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2012
Baseball
Preview

105
Pages of
Analysis

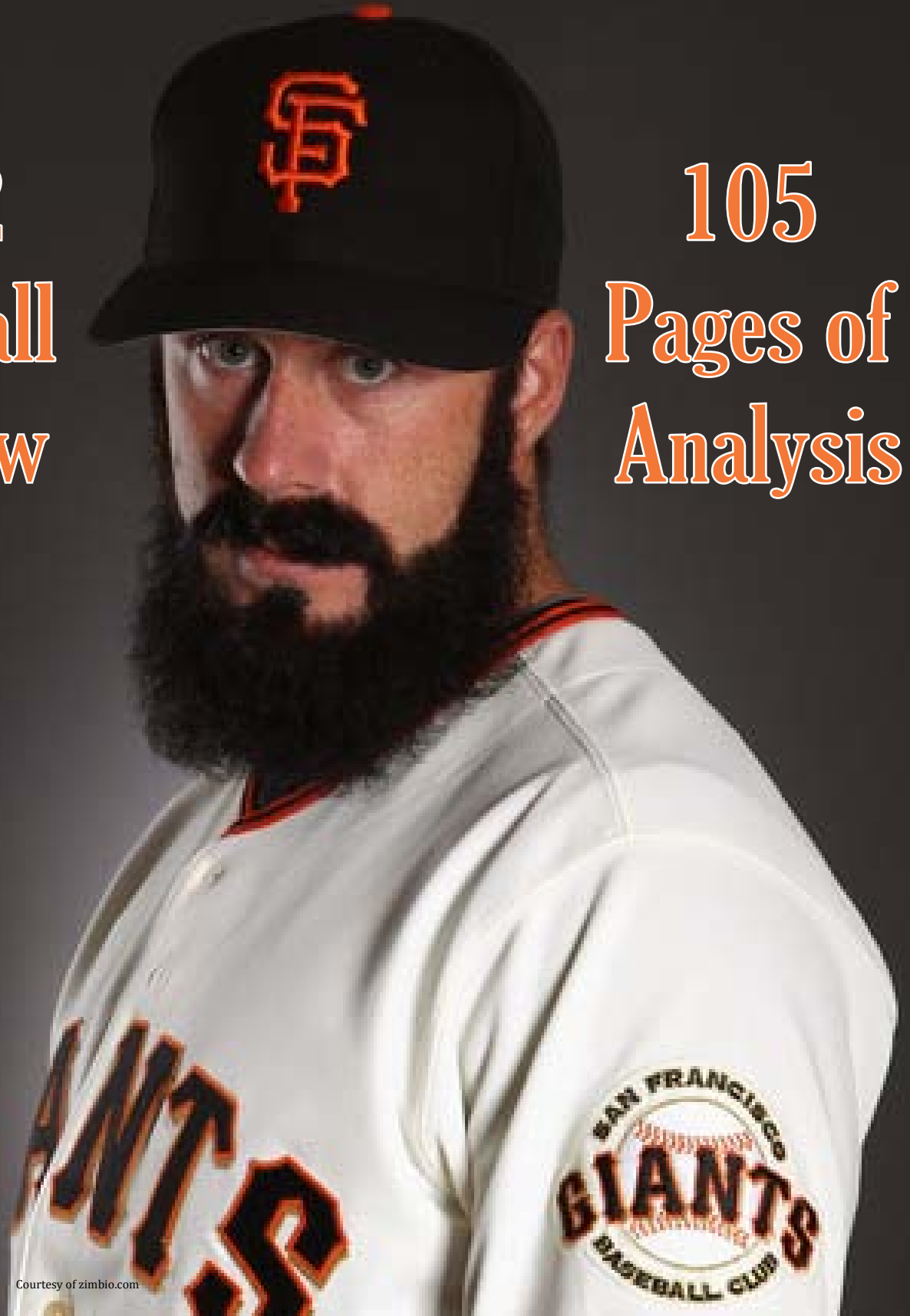


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Matt Moore aims to propel the Rays' young pitching back to the playoffs for the fourth time in five years.

American League National League

WILD CARD ROUND

New York over Angels Miami over Atlanta

DIVISIONAL SERIES

Boston over Detroit Philadelphia over Arizona
Texas over New York Cincinnati over Miami

CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

Boston over Texas Philadelphia over Cincinnati

WORLD SERIES

Boston over Philadelphia

This Baseball Preview is written by Ben Weinrib.
All photos courtesy of daylife.com unless otherwise noted.
The "PR" next to each player on his team's lineup stands for Player Ranking.



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AL East

Jacoby Ellsbury

Courtesy of sportsdata11c.com

AL East

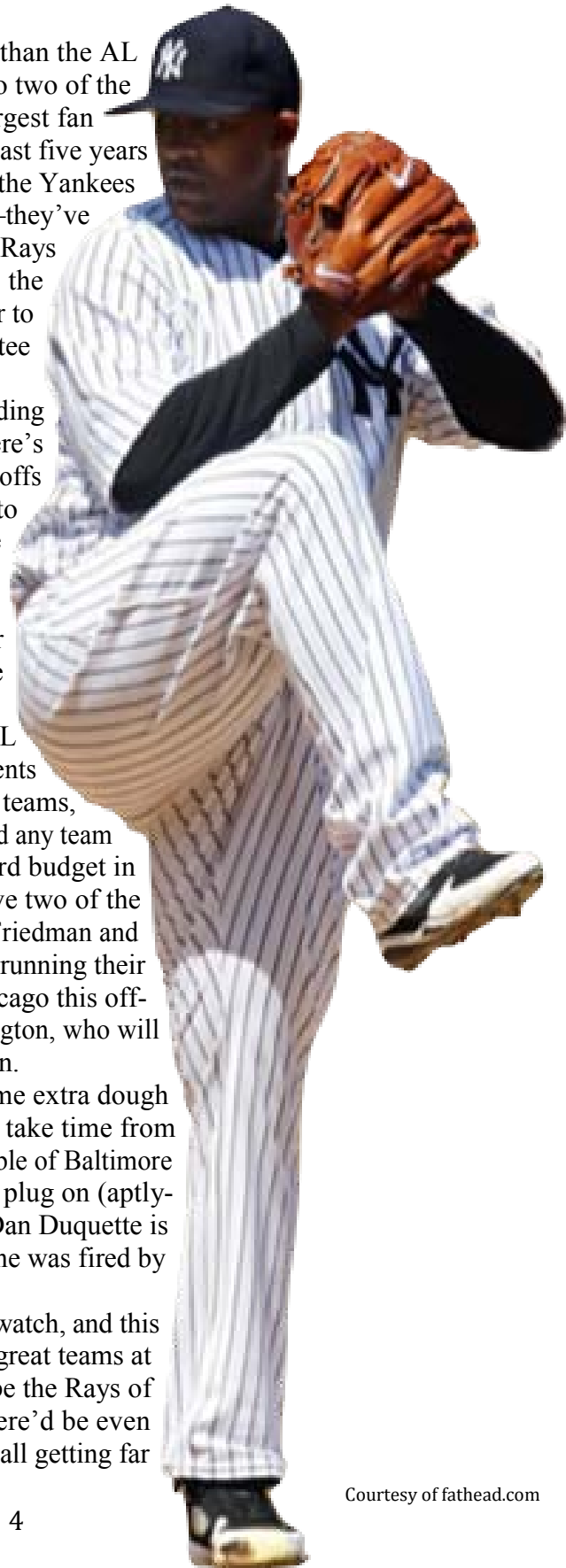
Is there a division more polarizing in all of sports than the AL East? I can't think of any. This division is home to two of the biggest spenders in the game—the teams with the largest fan bases. The Wild Card has come from the East for the last five years and eight of the last nine years. Since the 1994 strike, the Yankees or the Red Sox have made the playoffs every season—they've put a stranglehold atop the division. But now that the Rays have proved they belong in the same conversation as the Sox and Yanks (while the Blue Jays creep ever closer to entering the conversation), there's no longer a guarantee that any team will be headed to October baseball.

No one division was likely more in favor of adding a second Wild Card team than the AL East. While there's always one or two divisions that send a team to the playoffs with about 90 wins or less, a team's pretty much had to win 95 games to make the playoffs in the AL East. One team will win the division with a winning percentage sitting around .600, and all of a sudden there's only one other way for the remaining four teams to qualify for the playoffs: by beating out the rest of the AL for the best non-division winning record.

It's not just the great talent that separates the AL East from the rest of the divisions, the upper managements are what really makes the difference. For the top four teams, that's a good thing. New York has the power to out-spend any team they want to, although they've started to impose a hard budget in the last few years, while Tampa Bay and Toronto have two of the brightest minds working as general managers: Andrew Friedman and Alex Anthopoulos. Boston had one of the best groups running their team headlined by Theo Epstein, but he bolted to Chicago this off-season. Now, the team is left with new GM Ben Cherington, who will almost certainly do a fine job after years under Epstein.

And then we have the Orioles. They spent some extra dough last year to compete, but all that ended up doing was take time from the development of young players and delay the inevitable of Baltimore fading into obscurity by July. They finally pulled the plug on (aptly-named) GM Andy MacPhail, but their replacement, Dan Duquette is far from an inspiring hire. He hasn't run a team since he was fired by Boston in 2002.

This division is always the most interesting to watch, and this year will be no exception. There are three absolutely great teams at the top, and before you know it, the Blue Jays could be the Rays of the next decade. If there was only one Wild Card, there'd be even more drama, but with the Angels, Rangers, and Tigers all getting far better, there will be plenty of drama to go around.



Courtesy of fathead.com

AL East — 1. Boston Red Sox



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	REB	SB	WAR
Jacoby Ellsbury						CF	39
.321	.376	.552	119	32	105	39	9.4
Dustin Pedroia						2B	5
.307	.387	.474	102	21	91	26	8.0
Adrian Gonzalez						1B	4
.338	.410	.548	108	19	117	1	6.6
Kevin Youkilis						3B	14
.258	.373	.459	68	17	80	3	3.7
David Ortiz						DH	20
.309	.398	.554	84	29	96	1	4.2
Carl Crawford						LF	93
.255	.289	.405	65	11	56	18	0.2
Mike Aviles						SS	368
.255	.289	.409	31	7	39	14	0.3
Jarrod Saltalamacchia						C	186
.235	.288	.450	52	16	56	1	2.5
Ryan Sweeney						OF	165
.265	.346	.341	34	1	25	1	0.1
Cody Ross						RF	184
.240	.325	.405	54	14	52	5	0.9
Darnell McDonald						OF	257
.236	.303	.401	26	6	24	2	0.2
Nick Punto						3B/2B	80
.278	.388	.421	21	1	20	1	1.8
Kelly Shoppach						C	258
.176	.268	.339	23	11	22	0	1.1

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Jon Lester					LHP	24
15-9	3.47	3.83	1.26	191.2	182	3.7
Josh Beckett					RHP	68
13-7	2.89	3.57	1.03	193.0	175	4.3
Clay Buchholz					RHP	52
6-3	3.48	4.34	1.29	82.2	60	1.1
Daniel Bard					RHP	20*
2-9	3.33	2.96	0.96	73.0	74	1.8
Felix Doubront					LHP	105
0-0	6.10	5.44	1.94	10.1	6	-0.1
Andrew Bailey					RHP	24
0-4	3.24	2.86	1.10	41.2	41	0.9
Mark Melancon					RHP	51
8-4	2.78	3.25	1.22	74.1	66	0.8
Alfredo Aceves					RHP	49
10-2	2.61	4.03	1.11	114.0	80	1.0

*Relief Pitcher Player Rater



How can it be that a team so hyped can become so overlooked after one year and no major roster turnover? Last year, ESPN had a panel of 45 baseball experts predict the 2011 season. All 45 picked Boston to win the East. 42 picked them to make the World Series, and 33 chose them as the eventual champion. I've never before seen so much backing for one team in baseball—only the Miami Heat rivaled their unanimous support. But like Miami, Boston fell short of their ultimate goal, although the Red Sox's collapse came in the form of blowing a nine-game lead in the final month and losing 18 of their last 24.

Last season, after acquiring Adrian Gonzalez and Carl Crawford, the question was being asked if Boston had the best lineup of all-time. After starting the year 2-10, they took the league by storm going 80-41, thanks in large part to the best offense in the league. In fact, their team mark of 39.2 offensive WAR is the best the American League's seen since the 116-46 Mariners in 2001. If not for the final

month of the season, Boston would have gone into the playoffs as the far and away favorites, this season considered one of the greatest of all-time.

But, of course, the season didn't end September 1. That's not how baseball works. The offense stopped hitting, the pitching lost their touch, and countless clubhouse distractions rendered the team ineffective at the worst possible time. And the aftermath of the biggest collapse in baseball history? The Red Sox lost their manager, general manager, and All-Star closer.

In some ways, the 2012 Red Sox team is very different than last year's team. And for better or for worse, things are more or less the same. For starters, there is an entirely new culture in the clubhouse. New manager Bobby Valentine is much harder than Terry Francona's ever been, which he showed immediately when he banned alcohol from the clubhouse. While it was mostly just a PR stunt, it also illustrated that he means business, and what happened last year is not at all acceptable.

AL East — 1. Boston Red Sox

Additionally, the Red Sox don't have nearly the pressure they had last year. Boston teams will always have a giant target on their backs, but now the Yankees and Rays are being looked at as the class of the East. This team lost all sorts of respect with their late-season collapse—nearly to the point of becoming a sympathetic figure.

But for the most part, this is the exact same team that ran through the majors for most of the season. Marco Scutaro, J.D. Drew, and Jed Lowrie are gone from the lineup, but they weren't major contributors. Cody Ross, Mike Aviles, Ryan Kalish, and Jose

Iglesias can do just as good of a job. Plus Kevin Youkilis missed 42 games, while Carl Crawford looked lost the entire season. If anything, the offense should be even better with Jacoby Ellsbury getting the chance to build off his near-MVP season, Crawford making a rebound, and Adrian Gonzalez and Dustin Pedroia entering their primes.

The puzzling part about the Red Sox, though, has to be the pitching staff. Last winter, this group was looked at as one of the best in the majors. Now, they're just looked at as average. But when you look closer, that really shouldn't be the

“Everybody has something to prove each year. Everybody has a responsibility in this game. Even the batboy.”

--David Ortiz, DH

case. The main difference is that this year, John Lackey and Daisuke Matsuzaka won't be hurting the team by making 35 starts. What's even more confusing is that before last season, Josh Beckett hadn't re-established himself as a front-line starter. Now that he's returned to ace form, one would think Boston's rotation would be more respected. But it hasn't.

