past four seasons in the Sunshine state. Two holes that are opened to be upgraded down the road include catcher and first base. A powerful run producer at either or both spots would strengthen this offense and make it multi-dimensional.

Take Kazmir out of the pitching equation and what do you have? A remaining rotation that had no other player with 12+ wins, plus a bullpen that saw none save 5+ games. They're going to have to patch something together in the pen, while lefty Casey Fossum should be an every-other-day middle reliever. Instead, because of no real depth, they had him – with his wild control – make 25 starts a year ago. As we've seen in the past on numerous occasions, including the Red Sox a few seasons back, the closer-by-committee deal also usually isn't a good idea. Sooner or later, Tampa Bay will have to go shopping for some right-handed starting pitching in the rotation. And when they find a gem to go alongside Kazmir and the 6-foot-9 former NBA player Mark Hendrickson, they'll start rolling into something good.

Bottom Line: Closer, closer and closer. The Devil Rays are coming closer and closer to becoming a contender in the ultra competitive American League East, which saw Baltimore spend a ton of money to close the gap last year and Toronto do it this past winter. Problem is the D-Rays cannot take that next step in my opinion unless a closer (nice play on words huh?) is clearly defined. The loss of Baez will hurt, but only so much if Orvella or Mori can develop into a reliable late-inning reliever. Kazmir, Cantu, Gomes, Upton and the rest of the young guys are coming along nicely; no serious worry about any of them.

**Projected Order: SS Julio Lugo
LF Carl Crawford
2B Jorge Cantu
3B Aubrey Huff
DH Jonny Gomes
CF Rocco Baldelli
1B Travis Lee
C Toby Hall
RF Joey Gathright**

**Projected Staff: L Scott Kazmir
L Mark Hendrickson
L Casey Fossum
R Seth McClung
R Doug Waechter**

Pick: 4th in the AL East; fail to qualify for postseason play.