

Are Rangers ready to make that leap to the playoffs even without dominant starting pitching?



3. Texas Rangers: Offensively challenged? No way. The Texas Rangers moved on and got better without Alex Rodriguez, who was brought in from Seattle to make the franchise a championship contender. Despite ranking 10th in the league in batting average (.266), Buck Showalter's team scored 860 runs and made an impressive improvement, winning 89 regular season games. This one year after going 71-91 behind the presumed leadership of A-Rod. Better without them they look, especially with his salary gone and all the attention being spread around. What I really like about the Rangers' lineup is they are intelligent in the batter's box. As a team they had a negligible 0.95 flyball-groundball ratio - tops in all of baseball.

Hank Blalock (32HR 110RBI) really lights it up at home. Expect him to tear it up once again at Ameritrust Field in Arlington. Randy Johnson and Johan Santana may be the only two lefties in the entire league that can figure out Blalock, then Alfonso Soriano and then Teixeira. Soriano's season in 2004 was sub-par for his standards if you want to say that considering his .324OBP and the defense is not there with him. All that thrown out the window, he's not someone you want to face as a pitcher with the game on the line. Mark Teixeira hit .281, had 38 homers, a .560 slugging %, and over 100 RBI's. Quite a few people around baseball feel he is ready to erupt for an even bigger offensive year. Put that in the mixture with what Soriano does, the others do, Blalock's similar numbers, etc. and Texas can be a pest for plenty of opponents.

Did You Know? In 2001 Texas' Hank Blalock became the first player ever in ML history to hit for the cycle twice in a three-game span.

Shortstop Michael Young might be the most under appreciated leadoff guy in all of baseball when used there. Young's .313 batting average was anything but paltry. Same goes for the 22 homers he cranked out, nine triples, 33 doubles, and 99 RBI's. When you look at the outfield Kevin Mench, Richard Hidalgo, and David Dellucci are not all that scary. That being said, the trio combined for 68 dingers and drove in 214 runs. Still think they are mediocre? Just the batting average as Hidalgo and the lefty Dellucci both hit under .260, while Mench was a .279 batter. Their outfield depth is pretty adequate, too. Laynce Nix is growing each day from an offensive standpoint and Gary Matthews Jr. can take advantage of below average relief pitchers at home. Only thing that can slow this Rangers lineup down would be injuries, and not to predict injuries, but I don't see many at all since most of the guys are young, aggressive ball players.

Are the arms there... for a postseason run? They better be if they want to win the division or get a wild card. Because all it takes is for one or two youngsters to step to the forefront while either the Red Sox or Yankees are having problem. If that happens, then the Rangers can very much be in the mix. They're going to need more than 40-year-old crafty left Kenny Rogers, who won 18 games in 35 starts last season. Showalter does not

want to have to go to a four-man staff, giving Rogers less rest. That means Ricardo Rodriguez may have to pitch through pain, Chan Ho Park must bring them at least a few more wins than four, and local product Chris Young will need to go about 115+ innings in '05. Groundball pitcher Ryan Drese is the x-factor since he throws a mean sinker ball. He can help them get to the bullpen with Francisco Cordero (49 SV), Doug Brocail, etc. All Showalter wants is about six innings, maybe seven on most nights before going to the pen.



The Rangers paid a hefty price for Chan Ho Park (AP/Orlin Wagner) when they first got him. It's time for him to deliver or he'll soon be gone.

Bottom Line: Texas has the bats, but probably not the arms to go far if they do somehow make it to the playoffs. No question about it, Buck Showalter did an outstanding job managing last year. He'll have his work cut out for him once again, though it's conceivable the Rangers can win upwards of 80 games with excellent bullpen pitching and superb infield power.

Projected Order: SS Michael Young
3B Hank Blalock
2B Alfonso Soriano
1B Mark Teixeira
RF Richard Hidalgo
LF Kevin Mench
DH David Dellucci
CF Laynce Nix
C Rod Barajas

Projected Staff: L Kenny Rogers
R Ryan Drese
R Chan Ho Park
R Chris R. Young
R Pedro Astacio

Pick: Tied for 2nd in the AL West; win about 85 games and tie with Seattle.