There are definitely question marks in the rotation with Clay Buchholz's health, how Daniel Bard's conversion to the rotation will fare, and who will become the fifth starter. But Bard

was a great college starter, and he has the repertoire to be successful. Plus, the Yankees turned Bartolo Colon and Freddy Garcia into more-than-serviceable pitchers, so I'm sure Boston can find some use out of Vicente Padilla and Aaron Cook or young Felix Doubront.

It's easy to see why people have been slow to jump back on this bandwagon, but to say that the 2012 Red Sox team won't be successful because of distractions from down the stretch in 2011 would be foolish. There's a brand new vibe to this team with new management running the show

A Reason for Hope

What's the formula for winning a World Series? Hitting at the right time and pitch big when it counts. Not only do the Red Sox have both, they have both in a big way. They have the best lineup in the league and two aces. Most teams can't say that. We know Jon Lester and Josh Beckett will each do their thing, but if Clay Buchholz and Daniel Bard can prove to be more than just young live arms, this team will be potent. Their pitching lacks a consistently great third starter, but they have two pitchers who have that potential.

The Fatal Flaw

What happens if Buchholz and Bard don't develop into top-of-the-rotation pitchers? Then, all of a sudden, the Red Sox are staring at possibly missing out on the playoffs because of a lack of pitching. And even if they do make it, they'll be nearly completely dependent on Lester and Beckett to carry them through the playoffs. Beyond the first two starters, there's plenty of potential, but potential is what gets managers fired. Buchholz and Bard's development is key for this season.



SP Jon Lester

AL East — 1. Boston Red Sox

and the same great core of players still in place.

Don't forget, though, this offense is as dangerous as they come. The first five hitters in the lineup combined for 31.9 WAR—by far the best in the league, most closely followed by the Yankees' top five with 26.1. And that's not even taking into account Carl Crawford. Even if he only hits half as well as he did over his time in Tampa, he'll make the offense much more dynamic and dangerous. Yes, the bottom third of the line-up (Jarrod Saltalamacchia, Cody Ross, and Mike Aviles) leaves much to be desired, but the first six hitters more than make up for the lack of production at the end of the lineup.

If you want to nitpick, you can find holes in any team. But if you look too hard, you'll miss the forest for the trees. All too often, media and fans get stuck on the collapse last year and fail to see

what a great team Boston was last year. They had a historically great offense to go with two aces and a young stud, Clay Buchholz. All it takes to win the World Series is hot bats and a couple strong starters, but the opposite is the exact way that you can fall out of the playoffs. Call me crazy, but I'm not going to back the Cards this year just because the World Series, and I'm not going to back off on the Red Sox just because they had a collapse.

When picking a division champion, it's important to look at the whole picture rather than a small sample (the September collapse)—only then can you have an objective view of a team. The Red Sox have the best offense, and they have high quality pitching at the top—I see no reason why they shouldn't make the playoffs and be favored to do even more. 🍷

GRADE: 95



Spotlight – Carl Crawford

There might not be a single player in baseball who had a worse hype-to-production ratio last year than Carl Crawford. The difference between him and Adam Dunn is that Dunn DH'd in Chicago and is set to make \$86 million less. But at the spry age of 30, I fully expect Crawford to make a big turnaround. He's averaged 4.9 WAR the previous 7 season; Crawford is leaps and bounds better than he was last year. A Crawford recover is key to Boston becoming more than just a contender.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Xander Bogaerts – SS No one has a higher upside in the Red Sox organization than Bogaerts. At just 18, he hit 16 homers in 296 plate appearances, good for a .249 ISO. He could be a future middle-of-the-order bat like Hanley Ramirez at best, but he's still very raw. The major question is which position he'll play. At 6'3" 175, he may grow out of shortstop and have to shift to 3B, but between Middlebrooks and Kevin Youkilis, that position may already be taken. We won't see him in the majors until 2014 at the earliest, but he'll be a star.	Will Middlebrooks	3B	Athletic with plus arm; big-time power set in. Tends to be aggressive, too many Ks.	B+
	Xander Bogaerts	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Anthony Ranaudo	RHP	Posted okay numbers, but has great stuff. High ceiling, but mechanics can be an issue.	B+
	Matt Barnes	RHP	Very projectable with a great 4-pitch mix featuring a high 90s fastball. High floor.	B+
	Ryan Lavarney	C	Monumental power, superb on-base skills, but far from solid defensively. Future DH?	B+
	Blake Swihart	C	Switch-hitting, athletic with huge upside. May develop plus bat, needs to add weight.	B
	Brandon Jacobs	OF	Breakout star with big-time power, plus speed, high athleticism. Limited defensively.	B
	Bryce Brentz	OF	Prototype RF with plus plus power and arm. All other tools are average, though.	B
	Garin Cecchini	3B	Yet another high upside hitter. Solid power ceiling, great eye. Has some injury concerns.	B
	Jose Iglesias	SS	Still outstanding defender, bat seriously lagging behind. Has time to improve at 22.	B-

AL East — 2. New York Yankees



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RBI	SB	WAR
Derek Jeter						SS		127
.297	.355	.388	84	6		61	16	2.3
Curtis Granderson						CF		17
.262	.364	.552	136	41		119	25	7.0
Robinson Cano						2B		43
.302	.349	.533	104	28		118	8	5.6
Alex Rodriguez						3B		30
.276	.362	.461	67	16		62	4	4.2
Mark Teixeira						1B		23
.248	.341	.494	90	39		111	4	4.2
Nick Swisher						RF		26
.260	.374	.449	81	23		85	2	3.8
Raul Ibanez						DH		297
.245	.289	.419	65	20		84	2	-1.3
Russell Martin						C		139
.237	.324	.408	57	18		65	8	3.1
Brett Gardner						LF		9
.259	.345	.369	87	7		36	49	5.1
Andruw Jones						OF		49
.247	.356	.495	27	13		33	0	1.4
Eric Chavez						3B		319
.263	.320	.356	16	2		26	0	0.6
Eduardo Nuñez						SS/2B		360
.265	.313	.385	38	5		30	22	-0.6
Francisco Cervelli						C		298
.266	.324	.395	17	4		22	4	0.5

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
CC Sabathia						LHP	18
19-8	3.00	2.88	1.23	237.1	230		7.1
Michael Pineda						RHP	27
9-10	3.74	3.42	1.10	171.0	173		3.4
Hiroki Kuroda						RHP	14
13-16	3.07	3.78	1.21	202.0	161		2.4
Ivan Nova						RHP	86
16-4	3.70	4.01	1.33	165.1	98		2.7
Phil Hughes						RHP	101
5-5	5.79	4.58	1.49	74.2	47		0.7
Mariano Rivera						RHP	5
1-2	1.91	2.19	0.90	61.1	60		2.4
David Robertson						RHP	10
4-0	1.08	1.84	1.13	66.2	100		2.8
Rafael Soriano						RHP	55
2-3	4.12	3.97	1.30	39.1	36		0.3

In my six years writing baseball previews, I've always had one major issue with the Yankees: they've always lacked great pitching. New York has had lots of very good pitching between Mike Mussina, Andy Pettitte, and crew, but beyond CC Sabathia, the Yankees haven't had much front-line pitching. They gave A.J. Burnett \$82.5 million, but all he's done is give the entire Bronx a headache with a 4.79 ERA and less than 6 innings per start. Sure, Burnett would have his moments. He has among the best stuff in the major leagues, and could throw a fourteen strikeout two-hitter on any give start. But he was just as likely to get shelled for nine earned runs in 2 1/3 innings—he could never be trusted.

They've tried (twice) to fix the staff by trading for Javier Vazquez, but he couldn't handle the Big Apple. I laughed when they tried out (and ultimately won with) Freddy Garcia and Bartolo Colon, but those are just stopgaps. Even their trusty \$100 million ace CC Sabathia has been

anything but trustworthy in the playoffs—he has a 4.81 ERA and 1.62 WHIP in postseason play.

New York desperately needed long-term help for the rotation, and it wasn't coming from within. Joba Chamberlain flopped as a starter, Ian Kennedy never found success until he was traded, and Phil Hughes has been shaky at best. The only homegrown pitcher in the last handful of seasons to contribute as a starter has been Ivan Nova, who surpassed all expectations in his rookie season, thanks to a high ground ball rate.

But the Yankees are a special team, one in a different league entirely from every other team. They have other ways of acquiring prime talent. And this winter, they flexed their economic muscle by making two swift moves on the same January day. The team signed Hiroki Kuroda for \$10 million and traded star prospect Jesus Montero for Michael Pineda. All of a sudden, the Yankees don't seem to be lacking so much pitching.

Young, quality pitching is one

AL East — 2. New York Yankees

of the hardest entities for teams to get their hands on in baseball. Pineda was among four starters under 27 to be traded this off-season (the others being Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, and Mat Latos), and each fetched a crop of several elite prospects. Young pitching prospects are especially volatile, just look at the Yankees' lack of success if you need further proof. And although New York had to part with a real blue-chipper in Montero, offense and catching depth are not problems for this team.

Even before the Pineda trade, there were several question marks surrounding Jesus Montero.

The most pressing one was which position he'll spend the majority of his career at. It's clear that he won't stick at catcher, but his value is seriously shot down if he ends up playing first base or DH-ing. GM Brian Cashman ultimately decided that a potential ace is a better get than a mashing young hitter without a position. This choice was made much easier when considering the Yankees have lots of depth at catcher with Russell Martin and Francisco Cervelli in the majors and Gary Sanchez (who is very similar to Montero) and Austin Romine in the minors.

Instead of having the

"Our goal is to win the World Series ... and if we don't, the season is a failure."

--Derek Jeter, SS

youngster Montero getting ABs at DH, the Yanks opted to go in another direction—they signed Raul Ibanez to a one-year deal. But really, that move doesn't make much sense. The 39-year old couldn't last an entire season in the easier National League, hitting a lousy .245/.289/.419 when he did play. But the Yankees need to save the DH for spotting Derek Jeter, Alex Rodriguez, and crew a day off in the field, and Ibanez is no longer even an average hitter.

There's no doubt that the Yankees lineup is great, though. As always, they need to be compared to the Red Sox, and they compare favorably in some ways, while comparing worse in others.

Overall, the lineup isn't quite as good as Boston's, since New York's best hitters aren't quite up to the par of Adrian Gonzalez, Dustin Pedroia, and Jacoby Ellsbury. But the advantage they do have is that their lineup has fewer holes and is better balanced. Ibanez is the only truly weak hitter on the team, no matter your opinion on Jeter's decline or Russell Martin's bat.

I won't waste too much time commenting on the greatness of the Yankees lineup, you can just look at the numbers and look at the pedigree of each of the hitters for that. Instead, I'll break down exactly why I've made the (possibly controversial) pick of

A Reason for Hope

New York ran away with the AL East by the end of the season, and they really haven't lost any key players since then. But the major difference between this season and last is the addition of high-quality pitching. So long to A.J. Burnett and Bartolo Colon, the Yanks now have Michael Pineda and Hiroki Kuroda (not to mention possible contributions from Andy Pettitte) to lessen the burden on CC Sabathia's massive shoulders. A great offense and much improved pitching, what's not to love?

The Fatal Flaw

Well the only thing not to love about the Yankees is that those same new pitchers—Pineda, Kuroda, and even Pettitte—have questions surrounding them. Pineda's ERA away from Safeco Field is 4.40, including 4.73 against the AL East. Kuroda would not allow a trade to New York last summer, and I'm not certain he has the mindset for The Big Apple. And Andy Pettitte? If he makes it to June with his arm in one piece, I'll call this season a success. I don't expect much of anything from him.



SS Derek Jeter

AL East — 2. New York Yankees

the Red Sox over the Yankees in the AL East.

My pick may seem a bit strange at first because the Yankees won seven more games last year and improved more on paper over the winter than the Red Sox. But it may also not come as a surprise if you look at my history of picking this division. But—get this—I'm actually picking the Red Sox to win the division because I believe they are the better-built team with more firepower and proven performers.

New York's offense is often heralded as one of the best in the league, but it's no Red Sox lineup. Mark Teixeira is no Adrian Gonzalez and Ibañez is no David Ortiz. Robbie Cano and Curtis Granderson more or less cancel out with Dustin Pedroia and Jacoby Ellsbury, but under normal circumstances, Brett Gardner wouldn't be in

the same league as Crawford.

Even in terms of pitching, I give the slight edge to Boston. As previously noted, Sabathia has continually come up short in big games, and we don't know how well Pineda will handle the New York media, a playoff atmosphere, or even the shift from an extreme pitchers park (Safeco) to an extreme hitters park (the new Yankee Stadium). In the end, Jon Lester, Josh Beckett, and the Red Sox have been there and done that, while we can't be sure for New York.

