

We'll soon find out whether or not the addition of four new pitching arms and trading Soriano for Wilkerson makes Texas better equipped



4. Texas Rangers (79-83): Manager Buck Showalter has seen good go from bad to worse too often in his career. He managed the New York Yankees, then once he left, they won four World Championships in a five year span. Showalter then embarked on a quest to lead an expansion franchise – the Arizona Diamondbacks – to title glory. When he got the boot, Bob Brenly guided them to a World Series victory over those Yanks. Showalter has to realize, even with the departure of Alfonso Soriano [note: neither got along real well with one another], that there's too much talent to let it go to waste. Texas' offense is on the cusp of something unbelievable as they didn't miss a beat when the team dealt Alex Rodriguez and plans to do the same without Soriano. The Rangers, who lack obvious, dominant starting pitching, play blast ball. Texas was first overall in home runs with 260, atop the AL in slugging percentage and third in runs scored (865). That said, there are more holes this in their offense than in seasons past. One area of concern about the offense was the 'small ball' aspect of it as they were dead last in the majors in bunt hits, sacrifice flies and sac hits. In addition, they hit only .258 on the road compared to an average right around .280 at Ameriquest Field.

Filling the hole left by Soriano at second base will likely be unproved youngster Ian Kinsler, who will have to fight off vets Mark DeRosa and D'Angelo Jimenez to hold onto the job all season. Whoever plays on second on any given day will have good infielders around them. Former second baseman, now starting shortstop, Michael Young (AL best 221 base knocks) had the fourth best batting average in the American League on two-strikes and won the batting crown outright. His confidence has taken off the last couple years. Likewise for first baseman Mark Teixeira and third baseman Hank Blalock, the man that hit the game-winning home run off Eric Gagne in the 2004 All-Star game. On a better team, Teixeira would get more recognition than he is getting as his numbers are absolutely, check-plus-plus staggering: .301BA, 43 homers and 144RBI. The negative about Blalock, still an All-Star caliber hitter that once hit for the cycle twice in a span of three games, is he hits about 100 points lower on the road than at home. Center fielder Laynce Nix and catcher Rod Barajas hit home runs in this ball park and provide effort on defense. At the same time, they also are not big batting average guys – a minus when Texas goes up against a team with electric pitching. Others that have reaped the rewards from inflated numbers at this park include David Dellucci, a heady base runner, and Kevin Mench. The acquisition of Phil Nevin, who struggled late last year, from San Diego is now starting to look like a questionable one. If the holes at second base, catcher [note: Gerald Laird in waiting there] and center field prove to be big one's – then Nevin's importance will be magnified. And that's whether he starts, plays DH or comes off the bench.

Texas management will be looking like shrewd, intelligent people. For getting rid of left-hander/camera punching pitcher Kenny Rogers? Possibly. But also that is

provided the money they spent to bring in Kevin Millwood, Adam Eaton and Vicente Padilla pays off, translating into a winning season. They do their thing and the fourth starter as well as the fifth starter won't have too much pressure on them, allowing for their record to hover around .500. In relief, Francisco Cordero still shuts the door, though puts people on the edge of their seat doing so. His 37 saves last season wasn't quite enough to punch an All-Star ticket, but by cutting down on the 'too close for comfort' outings, he'll garner more attention. Akinori Otsuka should be a great addition as long as he smoothly adjusts to the AL settings, whereas the rest of this pen looks like it'll be up in shambles at first glance.



The 43 home runs Mark Teixeira belted last year made plenty of Texans fans smile from ear to ear. (AP)

Bottom Line: Rangers were starving for starting pitching, but I wasn't thrilled with the way they went about it in the off-season. Sixty million for Millwood? Granted, he was the American League ERA Champ, but come on people. His first AL season saw Millwood post a 9-11 record. He, Eaton and Padilla all have spent the majority of their careers in the NL without the DH. Add in pitching in a hitters park and that could spell trouble during tight situations. Can you say Chan Ho Park all over again in the Lonestar State? Texas fans are praying things turn out differently this time. They also better hope Millwood doesn't have arm problems from lifting up all that cash!

**Projected Order: LF Dave Dellucci
SS Michael Young
1B Mark Teixeira
3B Hank Blalock
DH Phil Nevin
CF Brad Wilkerson
RF Kevin Mench
C Rod Barajas
2B Ian Kinsler**

**Projected Staff: R Kevin Millwood
R Adam Eaton
R Vicente Padilla
R Kameron Loe
R Edinson Volquez/R Juan Dominguez**

Pick: 4th in the AL West; finish a game behind Seattle for third.