

## Busy winter leads many to believe Blue Jays are on the cusp of postseason play



**2. Toronto Blue Jays (80-82):** General Manager J.P. Ricciardi has done a wonderful job assembling the talent here. Baseball's only team north of the border, Toronto, which has endured six Managers in a decade, is thinking big. If the White Sox can exceed expectations and win it all, why not us? I mean hey, you have to go back to the early 90's when Joe Carter helped the Jays to find this Canadian franchise's last World Series title. When ace pitcher Roy Halladay (12-4, 2.41ERA and a **108-18K/BB ratio**) went down for the season due to injury, the most impressive thing about these Blue Jays had to be the way they kept plugging away. They finished up 80-82 and probably would've been a contender for the final Wild Card spot with Halladay for a full season. So logically, the additions of four All-Star caliber performers – closer B.J. Ryan from Baltimore, first baseman Lyle Overbay from Milwaukee, starting pitcher A.J. Burnett via Florida and ex-Angels catcher Bengie Molina – makes them my **AL Surprise Team of the Year!** If the core stays together, this could be the team of the future, too.

Still, with all the moves they made and the only significant subtractions being versatile right-handed pitcher Miguel Batista and second baseman Orlando Hudson, the Jays' payroll is not even half Boston's. That's not even the best part. Their payroll doesn't even equal ¼ of the Yankees'. Those two teams in the division have deeper, more talented rosters and rich postseason experience. However, you cannot underestimate chemistry and Toronto had a pretty good mixture before the spending spree. Some might not realize that the Jays have 80 or more games three times during the last five seasons in such a competitive league. From a fielding perspective, they lose Hudson and he was a key part of them ranking fourth in the AL in fielding percentage. Other than losing him, their defense looks fine and as capable as anyone else's inside the division. The offense (10<sup>th</sup> in slugging and 11<sup>th</sup> in homers) lacked power juice and bringing in Glaus and Overbay – a tandem that smacked 56 jacks in '05 – boosts them tremendously. An already good rotation was bolstered with Burnett, who if healthy throws dangerous heat, and the bullpen (65HR allowed) should be able to close the door now that Ryan has arrived. Behind the dish, Molina handles pitchers well and hits left handers (AL best .393BA). Gregg Zaun now spells him and can be a steady pinch hitter when called upon.

Toronto might be the only team, besides maybe the White Sox, that can legitimately say they have five starting pitchers capable of double-digit victories. **In fact, all five of the Jays' current starters won ten or more games in '05.** The lone one guy with a losing record was #3 option/lefty Ted Lilly, who pitched much better at home (8-3) than on the road (7.57ERA). Gustavo Chacin turned out to be a pleasant surprise, winning 13 games in 203 innings by using a fastball, slider, changeup and curve. Josh Towers may be the most durable one, having won 22 games and appeared in 325 innings since the start of '04. Top prospect Dustin McGowan will end up in the bullpen or as the fifth starter before the season is done. Speaking of the pen, Ryan's biting slider and powerful fastball enabled him to strikeout 100 batters – more than a few full-time starters

out there in far less innings. They have another lefty to use to eat innings in Scott Schoenweis, a former starter. If Justin Speier and Jason Frasor struggle – which was not the case a season ago – another right-handed reliever will need to step up.



**Last season, Frank Catalanotto and Shea Hillenbrand combined for 299 hits, including 65 doubles.**

(Photo Courtesy of Adrian Wyld/Associated Press/CP)

Alongside Halladay, Center fielder Vernon Wells is their franchise guy and the guy they've built around following Carlos Delgado's departure. A five-tool player that owns most of the pitchers out there, Wells has 147 doubles to his credit since 2002. When you factor in his OPS around .800 and 100-120RBI annually along with the flawless glove work in center, you've got yourself quite a ball player. Shortstop Russ Adams showed right away as a 'rook that he's more than adequate, proving to be one of the Jays' two double-figure base stealers [the other being RF Alex Rios]. Eric Hinske is my x-factor for this team in '06 as he's skilled enough to leave that void left by Corey Koskie.

**Bottom Line: Quite possibly baseball's most improved team, things for the Jays just got tougher. Not only are they going to have to begin the season without Burnell, who'll start on the DL, but they play in arguably the toughest division, competing with the Sox and Yanks. How they do in the 37 total games against them should tell the tale. Key – hitting in late inning situations with two outs.**

**Projected Order: SS Russ Adams  
LF Frank Catalanotto  
CF Vernon Wells  
3B Troy Glaus  
1B Lyle Overbay  
DH Shea Hillenbrand  
C Bengie Molina  
RF Eric Hinske/Alex Rios**

**Projected Staff: R Roy Halladay  
R A.J. Burnett  
L Ted Lilly  
L Gustavo Chacin  
R Josh Towers**

*Pick: 2<sup>nd</sup> in the AL East; lose Wild Card tie-breaker to Angels.*