All three teams atop the AL East will be great. It's very likely that all three will make the playoffs. I like the Yankees more than the Rays because of the strength of New York's offense, but they fall just a tad short of Boston because of overall talent. It'll be very tight, but New York will do just fine in the end. ①

GRADE: 94



Spotlight – Mariano Rivera

You won't find a reliever more consistent than Mariano Rivera—at least we haven't to this point. I know it sounds like blasphemy, but at 42 years old, Mariano Rivera could be nearing the end of the road fairly soon. His contact rate has been steadily rising over the past four years or so, it's now up to a hefty 83.3%. I'm not saying this is the beginning of the end, but the Yankees should take initiative and start to bolster their bullpen in the case that their safety net isn't so safe anymore.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Gary Sanchez – C The Yankees traded Jesus Montero because they needed pitching, and he wasn't able to stick at catcher, despite his strong bat. Sanchez has a similar game with huge power, a borderline plus bat, and lots of question marks defensively. While he's only 19-years old and has time to develop, he may have to move off the position soon, but he'll still be able to hit well for a first baseman or designated hitter. He's not Montero, but he's a very good alternative.	Manny Banuelos	LHP	Disappointing season, but still has a lot of upside at 20. Plus change, solid control.	B+
	Mason Williams	OF	Big-time athlete with plus speed, arm, and bat. Gap power could become HR power.	B
	Dellin Betances	RHP	Big frame, big fastball, but command may move him to the 'pen. Two solid off-speeds.	B
	Gary Sanchez	C	See Prospect Spotlight	B
	Jose Campos	RHP	Acquired with Pineda, has great velocity, lacks control. Great '11 numbers, very raw.	B
	Dante Bichette Jr.	3B	Produced well with good bat, patience, but defense is just average. Solid upside.	B
	Ravel Santana	OF	Raw, very athletic with great power-speed combo, upside. Injuries are a huge concern.	B-
	Brett Austin	3B	Young (19), but shows mature approach, plus bat, above-average speed, patience.	B-
	Slade Heathcott	OF	Toolsy draftee from 2009, but play hasn't matched skills. Injuries hamper his upside.	C+
	Austin Romine	C	Stud defender with great leadership, his bat has not come along. Profiles as a backup.	C+

AL East — 3. Tampa Bay Rays



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Desmond Jennings						LF	77
.259	.356	.449	44	10	25	20	2.4
B.J. Upton						CF	71
.243	.331	.429	82	23	81	36	4.1
Evan Longoria						3B	7
.244	.355	.495	78	31	99	3	6.1
Carlos Peña						1B	60
.225	.357	.462	72	28	80	2	2.6
Ben Zobrist						2B	11
.269	.353	.469	99	20	91	19	6.6
Matt Joyce						RF	44
.277	.347	.478	69	19	75	13	3.8
Luke Scott						DH	134
.220	.301	.402	24	9	22	1	-0.1
Jose Molina						C	266
.281	.342	.415	19	3	15	2	1.3
Sean Rodriguez						SS	157
.223	.323	.357	45	8	36	11	2.3
Sam Fuld						OF	161
.240	.313	.360	41	3	27	20	1.9
Reid Brignac						SS	375
.193	.227	.221	18	1	15	3	-1.1
Jeff Keppinger						IF	338
.277	.300	.377	39	6	35	0	0.4
Jose Lobaton						C	NR
.118	.231	.147	2	0	0	0	-0.2

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
David Price						LHP	34
12-13	3.49	3.32	1.14	224.1	218		4.7
James Shields						RHP	43
16-12	2.82	3.42	1.04	249.1	225		4.9
Jeremy Hellickson						RHP	47
13-10	2.95	4.44	1.15	189.0	117		1.4
Matt Moore						LHP	NR
1-0	2.89	2.17	1.29	9.1	15		0.4
Wade Davis						RHP	117
11-10	4.45	4.67	1.38	184.0	105		0.9
Kyle Farnsworth						RHP	40
5-1	2.18	3.16	0.99	57.2	51		0.9
Joel Peralta						RHP	32
3-4	2.93	3.37	0.92	67.2	61		0.8
J.P. Howell						LHP	93
2-3	6.16	5.41	1.57	30.2	26		-0.5

Back in April 2008 when the Rays were still thought of as a perennial basement-dweller, Tampa Bay made a surprise promotion two weeks into the season. Willy Aybar was placed on the DL, and star prospect Evan Longoria got the call. Six days later, the team gave Longoria a 6-year deal worth \$17.5 million. Just four games into his major league career, the team gave him a long-term deal that left him “pretty much set for life,” but he did sign the deal risking millions of dollars. If he produced 26.9 WAR in just his first four seasons, he’d be sacrificing potentially \$50-70 million. And he did just that.

That wasn’t the first time that Tampa had tried that trick, though. One year before, Tampa had a similar offer on the table for B.J. Upton, but he balked at the offer, hoping for a more lucrative deal later. One, which still hasn’t come. Although signing Longoria is clearly laden with risk—he could’ve proven to be highly injury prone or just plain not good, and Tampa would be down \$20 precious

million—the upside, as shown in Longoria’s case, makes it all worth Tampa’s trouble.

The Rays have had all sorts of elite prospects come through the system since 2008. Longoria. David Price. Desmond Jennings. Wade Davis. But the most recent player to break into the Trop with prodigious expectations is Matt Moore. Just like Price during the ’08 World Series run, Moore first pitched in the Majors on September 14, and after a handful of games was thrust into the spotlight of postseason baseball. Price and Moore both pitched extremely well; they each surrendering just one earned run and then were put in the starting rotation the next year. And just like they did with Longoria, Tampa offered Moore a long-term, team-friendly deal. And he bit. Tampa Bay locked up their young future ace for five years at \$14 million, tacking on three club options worth \$26 million.

The Rays don’t have the payroll of the Yankees, Red Sox, Tigers, Angels, and Rangers. If they did,

AL East — 3. Tampa Bay Rays

they'd have been able to retain Carl Crawford last winter to form the best defensive outfield ever seen of Crawford, Desmond Jennings, and B.J. Upton. They may not have the deepest pockets in the league, but they do have one of the deepest collections of bright, analytic minds running the team. Where a big market team may be \$200K apart from a player in arbitration and just split the difference, the Rays won't settle at the midpoint—they fight hard to win every arbitration case. Because in Tampa's book, every dollar of value matters when building a team.

This winter, there were

rumors floating all over about the Rays potentially trying to trade James Shields for prospects or use him as a trade chip for a great hitter, since he's free agent at the end of the year. But since they ended up holding on to their front-line starter, they signaled to the baseball world that they mean business. They're gunning for a title this season.

When discussing the best rotations in the game, three teams usually come to mind: the Phillies, Giants, and Angels. Each team has three great pitchers (Halladay, Lee, and Hamels; Lincecum, Cain, and Bumgarner; Weaver, Haren, and Wilson), but after their Big

“To walk away from that (defensive) formula at this point would not be wise.”

--Joe Maddon, Manager

Threes, the talent level really drops off. No offense to Joe Blanton, Barry Zito, and Jerome Williams, but that group couldn't even make up an Average Three. But the team that belongs with Philly, San Fran, and LA—if not above them—is Tampa Bay.

The Rays have three things: talent, youth, and depth. The talent is evident, even at an average age of nearly 26. All, with the exception of Shields, were elite prospects in their time in the minors, and they've each shown flashes of brilliance in the majors. Ultimately, though, what makes this rotation so great is the depth. 1 through 4, the Rays would be very comfortable starting any of their pitchers in a

key game, and many people (including myself) expect Wade Davis to vault himself into the next level as a pitcher.

There's no question this team will succeed, just by the strength of their pitching alone, they'd be a good team. But in the AL East, just good won't cut it. The Red Sox had the best offense in the league last year—despite their massive September collapse that allowed Tampa into the postseason—and the Yankees weren't far behind. While those teams don't have nearly the depth of pitching that Tampa Bay does, they both have great pitchers at the top of the rotation, pitchers that are proven in the playoffs and aren't

A Reason for Hope

Simply put, this is more or less the same team as last year. They even made it to the postseason with one less playoff team in 2011. But most importantly, they get a whole season from dynamic rookies Desmond Jennings and Matt Moore. Both had the talent to play most of—if not all of—last season, but because of arbitration issues, their respective promotions were delayed. Jennings created 2.4 WAR in well under a half-season, and Moore was lights-out in his short time.

The Fatal Flaw

The common thread between the Red Sox, Yankees, Rangers, and Tigers is that all four have elite offenses. The Rays just don't have one. Evan Longoria may be the best third baseman in the game, but he and Ben Zobrist are the only truly dependable hitters in the lineup. B.J. Upton is perpetually inconsistent, Carlos Peña and Luke Scott are over the hill, and Jose Molina was never a good hitter. The rest of the lineup is talented, but still very young and lacks much track record.



2B Ben Zobrist

AL East — 3. Tampa Bay Rays

afraid of the spotlight.

Since we can be nearly certain that the Rays' rotation will be stellar, the key to their season will fall onto the shoulders of the offense. The unit finished 7th in offensive WAR in 2011, but their on-base percentage wasn't nearly as impressive, falling in the middle of the pack. But, of course, that lineup included the departed Casey Kotchman and Johnny Damon. Now, the lineup features Carlos Peña, a shell of his old self from his first stint in Tampa Bay, and Luke "301 OBP" Scott. That's not even mentioning career .286 OBP Jose Molina taking over every day at catcher.

All of this is not meant to sound too pessimistic, though, because this offense will remain very strong. They have speed at the top of the lineup with Upton, Jennings, and the perpetually underrated Ben Zobrist, plus lots

of pop from six above average bats. You may not know they're names, but Matt Joyce, Jennings and Zobrist can flat out hit.

The Rays will do very well this season, there's no question about it. They, like every team, have flaws, but a weak 'pen can be overlooked with such a strong rotation—just think, Jeff Niemann and his 4.06 ERA can't even find a rotation spot. But what's going to hurt them in the end is a lack of high-quality hitting, like the rest of the American League powers have. Luckily, MLB's added a second wild card team, so the Rays won't have to worry about winning 94 games, finishing third in the East and missing the playoffs. I want to pick the Rays for a Wild Card, but I think in the end they'll fall just short of the Angels for the final Wild Card—unless their offense starts clicking on all cylinders. Ⓢ
GRADE: 93



Spotlight – Desmond Jennings

The Rays can't afford to bring in big-name free agents or keep expensive bats, but they have a seemingly endless stream of hot young prospects coming up. Desmond Jennings is the big ticket offensively. He's been a top-tier prospect on the radar for two years now, but his well overdo late-July call-up proved he is far better than advertised. If he can even remotely replicate his 2011 campaign, he'll end up having a better career than Carl Crawford and prove to be a key for a deep Rays playoff run.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Tim Beckham – SS	Hak-Ju Lee	SS	Plus speed, bat, arm and an elite glove. He won't have power, will have big test at AA.	B+
Beckham was drafted first overall in 2008 ahead of Eric Hosmer and Buster Posey, among others, but he's been a huge disappointment, to say the least. He's still just 22, though, and finally showed some of the promise that got him drafted so high. He's extremely athletic with a great arm, and he launched 5 homers in his 111 AAA plate appearances. He may have to move to 2B when he reaches the majors because of Hak-Ju Lee, but it's not time to give up on Beckham yet.	Taylor Guerrieri	RHP	Highest upside in the system with great stuff, velocity, but immaturity is an issue.	B+
	Chris Archer	RHP	Took a step back numbers-wise, but stuff, athleticism remain. Consistency will be key.	B+
	Enny Romero	LHP	High upside, average production. 3 plus pitches, will add velocity with bigger frame.	B
	Mikie Mahtook	OF	Great collegiate career, strong pro debut. Plus arm and speed, bat has high potential.	B
	Alexander Torres	LHP	Can be dominating, but often loses control and gets hit hard. 24, ready to contribute.	B
	Alex Colome	RHP	Hard-thrower with only 2 quality pitches. Struggles with control, may end up relieving.	B
	Tim Beckham	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Drew Vettleson	OF	Every tool is above-average, but none are great. On pace to become prototype RF.	B-
	Derek Dietrich	SS	Great power for a middle infielder, but will likely shift to 3B. Too many strikeouts.	B-

AL East — 4. Toronto Blue Jays



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RBI	SB	WAR
Yunel Escobar						SS		114
.290	.369	.413	77	11		48	3	4.3
Eric Thames						LF		243
.262	.313	.456	58	12		37	2	0.9
Jose Bautista						RF		1
.302	.447	.608	105	43		103	9	8.3
Adam Lind						1B		299
.251	.295	.439	56	26		87	1	0.5
Edwin Encarnacion						DH		211
.272	.334	.453	70	17		55	8	1.5
Brett Lawrie						3B		47
.293	.373	.580	26	9		25	7	2.7
Kelly Johnson						2B		72
.222	.304	.413	75	21		58	16	2.2
Colby Rasmus						CF		191
.225	.298	.391	75	14		53	5	0.8
J.P. Arencibia						C		220
.219	.282	.438	47	23		78	1	1.5
Travis Snider						OF		307
.225	.269	.348	23	3		30	9	0.3
Mike McCoy						Util		336
.198	.291	.269	26	2		10	12	0.3
Omar Vizquel						SS/3B		361
.251	.287	.305	18	0		8	1	-0.5
Jeff Mathis						C		378
.174	.225	.259	18	3		22	1	-1.0

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Ricky Romero						LHP	59
15-11	2.92	4.20	1.14	225.0	178		2.0
Brandon Morrow						RHP	81
11-11	4.72	3.64	1.29	179.1	203		3.4
Brett Cecil						LHP	109
4-11	4.73	5.10	1.33	123.2	87		0.4
Henderson Alvarez						RHP	33
1-3	3.53	3.97	1.13	63.2	40		1.0
Kyle Drabek						RHP	139
4-5	6.06	5.52	1.81	78.2	51		-0.2
Sergio Santos						RHP	33
4-5	3.55	2.87	1.11	63.1	92		1.6
Darren Oliver						LHP	23
5-5	2.29	2.77	1.14	51.0	44		1.3
Casey Janssen						RHP	66
6-0	2.26	2.45	1.10	55.2	53		1.3

Five years ago, *Sports Illustrated* ran a mock cover for their future 2010 Baseball Preview, where they pronounced that the Devil Rays would be the best team in baseball. It seemed laughable at the time, but the prediction nearly came true just eighteen months later when the Rays went from worst to first and earned a birth to the World Series. Sure, the cover boys were Delmon Young and Elijah Dukes, neither of whom had 850 plate appearances with the team before being traded, but *SI* got the main idea right. That team was headed in the right direction with a great young core. I'm not quite ready to say that Toronto will be a World Series contender in three years, but they're on their way up with a bright future ahead.

The Rays turned around their franchise with lots of young, affordable pitching and enough speed and power to keep themselves ahead. Toronto has really built up a great collection of young hitters, but they've deviated from Tampa's plan by how they acquire the hitting. Instead of

grooming a cadre of hitting prospects and hoping for a few to pan out, GM Alex Anthopolous has jumped on great buy-low candidates whenever another team got desperate and needed to make a big move.

Last year, Anthopolous traded Alex Gonzalez—a shortstop he picked up in free agency the previous winter—to the Braves for then-27-year old Yunel Escobar. Escobar had a disappointing first half, including some attitude problems, but Toronto saw past that, picking up a very good young player on the cheap. The next off-season, they moved their soft-tossing “ace” Shaun Marcum to Milwaukee for highly touted prospect Brett Lawrie. Now, Lawrie is 22 and already one of the best young hitters in the game. Again, Anthopolous struck while the iron was hot, picking up a great young hitter for fifty cents on the dollar.

To nobody's surprise, Anthopolous struck again in 2011 with two great buy-low investments. Just before the trade deadline, he

AL East — 4. Toronto Blue Jays

caught the Cardinals in a tough position. The team was struggling to jockey its way into playoff position, and needed to add pitching. Colby Ramsus, the best hitting prospect to come through St. Louis in the past decade, was having an okay-at-best season, so the Cards deemed him trade bait. Toronto bit, and it appears they've now found their center fielder of the future.

