

Washington franchise is not as bad as some think



5. Washington Nationals: D.C. baseball is now a reality.

Formerly referred to as the Montreal/Puerto Rico/you name it Expos, baseball now resides in Washington. Manager Frank Robinson has won 913 games. He's also lost 1,004. When the first season for the Nationals in D.C. is over I would suspect that the team will have more losses than wins. Am I going out on a limb saying that? Heck no, yet do not be surprised if they are competitive. Despite going 67-95 last season and failing to win 70 games three times in the new millennium, the ex-Expos have been highly competitive early on in past seasons. During the months of July and August they went a combined 30-26 surprisingly. They had an amazing [for them] 49-45 record at the 2003 All-Star break. Normally they do well in April, May and June so a nice start to the season with series' vs. everyone else in the division in the first month can be beneficial.

Where's the superstar on this team? Well, that's just it --- there isn't one. Yes, there used to Vladimir Guerrero, Pedro Martinez, Larry Walker and even Rondell White in the prime of his career. Newly acquired third baseman Vinny Castilla used to be an all-star and now is capable of performing much better than average. With the Rockies last season Castilla hit .271, drove in 131 runs and hit 35 homers. Of course, those numbers are rather diluted since half of his games were played at Coors Field. RFK Stadium is the new home of the Nationals and we'll find out quickly whether or not these guys can hit and like this place. There's a reason why they lost 95 games one year ago and that's because more than half of their runs scored came with two outs on the board, down in the count. Washington will need the top of the lineup to produce by getting on base and allowing some of the middle of the order power guys such as Castilla, Jose Guillen (110 career homers and 458 runs batted in with seven different teams in 11 seasons), Nick Johnson and Brad Wilkerson (team best 32 dingers in '04) to score them.

Don't forget about Jose Vidro, the team's dynamic second baseman that won the Silver Slugger award valuing substance over style in 110 games. Though he has never stole more than five bases in a big league season during his career, Vidro can make up for it with range defensively. A lifetime .304 batting average, 524 career runs, 325 walks and 257 doubles doesn't hurt the Puerto Rican infielder either.

One of the biggest reasons why the Nationals aren't expected to keep with the other teams in their division is simply they lack a marquee player. Besides ranking dead last in the National League in saves and 12th in ERA, they were 15th in batting average, total bases, slugging, and on-base percentage. Washington has one of the deadliest extra-base guys around in shortstop Cristian Guzman, who has 61 triples in six seasons to back it all up. Question remains, where will the runs come from down 4-2 with two outs, two on and pressed to score in the seventh or eighth inning?



Nationals

Manager Frank Robinson instructs his team.

Livan Hernandez is the ace of the staff and his numbers are not too flimsy. How about these two stats though: Hernandez has 67 losses since the year 2000, most for any active big league hurler. Livan's .236 career batting average is fifth best all-time for a pitcher with a minimum of 50 plate appearances. Tomo Ohka, Zach Day, Esteban Loaiza and Tony Armas Jr. (who will start the season on the 15-day DL due to a groin strain) does not make for an outstanding rotation after Hernandez. Each possesses suspect pitching attributes and do not have the greatest run support in the world when an outing goes sour.

Steady Eddie: Former Diamondbacks base coach Eddie Rodriguez inherits a good group of intelligent base runners. He'll try to keep the Nationals among the Major's elite in stolen bases for 2005.

Two, count 'em, two left-handed pitchers on this roster going into opening day. Both are relievers with decent futures - Joey Eischen and Joe Horgan. No real fantasy stud on this team either, though closer Chad Cordero can catch fire during the year.

Bottom Line: Where's the left-handed starters to get the lefty bats out? Washington has none, I repeat zero lefties in the rotation. It's a good thing Bill Bray, a LH that went to William & Mary, was selected first overall in '04.

Projected Order: SS Cristian Guzman	Pitching Staff: R Livan Hernandez
2B Jose Vidro	R Tony Armas Jr.
LF Brad Wilkerson	R Esteban Loaiza
RF Jose Guillen	R Tomo Ohka
3B Vinny Castilla	R Zach Day
1B Nick Johnson	
CF Endy Chavez/Termel Sledge	
C Brian Schneider	

Pick: 5th in the NL East; A distant fifth, Washington may be in right direction.