

Another season filled with summer buzz like last year would serve the Nats well

NATIONALS

4. Washington Nationals (81-81): Had someone told Nationals GM Jim Bowden his baseball franchise would win 81 games before last year began, he likely would've been pleased with that kind of end result. Had someone told him that when they were alone in first place at 51-32, he wouldn't have been too happy. The Nationals may have finished in last in the National League East, but they had as successful an 81-81 season when you factor in the injuries they had, plus it being the first year for the team in a new city, which showed great support at RFK Stadium all summer.

The headline this off-season for them was the acquisition of All-Star Alfonso Soriano. On one hand, they get one of the game's most lethal hitters around; on the other you get a defensive liability as he doesn't play real well in the field. In fact, he kind of lacks a defined position, therefore his long awaited move from second base to the outfield will happen. The numbers prove it all: since 2001, his 139 homers are the most by anyone playing the second base position. That's a significant bat any lineup will accept. Then you get the 105 errors since 2001 – most from anyone playing second base – and you'd like to get rid of that quick. Some became skeptical of this move when Soriano sat out a spring training game because they had him lined up in left field and didn't want to play there. Part of it has to do with Soriano being a free agent next season and he knowing he'll have more value as a second baseman on the mark than a left fielder or center fielder. Manager Frank Robinson – six wins shy of 1000 for his career – may shed a little light on the whole situation before the campaign completes.



Washington's Alfonso Soriano certainly can impact a game with hit bat – no matter what position in the field he plays. (AP/James Finley)

As long as Soriano hits, there shouldn't be too many problems. Washington got horrible offensive production from the left side of its infield a year ago; maybe 3B Ryan Zimmerman out of the University of Virginia changes that soon. As a true rookie selected fourth overall in the draft, Zimmerman quickly shot up the team system and played in 20 games, hitting .397. At shortstop, gritty veteran Royce Clayton temporarily takes over for

Cristian Guzman, who'll begin the season on the 15-day DL. Outfielder Jose Guillen (24HR, 76RBI) and first baseman Nick Johnson were the team's two best hitters last season. With three-time All-Star Jose Vidro continuing to dazzle with his glove but be hot and cold offensively, they need to get offensive production out of the left side of the infield, behind the plate and out of center fielder Ryan Church. Catcher Brian Schneider has been more of a force throwing base runners out than being a prolific type hitter.

Pitching wise, the Nationals did as good as most could've predicted. Livan Hernandez turned out to be a terrific ace, pitching in a Major League high 246+ innings and earning an appearance to the All-Star game. Hernandez doesn't wow with delivery or stuff, but knows how to get batters out. Not quite the case for the lanky John Patterson, who warmed up as the season progressed. Patterson, whose big size makes him possibly the leader of this staff for years to come, might be poised for a 15-win year after going 9-7 with a 3.13ERA and a 185-65K/BB ratio during '05. The team has taken a huge hit with the addition of Brian Lawrence as it was recently discovered that Lawrence is likely done for the year due to injury. There's not the depth in the rotation that there is in the bullpen. The 7-8-9 trio of Gary Majewski, Luis Ayala and closer Chad Cordero is one of the NL's very finest. Cordero was the NL's saves leader, using no secrets to locate his pitches extremely well. Ayala tends to throw a heavy sinker down in the zone and also confuse some with his slider. And as far as Majewski goes, his fastball, slider and changeup work well on most anybody.

Bottom Line: Washington played a Major League most 61 one-run games a season ago, going 30-31 overall. They cannot afford to get in that many close games and believe they'll fare a whole lot better. Granted, they do have a dominant hitter in Soriano and the offense shouldn't be last in seven different major categories. When the chance to blow the door off someone they'll need to do it and not blow leads when they get them. With one of baseball's lowest payrolls, it's unlikely Soriano is re-signed for next season. It is, however, pretty likely they try to deal him before the deadline if things are headed in the wrong direction. The Nats certainly brought a special vibe to D.C. in 2005. Duplicating it will mean either they make the postseason or remain in the hunt all season long.

**Projected Order: CF Ryan Church
2B Jose Vidro
RF Jose Guillen
1B Nick Johnson
LF Alfonso Soriano
3B Ryan Zimmerman
C Brian Schneider
SS Royce Clayton**

**Projected Staff: R Livan Hernandez
R John Patterson
R Pedro Astacio
R Ramon Ortiz
R Tony Armas**

Pick: 4th in NL East; fail to reach the playoffs.