Anthopolous struck less than a month later when he caught NL West-leading Arizona with the upper hand. The D-Backs needed an upgrade over struggling Kelly Johnson—who

had a .287 OBP in a hitters' park—and wanted to shore up their shot at winning the division. Stephen Drew was (shockingly) injured again, so the club needed a short-stop, too. And guess who had a middle infield combination on the market? Toronto, of course. They jumped on the opportunity to pick up a 29-year old All-Star on the cheap, and found themselves a quality second baseman.

Aside from the not-so-vaunted pair of Eric Thames and Adam Lind, the Blue Jays haven't developed a single hitter themselves. They traded for Jose Bautista, J.P. Arencibia, and Edwin

“People ask me: 'Who do you have in the World Series?' Well, I don't want anyone to win. I want it to be us. I don't want my season to end. I wish we were playing October baseball.”

--Ricky Romero, SP

Encarnacion, and even their top prospect, Travis d'Arnaud. But it doesn't really matter how they got their players, what's key is that Toronto has put together a great core of young hitters.

Toronto has been stockpiling young hitting for the last few seasons at the major league level, but what's even more impressive is the sheer amount of young quality pitching they have. The rotation is anchored by 27-year olds Ricky Romero (drafted sixth overall in 2005) and Brandon Morrow (plucked from

the Mariners two years ago). After that, they have 25-year old Brett Cecil, 21-year old Henderson Alvarez, and 24-year old Kyle Drabek. The pitching may be ugly this season, but the pitchers currently in place all—with the exception of Cecil—have the upside of top-end starters.

But perhaps even more impressive than the talent amassed in the majors is the job Anthopolous has done collecting pitchers in the minors. His trademark under the Blue Jays has been collecting free agents-to-be

A Reason for Hope

Alex Anthopolous may secretly be the best GM in the game—and he hasn't even been on the job for three years yet. He's turned the Jays into the Rays 2.0 with a huge stress on building through young talent. He's already the best in the business at trades (just look at how he got the Angels to take on Vernon Wells' entire contract for Mike Napoli), and he'll surely find a new addition for Toronto in the middle of the season. The man is a baseball genius; he's bringing Toronto back to relevancy.

The Fatal Flaw

The Blue Jays may be full of talent, but they're not nearly ready to compete now. The main problem is that they're just too young. Young hitting isn't always a huge problem—especially when there are players as talented as Brett Lawrie on the team—but teams often run into trouble with young pitching. Toronto has no one over 27 in their rotation; Brandon Morrow is the veteran with five years of experience. The group of pitchers just isn't consistent enough to win with now.



RF Jose Bautista

AL East — 4. Toronto Blue Jays

and just stockpiles draft picks as they leave. The move that best exemplifies this sentiment is when he traded for Miguel Olivo last off-season—only to decline his team option the next day. Of course, Olivo was a Type-B free agent, so when he signed with Colorado, Toronto got the 53rd pick in the draft.

In the two drafts he's overseen, Anthopolous has had fourteen picks in the first two rounds. All that's done is given Toronto the single deepest farm system in the league. Half of their top ten prospects came from the past two drafts, and that's not even considering Asher Wojciechowski, who just missed the cut. The Jays are swimming in top-notch pitching talent—just imagine if they won the bidding on Yu Darvish, too.

But unfortunately all good things must come to an end. Major League Baseball and the

MLBPA agreed to a new Collective Bargaining Agreement, avoiding a lockout—imagine that. One of the major changes involved acquiring amateur players. Free agent compensation has been drastically changed, and there's been a spending limit imposed on the Amateur Draft and international free agency. Without a large draft budget and cornucopia of compensatory picks, Anthopolous will have to find a new, creative way to gain a competitive edge.

For now, the Jays are just an average team. They're inexperienced and stuck in a monster of a division. But just like the Devil Rays in 2007, they're a couple players and a bit of luck away from being a serious contender. Keep your eyes out for Toronto because the AL East should be a four-team race in 2013.

GRADE: 88



Spotlight – Eric Thames

The only two homegrown hitters in the Jays' lineup are actually two of the only three hitters in the lineup I'm not a big fan of. Edwin Encarnacion and Adam Lind were never great, and they're past their peaks. Eric Thames is just 25 years old—but I'm not sure he'll ever be more than a 4th outfielder. Thames actually had a very solid career as an older prospect, but he doesn't have any plus tools. He lacks power, speed, and range, plus his .313 OBP didn't nearly resemble his career minor league .385 OBP.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Adeiny Hechavarria – SS The Blue Jays have by far the best farm system in the game thanks to crazy depth and lots of high-upside players. Adeiny Hechavarria may not have put up the stats his fellow Top-10ers did, but he is still well deserving of a spot here. The slick-fielding shortstop showed why he got a \$10 million deal. He stole 20 bases (although he was caught 15 times) and put up solid power numbers. But if he ever wants to be more than a Rey Ordoñez-type, he needs a breakout offensive year.	Travis d'Arnaud	C	Average defensively, but wields a mean bat. Great power, but discipline is okay at best.	A-
	Anthony Gose	OF	Blazing speed, plus power, patience makes up for poor contact. Plus range and arm.	B+
	Daniel Norris	LHP	Very good tools, the highest ceiling among pitchers in the system. Needs consistency.	B+
	Justin Nicolino	LHP	Posted unbelievable numbers (1.33 ERA, .85 WHIP) in A-ball with to plus control.	B+
	Jake Marisnick	OF	Power, bat, speed, and great defense. He just needs consistency and less strikeouts.	B+
	Noah Syndergaard	RHP	Great pitcher's frame, plus plus fastball. Great stats; stamina stands to improve.	B+
	Drew Hutchinson	RHP	Plus control, solid 3-pitch mix, doesn't have the ceiling of others in the system.	B+
	Deck McGuire	RHP	Four-pitch mix is nothing special. Control, stamina, however, have lots of promise.	B
	Aaron Sanchez	RHP	Didn't post great numbers, but has plenty of upside thanks to great stuff (plus curve).	B
	Adeiny Hechavarria	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	B-

AL East — 5. Baltimore Orioles



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Brian Roberts						2B	240
.221	.273	.331	18	3	19	6	0.2
Nick Markakis						RF	122
.284	.351	.406	72	15	73	12	2.2
Adam Jones						CF	212
.280	.319	.466	68	25	83	12	2.9
Matt Wieters						C	105
.262	.328	.450	72	22	68	1	4.3
Mark Reynolds						3B	140
.221	.323	.262	84	37	86	6	0.3
J.J. Hardy						SS	82
.269	.310	.491	76	30	80	0	4.8
Wilson Betemit						DH	178
.285	.343	.452	40	8	46	4	1.0
Nolan Reimold						LF	210
.247	.328	.453	40	13	45	7	1.5
Chris Davis						1B	346
.266	.305	.402	25	5	19	1	-0.3
Endy Chavez						OF	265
.301	.323	.426	37	5	27	10	1.5
Jai Miller						OF	238
.250	.250	.500	2	1	2	0	0.0
Robert Andino						IF	270
.263	.327	.344	63	5	36	13	1.8
Taylor Teagarden						C	276
.235	.278	.294	3	0	2	0	0.2

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Zach Britton						LHP	111
11-11	4.61	4.00	1.45	154.1	97		2.5
Brian Matusz						LHP	76
1-9	10.69	7.66	2.11	49.2	38		-1.0
Jason Hammel						RHP	106
7-13	4.76	4.83	1.43	170.1	94		1.0
Wei-Yin Chen						LHP	NR
8-10	2.68	3.23	1.03	164.2	94		---
Jake Arrieta						RHP	137
10-8	5.05	5.34	1.46	119.1	93		0.2
Jim Johnson						RHP	50
6-5	2.67	3.22	1.11	91.0	58		1.6
Pedro Strop						RHP	34
2-1	2.05	2.62	1.14	22.0	21		0.6
Matt Lindstrom						RHP	86
2-2	3.00	3.30	1.22	54.0	36		0.8

*Japanese Central League Stats

I'm not exactly sure where to start with the Orioles. Last year, I got the bright idea of picking them to finish third in the East after they picked up Mark Reynolds, Vladimir Guerrero, and Derrek Lee. Let's just say that wasn't my best pick. As it turns out, the Orioles are still the Orioles, and these birds have yet to take flight.

It's really hard to point out one singular flaw with the Baltimore Orioles. It's like trying to point out what was wrong with the pre-Chris Paul LA Clippers—just without the beautiful Southern California weather. The management is bad, they spend money in all the wrong ways, they have untimely injuries, and they just have a general lack of talent.

What's so strange about the Orioles is that isn't not as if this team is devoid of young talent. Matt Wieters was the top prospect in baseball three years ago, and Nick Markakis and Adam Jones were two of the highest touted outfielders when they broke into the majors in '06. They've even got plenty of promise

from young starting pitching between Zach Britton, Brian Matusz, and Jake Arrieta. But that's where the problem lies. With the young pitching.

Over the years, the Orioles have actually had some pretty solid pitchers come through the system. Erik Bedard was great until he was traded for Adam Jones and a few other prospects, and Jeremy Guthrie was dependable until he was traded in an oddly attempted salary dump this off-season in which the Orioles actually took on money. But more recently, every time a promising young pitcher entered the system, something has gone wrong—their skills have vastly diminished.

Three young pitchers, in particular have fallen victim to this system-wide bug, if you will: Brian Matusz, Chris Tillman, and Jake Arrieta. The first two broke into the Bigs in 2009, followed by Arrieta the next year. In their rookie seasons, Matusz and Tillman sat around 91-92 MPH on their fastball, but each of the following seasons, they saw their velocity dip all the way down to 86-

AL East — 5. Baltimore Orioles

89. Their production dropped with their velocity, as Matusz shattered records with a 10.69 ERA and Tillman now lacks a solid role going forward in Baltimore. Arrieta, too saw his velocity tick down since he set foot in Baltimore, just not to the extent of the others.

But it's not just the pitchers in the majors with this problem, as noted by ESPN analyst Keith Law, pitchers throughout the minors are having the same problem. Former top picks Matt Hobgood and Brandon Erbe also fit under that category. Both pitchers seriously injured their shoulders and lost velocity when

they returned. Even Zach Britton seems to have lost something off his heater since reaching the upper ranks of the minors.

Now, this could just be a coincidence among six young pitchers in a three-year window. But this seems far too connected to be a mere string of random injuries, especially when you take into account the fact that the O's threw the seventh highest percentage of fastballs in the league. I'm not quite sure if the problem is overusing the fastball to the point of injury, but it's certainly something new GM Dan Duquette needs to look into.

"We know the end is near and we're fighting right to the end ... I think we like to be in this situation. Everybody the last month has been working their tails off."

--Adam Jones, CF

In the meantime, the Orioles will remain very poor in terms of pitching. They lost their ace, and in return they got Jason Hammel, a classic fourth starter, and Matt Lindstrom, a classic mop-up man. The big splash of the off-season was bringing in Wei-Yin Chen, a control starter from Taiwan with solid potential. He'll likely end up the best pitcher on the staff by default, but I'll be surprised if he lives up to his \$11.3 million price tag.

But while the pitching will be dreadful, the hitting will be just

average. And if you're an Orioles fan, that's about all you can ask for at this point. The lineup is an average age of 28, and actually fairly promising. Wieters should continue to see his numbers rise, particularly as his power really starts to set in, and I'm not convinced we've seen the best of Adam Jones either. Nick Markakis should stay pretty steady in right field, but the big question offensively will be how much Chris Davis and Nolan Reimold actually improve.

Davis was a castoff from

A Reason for Hope

They may have had poor seasons last year, but Brian Matusz and Zach Britton have bright futures in Baltimore. I rarely suggest that you can throw away a year's data, but Brian Matusz's 2011 was a lost season. He was banged up and wasn't his usual self. Although Matusz and Britton's combined career ERA is a sky-high 5.20, they were both highly touted prospects not too long ago. Soon, along with Dylan Bundy, they could form a very strong 1-2-3 punch atop the rotation.

The Fatal Flaw

The owner? The players? The team? The Orioles are just fatally flawed. But what's got to be the most frustrating part for the Orioles is knowing they're stuck in a division with two economic powerhouses in the Yankees and Red Sox and two young, fast rising teams in the Rays and Jays. It doesn't look like the Orioles are going to become very good any time soon anyways, but in order for them to compete for a playoff spot, they'll have to fend off four good teams now.



RF Nick Markakis

AL East — 5. Baltimore Orioles

Texas in the Koji Uehara trade last summer. He's absolutely torn up the minor leagues since 2008 with a .337/.395/.611 line, but he's only hit .252/.301/.448 in his three seasons in the majors. Reimold, on the other hand, hasn't even had 900 plate appearances since his debut in 2009 between injuries and platoon issues. He's hit for a much stronger line than Davis, but he lacks the same upside.

No matter which angle you look at it, the Orioles are in trouble. They'll always have to deal with the Yankees and Red Sox as long as the divisional format is kept in place, and the Rays are more or less as good as the two big-spenders. Not only that, but the Blue Jays are on their way to becoming an AL power with their fantastic depth of young position players and breadth of young pitching. It's going to take more than just

waiting out this storm to turn around the O's—this franchise needs an total makeover.

The Los Angeles Clippers went from a joke to a legit contender in a blink of an eye when they acquired Chris Paul. They already had young talent in Blake Griffin and DeAndre Jordan, but they needed that final piece. The Orioles have a couple of really good players on the way in Manny Machado and Dylan Bundy, plus this June's 4th overall pick. But in order to make their way into the playoff conversation, they'll need to pull off a big move. Maybe that means cashing in a lot of trade chips in one deal or blow free agent-to-be Josh Hamilton out of the water with a contract offer he can't refuse. But whatever that move may be, it'll be hard to find because no player will want to come to this mess by choice. 🍷

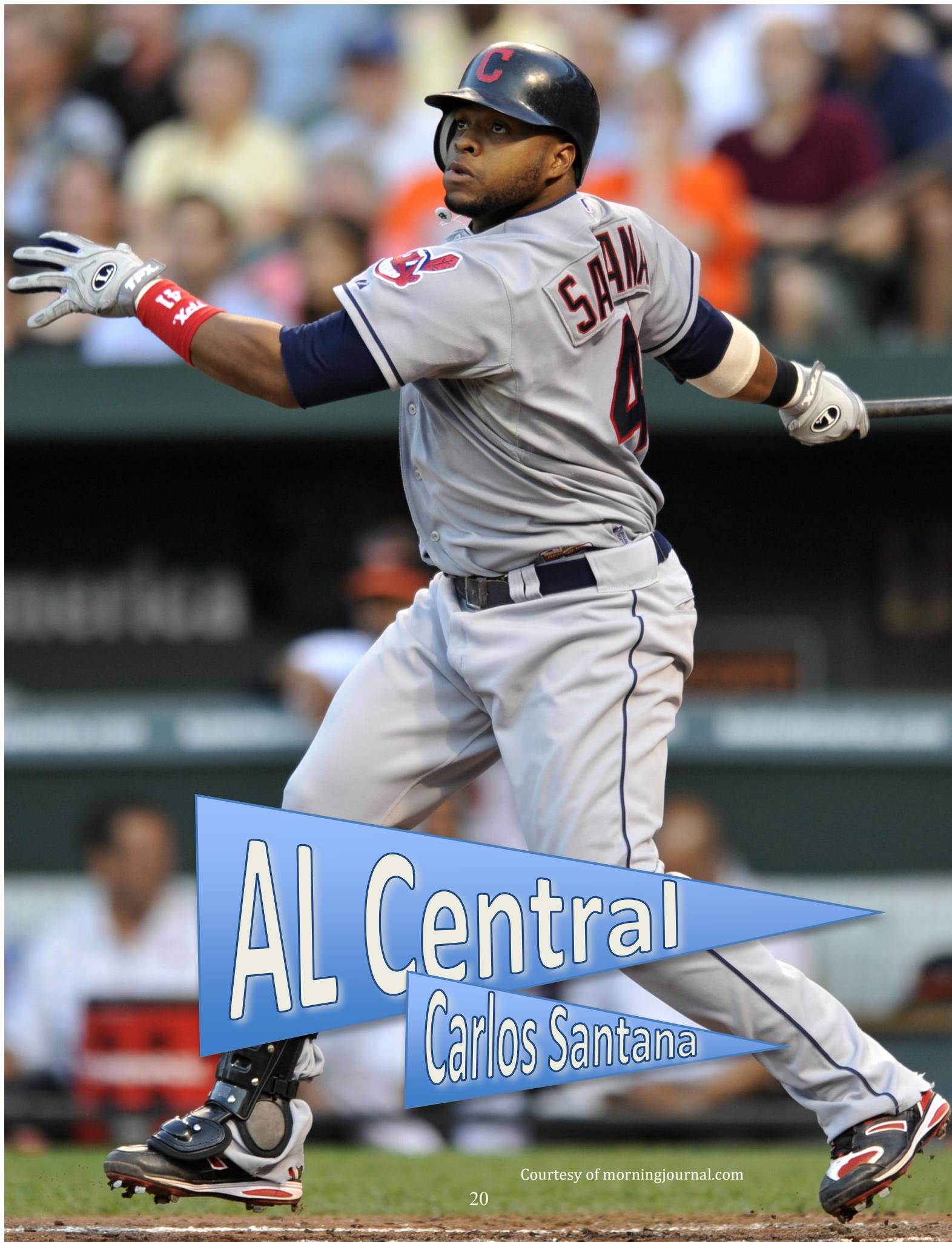
GRADE: 79



Spotlight - Zach Britton

The 24-year old pitcher's 4.61 ERA and 1.45 WHIP during his rookie campaign may not impress you, but those numbers are far from the whole story. He was really hurt by a terrible infield defense—partially illustrated by a much better FIP at 4.00 and Mark Reynolds' sterling -28.2 UZR. His ERA up to June was a superb 2.93, but his ERA shot up thanks to surrendering four or more runs in eight of his last thirteen starts. I believe Britton has a bright future ahead, but I need to see more of first-half Britton.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Manny Machado – SS	Manny Machado	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	A-
If not for Bryce Harper, Manny Machado would've been the talk of the 2011 Draft. The prep shortstop often drew comps to Alex Rodriguez between his size, power, and hype from a young age. In his first season after receiving a \$5.25 million signing bonus, he was pushed to High-A and put up solid numbers. While a .257/.335/.421 line won't make heads turn, he's being challenged while flashing all sorts of tools. Look out for a breakout year; this young man is a future superstar.	Dylan Bundy	RHP	Athletic with plus curve, fastball touching 98. Top-notch potential, 4 th pick in 2011.	A-
	Jonathan Schoop	SS	Raw, talented—but not at a Machado level. Disciplined, gaining power, may shift to 2B.	B
	Jason Esposito	3B	Ace defender with great reflexes, strong arm. Needs to add power to stick at 3B.	B
	Nicky Delmonico	3B	High power ceiling, but durability, defense remain a problem. Likely won't play 3B.	B
	L.J. Hoes	OF	Converted 2B with great bat and on-base skills, but average power. Nice speed, too.	B-
	Parker Bridwell	RHP	High-ceiling arm with great stuff. Numbers don't reflect abilities, slightly to develop.	B-
	Bobby Bundy	RHP	Older brother of Dylan, less talented, closer to The Show. Nice off-speeds, plus control.	C+
	Xavier Avery	OF	Plus athleticism, speed, but power hasn't come. Bat needs to improve or he's a 4 th OF.	C+
	Dan Klein	RHP	Has plus fastball, changeup, puts up great numbers out of the pen. Somewhat brittle.	C+



AL Central

Carlos Santana

Courtesy of morningjournal.com

AL Central

There wasn't a division last year worse than the AL Central. There may not have ever been a division as bad as the AL Central was last year. The 2010 division champion Twins went from 94 wins to 99 losses, Cleveland finished the year 50-67, Chicago waited to get hot until it was too late, and the Royals were the Royals.

The lone bright spot for the division was the strong play of the Tigers, who won 95 games before being knocked out in Game 6 of the ALCS. The gap between Detroit and the next best team was bigger than any division—the second-place Indians were sub-.500 and finished 15 games out of first. Not only that, but Minnesota finished the farthest out of first (32 games) by any non-Houston team in the majors. And to make matters worse, the gap is only widening with the moves made this winter.

The Tigers were already by far the class of the Central, but then they swooped in to snatch up Prince Fielder for \$214 million. Fielder now forms perhaps the best middle-of-the-order duo of the last decade with Miguel Cabrera, who will now have much more pressure defensively, as he moves to the hot corner, but far less pressure offensively, as he no longer has to carry the bulk of the lineup's weight.

The Tigers may be pulling away with the Division title while the Twins, Indians, and White Sox are stuck in neutral, but there is one potentially deadly team waiting in the shadows: the Royals. To the average fan, this may come as a surprise, since Kansas City has been the very definition of inadequacy over the last quarter century. But to those who follow the game especially close, the Royals have been lurking in the grass for more than a year now.

Although they haven't won more than 75 games since 2003, the Royals have actually managed their team extremely well recently. They've grown a great collection of young talent and should be competing for a division crown in the next few years. There's a good chance this year's competition may not be close, but it's never safe to assume that anyone winning is a done deal.



AL Central — 1. Detroit Tigers



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Austin Jackson						CF	94
.249	.317	.374	90	10	45	22	2.8
Brennan Boesch						RF	227
.283	.341	.458	75	16	54	5	1.7
Miguel Cabrera						3B	3
.344	.448	.586	111	30	105	2	7.3
Prince Fielder						1B	12
.299	.415	.566	95	38	120	1	5.5
Delmon Young						DH	351
.268	.302	.383	54	12	64	1	0.4
Alex Avila						C	40
.295	.389	.506	63	19	82	2	5.5
Jhonny Peralta						SS	103
.299	.345	.478	68	21	86	0	5.2
Don Kelly						LF	324
.245	.291	.381	35	7	28	2	0.6
Ryan Raburn						2B	177
.256	.297	.423	53	14	49	1	1.2
Andy Dirks						OF	313
.251	.296	.406	34	7	28	5	0.4
Ramon Santiago						2B	279
.260	.311	.384	29	5	30	0	1.4
Brandon Inge						3B	314
.197	.265	.283	29	3	23	1	-0.4
Gerald Laird						C	363
.232	.302	.358	11	1	12	1	0.1

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Justin Verlander						RHP	4
24-5	2.40	2.99	0.92	251.0	250	7.0	
Doug Fister						RHP	58
11-13	2.83	3.02	1.06	216.1	146	5.6	
Max Scherzer						RHP	63
15-9	4.43	4.14	1.35	195.0	174	2.7	
Rick Porcello						RHP	129
14-9	4.75	4.06	1.41	182.0	104	2.7	
Jacob Turner						RHP	NR
0-1	8.53	6.03	1.66	12.2	8	-0.1	
Jose Valverde						RHP	41
2-4	2.24	3.55	1.19	72.1	69	1.0	
Joaquin Benoit						RHP	13
4-3	2.95	2.96	1.05	61.0	63	1.3	
Albuquerque						RHP	8
6-1	1.87	2.08	1.15	43.1	67	1.3	

I wouldn't dare to say that the 2011 Tigers were a surprise to win the AL Central. After all, we knew it would be a fairly weak division—it turned out to be one of the worst in years—and they had an ace in Justin Verlander to go with two big mashers in Miguel Cabrera and Victor Martinez. In the end, they were the only team in the Central to have a winning record, cruising to a cushy 15-game lead in the final standings.

But they, like 28 other major league teams, fell short of a World Series crown. Although they made it to Game 6 of the ALCS, they had to make changes this off-season if they wanted to compete with the powers of the AL. The club took a devastating blow on January 18, when they found out that Victor Martinez tore his left ACL during winter workouts, forcing him to miss the entire 2012 season. But about a week later on January 26, Detroit agreed to a blockbuster \$214 million deal with Prince Fielder, shoring up a lineup that looked suddenly short on pop without their

switch-hitting designated hitter.

There's no question that the change from Martinez to Fielder is an upgrade. Fielder hasn't had an OBP under .400 in the last three seasons while mashing 116 home runs. V-Mart never fell below .350 with 55 homers during the same time. But the question remains just how good the club will be with their super-sized addition.

There are plenty of ways to describe the Tigers, but I'll say this: Detroit reminds me of the 2011 Cardinals. Now, I highly doubt Detroit will bring home a World Series Trophy this year, but I also believe that if the 2011 playoffs were played out nine more times, the Cardinals wouldn't win again. Both teams have one great pitcher (Chris Carpenter vs. Justin Verlander) along with two great hitters in their prime (Albert Pujols and Matt Holliday vs. Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder) and a cornucopia of average players. Because if David Freese, Rafael Furcal, Delmon Young, and Jhonny Peralta don't fit your functional definition of an average

AL Central — 1. Detroit Tigers

player, you need to raise your standards above “can swing a bat.”

The problem with the Tigers offensively is that they have two great bats, two and a half promising bats (Austin Jackson, Alex Avila, and the fragile Brennan Boesch), and lots of depth. Depth can be a good thing if you’re trying to build a strong bench, but when your depth is average hitting 6-9 in the lineup, it’s time to find better hitting.

Yes, the Tigers were fourth in the majors in runs last year, but essentially every player on the team had a career year. Miguel Cabrera should see his colossal

.448 OBP fall back to Earth, especially as he fields a much more rigorous position in third base. Furthermore, I hardly expect Peralta, Avila, and Boesch to have as good of seasons—I think 2011 was a bit of an overachieving year.

In review, the Tigers lost their second best offensive weapon and replaced him with a far superior bat. But I think the lesser players will regress, keeping the offense at about the same place it was last season.

Offense, however, is only one aspect of the game. As obvious as that statement sounds, people often overlook that when it

A Reason for Hope

This team was just two games short of the World Series, and they added the best bat on the market—yes, I’d rather have Prince Fielder during his prime (27-36) than King Albert from ages 32 to 41. GM Dave Dombrowski has shown he’s willing to be aggressive to make a push for a title (think of the Fielder signing and Doug Fister trade) so it’s not out of the question to imagine the team coming up with a creative way to move Victor Martinez for another bat or young pitcher.

The Fatal Flaw

If there is one flaw with the Tigers it’s that the rotation isn’t very well balanced. All five pitchers are right-handed (not good against the Red Sox, Yankees, and even the in-division Indians), and none after Verlander have shown a propensity to stay consistent. Even the bullpen is full of righties, none of their top-four relievers are southpaws (if and when Al Albuquerque comes back from elbow surgery), and neither Phil Coke nor Daniel Schlereth is especially trustworthy.

“We’re still hungry. You start working, you get ready, you’re working to win it all. This is not it, just to make it to the postseason.”

--Victor Martinez, DH

comes to this team. The lineup looked a lot better with Prince Fielder in the middle, but the defense suddenly looks a lot worse. Brandon Inge and Wilson Betemit were just fine defensively at the hot corner, and that’s much more than Miguel Cabrera can say. Ultimately, Miggy should be at DH, but since he and Prince are making a combined \$44 million in 2012, Detroit’s brass wants both in the field. But this is bad news for the Tigers. Even after losing 20 pounds this off-season, Cabrera is in no shape to play third 150 times per year. He wasn’t even a

good defender when he was under 200 pounds in Florida, and his foot speed will cause every other AL Central coach to call a lot more bunts to the left side.

But in the end, I believe that the success of this team will come down to the pitching. Specifically, the young pitching. We all know that Justin Verlander will do his thing atop the rotation, but the 2 through 5 spots are full of as volatile pitchers as you’ll find. Each has the potential to be a #1 or 2 starter, but each can as easily be wild men just aiming darts at the catcher.



SP Justin Verlander

AL Central — 1. Detroit Tigers

By far, the most consistent pitcher after Verlander is Doug Fister. Brought over from roomy Safeco Field, his transition to a hitter's ballpark didn't faze him at all. In fact, his ERA, WHIP, and BB/9 dropped considerably while his K/9 shot up. Don't expect him to be another ace, though, but look for good second starter stuff out of him. It's at this point, however, that the rotation starts to look very interesting.

Max Scherzer, Rick Porcello, and Jacob Turner have all been highly touted prospects at one point. Each was drafted in the first round (11th in 2006, 27th in 2007, and 9th in 2009), but none have been good in the majors. They have a combined 4.25 ERA in 1145 innings, and none of them has a full season ERA under 3.50. They all throw hard and have excellent stuff, but none of them have been able to turn the potential into production.

Of course, there still is plenty of time in their respective careers to produce. Turner has had only three starts, while Porcello and Scherzer have pitched just a combined seven seasons. But if the Tigers want to make a lasting impact in the playoffs, they need another pitcher to step up into stardom.

The easiest bet in all of baseball is that the Tigers will win the AL Central. No team has remotely close to their level of talent, so they should cruise to another easy AL Central title. But the Tigers are still one bat (V-Mart?) or two short of being one of the two top AL teams, and the added offense from Fielder is nearly cancelled out by the drop-off in defense from Cabrera at third. Plus they lack any sort of speed. They're oh-so-close, but just a few pieces short. ①

GRADE: 93



Spotlight – Austin Jackson

Austin Jackson is the fourth best hitter in the lineup, and a great young hitter at that. However, he is miscast as a leadoff hitter. He's fast, but that doesn't make up for his 2011 OBP of .317. I suggest the Tigers move him down the 2- or 6-hole and hope he improves his on-base skills while moving either Brennan Boesch or Jhonny Peralta up to the leadoff spot. That will relieve pressure on Jackson and get the leadoff hitter on base a lot more. I'm not writing off Jackson as a future lead-off hitter, but he can't be one in 2012.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Brenny Paulino – RHP	Nick Castellanos	3B	Huge upside offensively, gap power needs to grow. Strong arm, too many strikeouts.	B+
Paulino shows flashes of brilliance, and at times he also shows complete lack of baseball skills. For instance, his 4.41 ERA at age 18 is deceptively high. In the GCL, he had a 2.36 ERA in over 45 innings, but his 5 innings in High-A were destructive: 13 earned runs, good for a 21.94 ERA. The 6'4" starter has a lot of his frame to still fill out at just 170 lbs, and he needs to develop a quality second (and third) pitch after his plus fastball, which reaches the upper-90s.	Drew Smyly	LHP	Four solid pitches and plus control. Fairly polished, lacks good velocity, innings eater.	B
	Casey Crosby	LHP	Overcame injuries to have a high ceiling. Plus curveball, but command is an issue.	B
	Andy Oliver	LHP	Looks like a late-rotation starter or late-inning reliever, thanks to poor command.	B
	Alex Burgos	LHP	Unreliable off-speeds, but puts up great numbers. Plus control, often hard to hit.	B-
	James McCann	C	Strong defender with a plus arm, but his bat remains a question. Backup at worst.	C+
	Rob Brantly	C	Offensive-minded with limited power. Bat took a step back in 2011, potential platoon.	B-
	Aaron Westlake	1B	Aggressive with a big bat, but is blocked by Fielder, Cabrera. Can also play corner OF.	C+
	Brenny Paulino	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	C+
	Tyler Collins	OF	Tick above average bat with solid power, speed. Needs to become more consistent.	C+

AL Central — 2. Chicago White Sox



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Alejandro De Aza						CF	57
.329	.400	.520	29	4	23	12	2.8
A.J. Pierzynski						C	328
.287	.323	.405	38	8	48	0	1.7
Alex Rios						RF	357
.227	.265	.348	64	13	44	11	-0.7
Paul Konerko						1B	32
.300	.388	.517	69	31	105	1	3.1
Adam Dunn						DH	205
.159	.292	.277	36	11	42	0	-2.9
Alexei Ramirez						SS	117
.269	.328	.399	81	15	70	7	4.9
Dayan Viedro						LF	301
.255	.327	.314	11	1	6	1	0.2
Brent Morel						3B	335
.245	.287	.366	44	10	41	5	0.5
Gordon Beckham						2B	274
.230	.296	.337	60	10	44	5	1.1
Kosuke Fukudome						OF	172
.262	.342	.370	59	8	35	4	-0.2
Brent Lillibridge						Util	309
.258	.340	.505	38	13	29	10	1.3
Eduardo Escobar						SS/2B	NR
.286	.286	.286	0	0	0	0	0.0
Tyler Flowers						C	173
.209	.310	.409	13	5	16	0	0.7

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
John Danks						LHP	57
8-12	4.33	3.82	1.34	170.1	135		3.2
Gavin Floyd						RHP	66
12-13	4.37	3.81	1.16	193.2	151		3.6
Jake Peavy						RHP	38
7-7	4.92	3.21	1.26	111.2	95		2.9
Phil Humber						RHP	60
9-9	3.75	3.58	1.18	163.0	116		3.5
Chris Sale						LHP	29*
2-2	2.79	3.12	0.92	67.2	61		0.8
Matt Thornton						LHP	17
5-0	3.88	4.20	1.32	48.2	46		0.0
Jesse Crain						RHP	58
8-3	2.62	3.70	1.24	65.1	70		0.9
Will Ohman						LHP	90
1-3	4.22	4.13	1.31	53.1	54		0.2

*Relief Pitcher Player Rater

It seems as if every year, the White Sox are on the brink of contention. Some years, they start the season with high expectations, only to fizzle out down the stretch. Other times, they enter the season with tempered expectations and make a bold move at the trade deadline, only to fall short again. The White Sox are rarely in a rebuilding mode because owner Jerry Reinsdorf is aggressive, in terms of willingness to spend money, and GM Kenny Williams is never afraid to make a big move. But this off-season was rather puzzling—I'm not quite sure if this duo wants the team to contend or rebuild.

Chicago entered the off-season already down a manager and with Mark Buehrle on the open market. Their longtime ace joined Ozzie Guillen in Miami. Williams then announced that the team was looking to get younger and play their inexperienced players more—Dayan Viedro, Alejandro De Aza, Gordon Beckham. This, after dropping over \$93 million the previous off-season on

over-30-year old sluggers Adam Dunn and Paul Konerko. After watching Buehrle walk, Chicago then moved arbitration-eligible slugger Carlos Quentin and breakout star closer Sergio Santos for two of their top-five prospects in what seemed to signal a full-on rebuilding mode. That was, until they signed their top starter John Danks to a hefty five-year, \$65 million extension.

So maybe the White Sox aren't biding their time, collecting enough assets to make a push for the division title. Perhaps that's because they have relatively no assets in the minors worth waiting on, save for a couple medium-upside bats. Regardless, because of the division they're in, this ragtag group of players has a shot at finishing near the top of the division—also known as emerging as the best of four very mediocre teams.

One year ago, I picked the White Sox to win the division. While that pick turned out to be off by sixteen games, the reasons I liked them last year are the same reasons why I'm picking them to finish so well

AL Central — 2. Chicago White Sox

this year. For starters, they've got seriously underrated pitching. John Danks and Gavin Floyd look like the lynchpins to Chicago's future success, totaling 30.5 WAR over the past four seasons—and neither pitcher has reached 30 years old yet. After bouncing around to his fifth team, Phil Humber finally validated being traded for Johan Santana with a breakout season at 29, earning him a (relatively) permanent rotation spot.

The last two pitchers, however, are the most interesting in the bunch. I've always been a huge supporter of Jake Peavy, and for what seems like the past three years

I've been calling for a comeback performance. Sure, he hasn't been the same since he left the comfy confines of PETCO Park, but he's got the same stuff as when he won the Cy Young in 2007, and I'm (irrationally) anticipating he'll actually stay healthy this year. As for Chris Sale, he has perhaps the highest upside in the rotation. The man was drafted 13th overall in 2010 and made it to the majors that year as a late-inning reliever. In his two pro seasons, Sale has been very effective with 10.59 K/9 and 3.53 BB/9, but the team wanted him to have a bigger role, so they moved him to the rotation.

“Believe me, as long as I am sitting in this chair, we will continue to be as aggressive as we can possibly be.”

--Kenny Williams, GM

Now, Sale hasn't started a game since college, but the combination of a high strikeout and groundball rates suggest he could be a very effective starter.

The bullpen, too, should be a strength for the South Siders, even with the departure of Sergio Santos. Despite four straight blown saves in April before being replaced by Santos as the closer, Matt Thornton was an extremely effective late-inning stopper, and should prove to be a fine closer his second go around. If that doesn't work out again, second-ranked prospect Addison Reed could step into that role fairly

easily. The depth of relievers is what really tells the story, though, with veterans Jesse Crain and Will Ohman followed by a barrage of young guns: Zach Stewart, Dylan Axelrod, and Hector Santiago.

The White Sox's pitching will be they key to their success this year, but that's partially due to the fact that the offense will be nothing special. Even if Adam Dunn's bat returns back to it's 40-homer-on-the-mark power, it will take some marked improvements across the board to make this offense average.

Kenny Williams said he wants to make sure the young

A Reason for Hope

The White Sox may be hurting for elite talent now, but GM Kenny Williams is always the number one candidate to make a big move to shuffle up his team. Of course, it'll take a lot to put the White Sox over the Tigers in the division, but we've seen much-hyped Tigers teams fall through the cracks before. Think about the 2008 team that added Miguel Cabrera and Dontrelle Willis, entering the season as World Series favorites, before finishing the year last in the division at 74-88.

The Fatal Flaw

While the White Sox have been one of the most aggressive teams under Kenny Williams' watch, they've just about run out of trading chips. They can still move Gavin Floyd, but then they'd be in full-on rebuilding mode. Unfortunately, Chicago has not taken good care of their minor league system, and as such, they have one of the weakest crops of prospects in the league. The team needs to pour more money into scouting, draft spending, and international signings.



SP Chris Sale

AL Central — 2. Chicago White Sox

players get their due time, which is great. But unfortunately, it looks like the bats of Brent Morel and Gordon Beckham may never be more than okay. The twenty-four and -five year olds hit a combined .237/.292/.350 in 1001 plate appearances. While it's way too early to give up on the young hitters, they need to deliver soon.

But those young hitters aren't the only disappointments offensively. The trio of Dunn, Alex Rios, and A.J. Pierzynski weren't any better at .225/.292/.344. What's worse is that they're all past their peak and don't have the same promise, now that the trio is an average age of 32.

Perhaps the offense won't be so bad if Konerko, Vicedo, De Aza, and Alexei Ramirez can continue their good play, but the pitching will carry the team for most of the year. Fortunately, they have a solid defense with only one

real butcher—Vicedo playing off his customary corner infield position. And Ramirez and De Aza are absolute studs, and Beckham is coming along well.

From the outside, it appears that Chicago is trying to retool, but try to stay competitive at the same time. By moving Quentin, they saved a big chunk of money, while giving Vicedo an every day job. That move won't win a division, but it will set them up well for the future. My suggestion would be to auction off Konerko, Floyd, and what's left of Alex Rios to collect enough pieces to make a run at the division in two to three years. Even the most optimistic fan couldn't see a competitive Sox team before that time, and by then, Konerko will be an average player at best in his late-thirties. The White Sox just need to make up their mind. 🍷

GRADE: 85



Spotlight – Adam Dunn

For four years, Adam Dunn was the most consistent hitter in the game. He launched 40 homers on the nose all four years and had OBP of .386 or .387 in three of the four. But his first year in the South Side proved to be the least consistent of his career: he posted .159/.292/.277 line, by far the worst of his career. He never adjusted to AL pitching, finishing last in the majors with a -2.9 WAR. I can't see that trend continuing, though. With a year of AL experience under his XXL belt, I see Dunn mostly returning to form with 32 homers.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jared Mitchell – OF	Nestor Molina	RHP	Pinpoint control with decent off-speeds. Doesn't allow strong contact, especially HRs.	B+
After being drafted 23 rd overall in the 2009 draft Mitchell has done just about nothing to validate being drafted so high and receive a \$1.2 million signing bonus. He missed the entire 2010 season to an ankle injury and posted a .236/.327/.389 line otherwise. He still flashes a few plus tools, but at the age of 23, his bat isn't improving, and he did strike out 183 times last year. This season will help show whether Mitchell can be a solid major leaguer or if he's yet another first round bust.	Addison Reed	RHP	Great command of plus fastball, slider. Only a closer, which hurts value. 7.93 K/BB ratio.	B+
	Trayce Thompson	OF	Huge power, but too aggressive. Struggles with off-speeds. Brother Klay is in the NBA.	B
	Keenyn Walker	OF	Great athlete with plus speed, defense. Nice on-base skills, but lacks any power.	B
	Simon Castro	RHP	Former Top-50 prospect, value plummeted after 5.63 ERA between AA, AAA. Plus stuff.	B
	Tyler Saladino	SS	Good power for a SS, disciplined with great work ethic. Jack of all trades, master of none.	B
	Dylan Axelrod	RHP	Older prospect (26), who cruised through AA, AAA with nasty slider. Low ceiling.	B-
	Jacob Petricka	RHP	College reliever turned starter. High velocity, ground ball rate. May go back to relieving.	C+
	Jared Mitchell	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	C+
	Hector Santiago	LHP	Addition of screwball made him a legit prospect. Looks like a back-end starter.	C+

AL Central — 3. Kansas City Royals



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Alex Gordon						LF	51
.303	.376	.502	101	23	87	17	6.9
Johnny Giavotella						2B	317
.247	.273	.376	20	2	21	5	0.0
Eric Hosmer						1B	208
.293	.334	.465	66	19	78	11	1.6
Billy Butler						DH	92
.291	.361	.461	74	19	95	2	1.8
Jeff Francoeur						RF	237
.285	.329	.476	77	20	87	22	2.9
Mike Moustakas						3B	251
.263	.309	.367	26	5	30	2	0.7
Lorenzo Cain						CF	182
.273	.304	.318	4	0	1	0	0.1
Salvador Perez						C	170
.331	.361	.473	20	3	21	0	1.4
Alcides Escobar						SS	293
.254	.290	.343	69	4	46	26	2.2
Mitch Maier						OF	147
.232	.345	.337	19	0	7	1	0.7
Yuniesky Betancourt						SS/3B	377
.252	.271	.381	51	13	68	4	0.5
Chris Getz						2B	329
.255	.313	.287	50	0	26	21	1.0
Brayan Peña						C	322
.248	.288	.338	17	3	24	0	0.5

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Luke Hochevar						RHP	126
11-11	4.68	4.29	1.28	198.0	128		2.3
Bruce Chen						LHP	114
12-8	3.77	4.39	1.30	155.0	97		1.7
Jonathan Sanchez						LHP	74
4-7	4.26	4.30	1.44	101.1	102		0.6
Felipe Paulino						RHP	120
4-10	4.46	3.69	1.44	139.1	133		2.5
Danny Duffy						LHP	119
4-8	5.64	4.82	1.61	105.1	87		0.6
Jonthan Broxton						RHP	35
1-2	5.68	5.63	1.89	12.2	10		-0.3
Aaron Crow						RHP	67
2-2	2.79	3.12	0.92	67.2	61		0.8
Greg Holland						RHP	9
5-1	1.80	2.21	0.93	60.0	74		2.0



In the last 25 years, there hasn't been much to be excited for in terms of Kansas City baseball. They haven't won more than 75 games since 200—no winning seasons since '94. And playoffs—quick, somebody cue Jim Mora—playoffs? Not since they won it all back in 1985. But now, it's time to be excited about Royals baseball again. No, they're not World Series contenders, or even playoff contenders at that, but the team is back to relevancy—which is more than they could have said at any point this millennium.

When you think of the potential success of Kansas City, they are about at the stage of Tampa Bay circa 2007. The final Devil Rays team before their exorcism only won 66 games, which the Royals should easily surpass, but the win totals should not be the center of attention. What's more pertinent is that half the wave of elite Royals prospects is in the majors (Eric Hosmer, Mike Moustakas, Alcides Escobar, Johnny Giavotella, Salvador Perez, Danny Duffy...) with

much more (Wil Myers, Mike Montgomery, Bubba Starling, Jake Odorizzi...) on the way. And like the Rays, they'll have a tight window to win big before their talent hits the open market—assuming they won't have the budget to hold onto all of their prime assets.

The great news for the Royals is that there are absolutely no expectations for them. The offense isn't great, and the pitching is somewhat of a fright to behold, but they are so young and have the potential to become a solid team this year. KC has by far the youngest lineup in the league with an average age of 24 years old. Offensively, Alex Gordon and Billy Butler have already established themselves as above-average bats, and the rest of the team (perhaps with the exception of Escobar and Perez) have the potential to join them within the next few seasons.

Pitching-wise, this team is a different story altogether. Once-promising Luke Hochevar completely lost his touch, while former-All-Star

AL Central — 3. Kansas City Royals

Joakim Soria saw his velocity drop and ERA rise. But Kansas City didn't stay still this winter: they brought back consistent Bruce Chen and cashed in on Melky Cabrera to land the erratic, but talented Jonathan Sanchez from San Francisco. Not only that, but young Aaron Crow and Duffy will get a full season each in the majors. I wouldn't go ahead and expect major steps forward in the rotation, but they should look better than last year.

The real improvement that should occur for the Royals is a boost offensively. The team was 10th in scoring and 10th in

offensive WAR, but that was with Chris Getz, Brayan Peña, and the Melk Man getting 1375 plate appearances. That's not too big of a bar to have to surpass. The problem is that this team is sporting five players with just one year of MLB experience, plus another player with two plus seasons in the bigs.

Youth can be a curse, but it can also be a blessing. When it comes to winning games, playing veterans is typically better, but Kansas City shouldn't be worried about wins and losses—they're not winning the World Series this year, and they're definitely not

“There's a lot of stuff we learned this year, especially the young players, but we're ready to get after it. Hopefully we won't have to stop playing in September.”

--Mike Moustakas. 3B

winning the division. Instead, they need to be focused on making sure the young players—most specifically lefties Eric Hosmer and Mike Moustakas—can go from good, promising players to among the best at their respective positions. And that's not going to happen unless the club is patient during rough patches, especially against lefty pitching.

This may just seem like just another Kansas City season filled with high hopes waiting to be crushed, but this season is different. The team is both able to

play their young guns while also stay relevant in the win/loss column. Now, you can largely attribute this fact to the other three non-Tigers teams in the division. The White Sox, Indians, and Twins could all be okay this year, but it's much more likely that they'll each be bad, putting KC in a great position.

Kansas City is where every small market team can only dream of being. They have a low payroll, weak competition to beat out, and a great plan they've been able to stick to. After sitting atop the draft

A Reason for Hope

You may not have heard of many of the hitters on the Royals, but you'll need to learn their names soon. At just 22 years old, Eric Hosmer has already entered the conversation as one of the best first basemen in the AL—a league that has Albert Pujols, Adrian Gonzalez, Prince Fielder, and Mark Teixeira. The player who could really take the leap this year is Mike Moustakas. In a half-season, he didn't show nearly the bat—for power or average—that gave him a .999 OPS last year in the minors.

The Fatal Flaw

Beyond their overwhelming youth, the Royals biggest problem is a lack of pitching. They don't have one consistent pitcher atop the rotation, and none of their pitchers has the potential to be much more than a 3rd-starter. Luke Hochevar, Felipe Paulino, Jonathan Sanchez, and Danny Duffy all had ERAs over 4.10, and four of the starters have FIPs over 4.25. They're going to need major help from the minors or a miracle to fix this rotation enough to make a run at the playoffs.



1B Eric Hosmer

AL Central — 3. Kansas City Royals

for years and years (and years), they've amassed a fantastic group of young players who will hit the big leagues within a two-or-so year period of each other. Then, hopefully once they all mature and get a chance to potentially develop into stars, they'll have a shot at the World Series from 2014-2017.

This strategy worked for the Rays. Well, Tampa still doesn't have a World Series trophy, but they've gone from a perennial doormat to a World Series contender for the next few years. One major difference, however, between the two strategies is that the Rays built around young pitching—James Shields, David Price, Jeremy Hellickson, Matt Moore, etc.—while the Royals built around fantastic young hitting. We've all heard the old baseball adage that “good pitching beats good hitting,” but there's no better

way to have sustained success throughout the regular season than with an elite offense.

It's important to dream big with every baseball team. Some teams are easier to romance about than others, and the Royals, as strange as this may have sounded two years ago, are one of the ten easiest teams in the league to fantasize about. They've got youth, they've got talent, and they've got lots of it.

But for now, this team is just average. They've got all the players in place to make a run at the playoffs, but the timing isn't right. The hitters aren't quite developed enough, and the pitching just flat out isn't good. Hopefully we'll be able to see Mike Montgomery and Wil Myers contributing soon, and equally as importantly see Jeff Francoeur getting off the field. 🍷
GRADE: 84

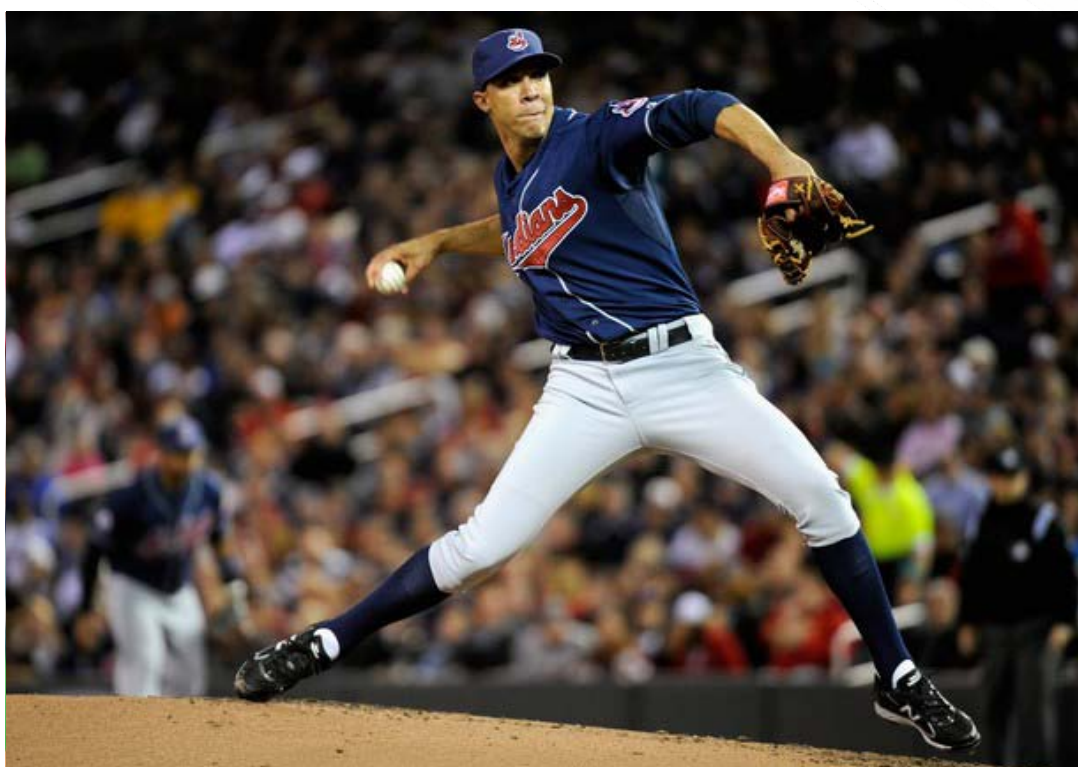


Spotlight – Bruce Chen

Oh, how small market teams lose out in free agency. Bruce Chen has been a respectable starter, at best, with a 4.24 ERA over 295.2 innings the last two years. The Royals wanted to keep their rotation semi-solidified and consistent by bringing back Chen, but it came at a lofty price: \$9 million over 2 years. Chen isn't worth even close to that much, but if Kansas City wanted to be remotely competitive and avoid watching Felipe Paulino log 120 more innings, they had to pony up some extra dough.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Cheslor Cuthbert – 3B	Wil Myers	OF	2011 marred by injuries, ceiling remains high. Plus arm, athleticism, power potential.	A-
While rising star Mike Moustakas was raking in AAA before getting the call in June, another third base prospect was taking off: Cheslor Cuthbert. For the first three months of the year, he hit .329/.380/.485, but then slumped in the second half, hitting a measly .136/.276/.209. With Mike Moustakas already settled in at third in KC, the Royals may have to trade one of the one of the two youngsters or move one off their natural position to second-base or a corner outfield spot.	Bubba Starling	OF	Enormous upside, athleticism, all 5 tools. Raw, can finally solely focus on baseball.	A-
	Mike Montgomery	LHP	Solid stuff, top-of-the-rotation potential, needs to iron out command, consistency.	B+
	Cheslor Cuthbert	3B	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Jake Odorizzi	RHP	Great athlete with plus command, doesn't miss many bats. Needs to pitch down more.	B+
	John Lamb	LHP	Development stunted by TJ Surgery. When healthy, has plus velocity, change, control.	B
	Christian Colon	SS	Value plummeted since going 4 th overall in 2010. Has a great glove, but subpar bat.	B-
	Jorge Bonifacio	OF	Plus power, arm, solid bat at just 18. Very raw, just screams boom or bust potential.	B-
	Kelvin Herrera	RHP	Overcame elbow injuries out of the 'pen with plus velocity, stuff. Often hard to hit.	B-
	Chris Dwyer	LHP	Had a setback thanks to a loss of control at AAA. Medium upside with plus curve.	C+

AL Central — 4. Cleveland Indians



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	REB	SB	WAR
Michael Brantley						LF	300
.266	.318	.384	63	7	46	13	1.4
Asdrubal Cabrera						SS	190
.273	.332	.460	87	25	92	17	3.6
Shin-Soo Choo						RF	48
.259	.344	.390	37	8	36	12	1.4
Carlos Santana						C	36
.239	.351	.457	84	27	79	5	3.8
Travis Hafner						DH	73
.280	.361	.449	41	13	57	0	1.3
Grady Sizemore						CF	348
.224	.285	.422	34	10	32	0	0.2
Jack Hannahan						3B	143
.250	.331	.388	38	8	40	2	2.4
Casey Kotchman						1B	202
.306	.378	.422	44	10	48	2	2.8
Jason Kipnis						2B	146
.272	.333	.507	24	7	19	5	0.8
Matt LaPorta						1B/OF	340
.247	.299	.412	34	11	53	1	-0.8
Jason Donald						SS/2B	296
.318	.364	.402	13	1	8	3	0.5
Lonnie Chisenhall						3B	260
.255	.284	.415	27	7	22	1	0.7
Lou Marson						C	315
.230	.300	.296	26	1	19	4	0.9

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Ubaldo Jimenez						RHP	61
10-13	4.68	3.67	1.40	188.1	180	3.5	
Justin Masterson						RHP	104
12-10	3.21	3.28	1.28	216.0	158	4.9	
Derek Lowe						RHP	116
9-17	5.05	3.70	1.51	187.0	137	2.5	
Kevin Slowey						RHP	108
0-8	6.67	4.47	1.40	59.1	34	0.4	
Josh Tomlin						RHP	72
12-7	4.25	4.27	1.08	165.1	89	1.8	
Chris Perez						RHP	83
4-7	3.32	4.27	1.21	59.2	39	0.1	
Rafael Perez						LHP	87
5-2	3.00	3.30	1.24	63.0	33	0.8	
Joe Smith						RHP	72
3-3	2.01	2.91	1.09	67.0	45	1.2	

2011 was a tale of two teams for the Indians. After rocketing out of the gate with a 30-15 record, the Tribe closed a dreadful 40-67, even after adding Ubaldo Jimenez. The team was marred with injuries—Asdrubal Cabrera and Carlos Santana were the only players with at least 500 plate appearances and 18 total players got at least 100 plate appearances. So the question remains whether a healthy Indians team is actually good enough to make a run at the playoffs.

I never quite bought into the Indians last year for several reasons. One, they're fairly young offensively. Two, they're really not that great, either. Carlos Santana is perhaps the best offensive catcher in the AL, but Grady Sizemore and Travis Hafner are way over the hill. Furthermore, Shin-Soo Choo took a large step backwards in 2011, and Asdrubal Cabrera had just a .310 OBP in the second half. After taking a look from afar, it really looks like the first 45 games of the season were a fluke, not the injury bug that kept so many of the hitters out.

For a team that led the division nearly half the season (78 games), the Indians had a pretty mediocre rotation. The team finished 23rd in ERA, and that's including Jimenez's 11 starts. Carlos Carrasco and Fausto Carmona, or should I say Roberto Hernandez Heredia, combined for over 313 and neither is likely to pitch at all this season. To replace them, Cleveland picked up Derek Lowe and Kevin Slowey. But that duo hasn't been good in years—they put up a combined 5.44 ERA last season. That won't cut it in New York, Philadelphia, or even in Cleveland.

Unfortunately, the Indians did not make many adjustments this off-season. The pitching additions were far from spectacular, and the moves to the lineup weren't much better. They re-upped Sizemore for just \$5 million, but I don't think he's worth that much considering his injury history and deteriorating (if not absent) speed. They did also bring in Casey Kotchman to take over for the highly disappointing Matt LaPorta, but outside of last

AL Central — 4. Cleveland Indians

year, he's just a career .326 OBP hitter. Last season's line of .306/.378/.422 is impressive for just about any hitter, but I'd like to see those numbers replicated, especially with more than ten homers in a season.

I'm not sure that there's a single team in the majors that embodies its hometown better than the Cleveland Indians. With all due respect, Cleveland is known for being boring. It's a Midwestern town with terrible winter weather and a river that has caught fire multiple times. The Indians are rather drab and boring to watch with no particular flare. They're

not in position to make a run at the Tigers for the division crown, and they're not chock full of promising young players like the Royals. They're just in the middle as boring old Cleveland.

Right now, the Indians are stuck in what I like to call Sports Purgatory. They're not good enough to win, but they're not bad enough to get good. In basketball and football, this means tanking for a better draft pick, but in baseball that would mean trading off assets for prospects and playing what young players are in the majors.

Right now, the Indians are

"It's been a tough season, but I've learned from it ... I'm going to take everything I can out of this and get ready for next season."

--Ubaldo Jimenez, SP

not spending their money in the right areas. It was time to let go of Grady Sizemore this winter; he's not in the team's future, and he's not very effective, anyways, when he's healthy. The Tribe needed to trot out players like Ezequiel Carrera to see if they may have a future in Cleveland. Similarly, there's no need for Jack Hannahan on this squad, Lonnie Chisenhall and Jason Donald need all the playing time they can get. There's lots of blame to go around for why this team soured, but it's more than just the average hitting. I think that a sub-par team got off to a hot start and didn't

realize they had fallen out of the playoff hunt when they traded for Ubaldo Jimenez at 53-51.

Small market teams have a very tight window to win—just look at the talented Indians teams of the past decade. They've had CC Sabathia, Cliff Lee, Victor Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, and more, but since they couldn't close the deal in 2007 and didn't have the budget to bring back the old gang, they had to blow up their core. Cleveland wants to avoid totally rebuilding again, but this team is not close to competing for a championship, even if they cash

A Reason for Hope

There really isn't a lot to be excited about for this team. Outside of Justin Masterson, they lack any promising pitching, something that Drew Pomeranz and Alex White would have brought had they not been traded to Colorado. But at the very least, the offense is young and fairly promising. Lonnie Chisenhall and Jason Kipnis weren't all-world prospects last year, but they were well respected and could join Carlos Santana as very good young hitters in a year or two.

The Fatal Flaw

Does talent count as the Indians fatal flaw? They have just one sure-fire above-average hitter (Carlos Santana), and questionable pitching up and down their staff. The bottom of the pitching staff is dreadful, but I think what will really kill this team is its unpredictability. We're never sure about the health of Grady Sizemore, and we're not sure if the Shin-Soo Choo of 2012 will be the 2009-10 Shin-Soo Choo, who put up 11 WAR, or the 2011 Shin-Soo Choo, who missed time and just 1.4 WAR.



2B Jason Kipnis

AL Central — 4. Cleveland Indians

in all their trade chips.

The Ubaldo trade forces the Indians into an awkward position. They don't want to hold onto their ace—assuming 2009 was not a fluke—only to see him walk away like Sabathia and Lee before him. However, they also don't want to give up on their recent acquisition if he continues to pitch poorly and the team collectively struggles. Unfortunately, Ubaldo has very little trade value at this point, so I just suggest the Indians endure his bumpy ride, even if the season ends like the last 117 games of last season.

In the end, the Indians are a team with well-below average pitching and just about average hitting. Even with two Wild Card spots, this team stands no chance at making the playoffs. The AL is just too tough this year between the Red Sox, Yankees, and Rays in the East, the Tigers,

and the Rangers, and Angels out West. Until the Indians are willing to make drastic moves (even trading Asdrubal Cabrera), they're going to be stuck in Sports Purgatory.

The Indians' goal for this season should not be to make a run at the playoffs. Because even if they do find themselves in the playoff hunt, they don't have a puncher's chance against the big boys of the AL. Instead, they should figure out the direction of the club for the next few years. Are they going to make a move to win the division in 2014 when their young players are developed and the minor leagues supply a few more arms? Are they going to blow up the entire team and start from scratch? Or are they just willing to stay OK in an alright division? Those are the questions they need to answer.

GRADE: 83



Spotlight - Lonnie Chisenhall

The Indians' top prospect last season, Chisenhall had a hot start in AAA and earned a trip to the show in late June. But unlike fellow rookie mid-season call-up Desmond Jennings, Chisenhall showed he was far from ready to be an everyday starter. Although he put up solid power numbers, his dreadful .284 OBP kept him riding the bench behind the likes of Jack Hannahan and Jason Donald. I suggest the Indians send Chisenhall back to AAA for more seasoning if he won't be starting every day.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Nick Hagadone - LHP	Francisco Lindor	SS	Strong glove with a plus bat, power may develop later. Mature for an 18 year old.	B+
Hagadone was taken in the first round of the 2007 draft by the Red Sox and was the centerpiece of the trade that sent Victor Martinez to Boston along with Justin Masterson. Unfortunately, he hasn't been able to stick in the rotation, and he's been made into a full-time reliever. However, he's proven to be a quality late-inning power reliever—he even got 9 appearances in Cleveland at the end of the year. He'll never be an innings-eater, but he could eventually be a closer.	Dillon Howard	RHP	High upside with a workhorse body and plus fastball. Three off-speeds need work.	B
	Chen Lee	RHP	Low arm slot, plus slider, good velocity. Old for a prospect (25), puts up great numbers.	B-
	Luigi Rodriguez	OF	Toolsy, but raw with plus speed and bat. Power ceiling will determine overall ceiling.	B-
	Nick Hagadone	LHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Austin Adams	RHP	Numbers average vs. tougher competition. Live arm, plus fastball, otherwise average.	B-
	Jesus Aguilar	1B	Huge power, but his contact rate is not good, and his defense, speed aren't better.	B-
	Tony Wolters	SS	Makes solid contact, is very disciplined. Likely will move to 2B because of Lindor.	B-
	LeVon Washington	OF	Huge upside because of elite athleticism, speed. Injuries messed with mechanics.	C+
	Jake Sisco	RHP	Nice velocity, generates lots of grounders. Could be mid-rotation starter or reliever.	C+

AL Central – 5. Minnesota Twins



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	REB	SB	WAR
Denard Span						CF	136
.264	.328	.359	37	2	16	6	2.2
Jamey Carroll						SS	85
.290	.359	.347	52	0	17	10	2.2
Joe Mauer						C	34
.287	.360	.368	38	3	30	0	1.8
Justin Morneau						1B	109
.227	.285	.333	19	4	30	0	-0.3
Josh Willingham						LF	54
.246	.332	.477	69	29	98	4	2.1
Ryan Doumit						Util	188
.303	.353	.477	17	8	30	0	1.8
Danny Valencia						3B	282
.246	.294	.383	63	15	72	2	0.5
Ben Revere						RF	234
.267	.310	.309	56	0	30	34	2.0
Alexi Casilla						2B	286
.260	.322	.368	52	2	21	15	1.4
Trevor Plouffe						Util	294
.238	.305	.392	47	8	31	3	-0.6
Tsuyoshi Nishioka						SS/2B	358
.226	.278	.249	14	0	19	2	-1.4
Luke Hughes						2B/3B	239
.238	.305	.392	47	8	31	3	-0.6
Drew Butera						C	376
.167	.210	.239	19	2	23	0	-0.8

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Francisco Liriano						LHP	78
9-10	5.09	4.54	1.49	134.1	112	1.0	
Carl Pavano						RHP	71
9-13	4.30	4.10	1.36	222.0	102	2.9	
Scott Baker						RHP	16
8-6	3.14	3.45	1.17	134.2	123	2.7	
Nick Blackburn						RHP	138
7-10	4.49	4.84	1.60	148.1	76	0.7	
Jason Marquis						RHP	140
8-6	4.43	4.05	1.49	132.0	76	1.4	
Matt Capps						RHP	92
4-7	4.25	4.75	1.20	65.2	34	-0.4	
Glen Perkins						LHP	39
4-4	2.48	2.41	1.23	61.3	65	1.7	
Anthony Swarzak						RHP	89
4-7	4.32	4.04	1.34	102.0	55	1.0	

There's a common thread between all of the AL Central teams: they all depend on large contributions from young players. From Austin Jackson to Jason Kipnis to Chris Sale to the entire Royals starting lineup, each team has some young contributors on whom the teams' success will depend. Of course, the Twins aren't left out of the fun; they're depending on a handful of youngsters, too. Unfortunately, they, along with the rest of the Twins team just aren't that good.

The Minnesota Twins were the biggest disappointment in the 2011 season. No Contest. They took a 31-win dive from a 2010 94-68 record to 63 wins and 99 losses—everything went wrong that could have gone wrong. Justin Morneau's concussion problems reared its ugly head, forcing him to only get 288 plate appearances. Joe Mauer missed nearly half the season with injuries ranging from his knee to his leg to pneumonia. And most concerning, in terms of performance, Francisco Liriano went from a 2.66 FIP, 6.0 WAR 2010 season

to a 5.09 FIP, 1.0 WAR 2011. He lost touch with home plate and more closely resembled Nuke LaLoosh than the fireballing lefty who nearly won the AL Rookie of the Year Award back in 2006.

Of course, with a season marred by so many maladies, one would normally be reluctant to guess that another nearly triple-digit loss season is on the way. And for the most part this is true. Mauer and Morneau should make massive steps back to where they once were as lynchpins in the Twins offense. But really, the rest of the offense isn't great. The team brought in Josh Willingham, but that's just a lateral move from the departed Michael Cuddyer. Otherwise, Jamey Carroll is the next biggest off-season acquisition, and he's just a glorified utility infielder.

The problem for the Twins is that they're relatively young throughout the lineup, and they're lacking promise. I've been a big buyer in Ben Revere stock since he broke into the minors in 2007, but he looks

AL Central — 5. Minnesota Twins

like he may only become Juan Pierre-lite. He's never launched more than two home runs in a season but is a fantastic defender with plus speed. Danny Valencia was once promising, but in his second season, he saw his bat and glove disappear almost entirely with a .294 OBP and -6.1 UZR. Even up-the-middle players Alexi Casilla, Trevor Plouffe, and Tsuyoshi Nishioka failed to impress anyone with a combined .244/.305/.345 line. It's one thing to be bad and young, but entirely different to be disheartening.

The Twins even have a couple more young players they

called up at the end of the season, but none are any better. Joe Benson is a legit prospect and should do fairly well if he gets regular playing time, but he likely won't get more than spot starts at DH. After all, young Revere and Span and expensive Willingham highly unlikely to be benched. Rene Tosoni and Chris Parmelee got the call last season, as well, but they're nothing special to report on, either.

But it's not just the offense that lacks solid production and limited upside, the pitching is in the same boat, too. With such an uninspiring offense, the pitching is

A Reason for Hope

The good news is that it can't get any worse than it was in 2011. It's not just that they nearly lost 100 games, they struggled to put together any offense. 29th in WAR. 29th in power. 27th in OBP. And it's not like the pitching was any better. And even though they made minimal improvements personel-wise, each player should improve. It's exciting to see the youngsters like Revere and Valencia play, even if they don't have high ceilings. It's better than watching Delmon Young again.

The Fatal Flaw

Minnesota actually does have a good deal of talent on roster, but that talent comes in the form of back-up quality players. And I mean a lot of them. The Twins could carry a bench of eight solid hitters, but of course they don't have the room. The combined talent of their 40-man roster could rival many .500 teams, but having Luke Hughes, Drew Butera, Tsuyoshi Nishioka, and Trevor Plouffe all riding the pine won't make everyday replacement-level players like Ryan Doumit play any better.

“It's hard to find any positives in this season. For myself, there's nothing positive I can take out of it.”

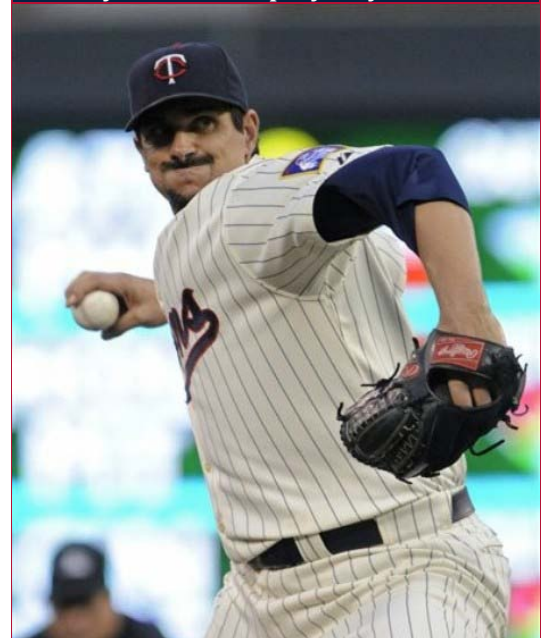
--Justin Morneau, 1B

really going to have to carry the team if they're going to succeed. The aforementioned Francisco Liriano may have the most talent in the rotation, but he's less dependable than Mark Sanchez trying to string together a scoring drive. Carl Pavano, on the other hand, is Liriano's foil. He doesn't have great stuff, but he goes deep into games and stays fairly consistent. Now, he's not consistently good—his ERA rose back to his career average of 4.33 last season—but at least he's averaged 214 innings over the last three seasons, sparing the bullpen work after the all-too-common

five-inning Liriano start. In fact, 54% of Liriano's 24 starts didn't make it past the fifth inning.

On a positive note, Scott Baker really turned his game around last year. After nearly being relegated to the 'pen, the soft-tossing righty turned in a 3.14 ERA season. His only down note was two short stints on the DL in July and August for elbow issues. The man just turned 30, so it won't be too surprising to see his numbers settle down, assuming he keeps his strikeout totals high or brings up his tiny groundball rate.

But beyond those first three, the Twins just have a ragtag



SP Carl Pavano

AL Central — 5. Minnesota Twins

team of pitchers to throw out into the surprisingly hot Minnesota summer. Nick Blackburn is no longer young and promising—he's now into his thirties and putting up season after season of 4.50 ERA ball. Even Brian Duensing, who looked fantastic in his first full season in 2010, saw his ERA balloon to a whopping 5.23 over 161.2 innings.

Hopefully Twins fans and baseball people in general won't have to see much of either of those pitchers this season—assuming they don't turn things around. The club brought in Jason Marquis, who should bring in some much-needed relief in the form of continuity, stability, and not being Brian Duensing.

But more importantly than finding just continuity should be building towards the future. Instead of just trotting

out 30-plus-year olds with little to do with the big picture of this club, the Twins should throw Anthony Swarzak and rookies Kyle Gibson and Liam Hendriks into the deep end. None in the trio has the upside of Detroit's Jacob Turner or KC's Mike Montgomery, but it's essential for the Twins to give their young pitchers playing time, as a litmus test on their futures.

After turning in a 94 win season in 2010, there's no (politically correct) way to describe the Twins' 31-win swing other than a calamity of a season. Unfortunately, they've got nearly all the same pieces in place, save for a Cuddyer-for-Willingham swap. The team should be better than last year, but in a division with all teams (except for Detroit) honing in on mediocrity, I have a hard time seeing them escape the basement.

GRADE: 79



Spotlight – Joe Mauer

When Joe Mauer re-upped with the Twins for \$184 million, the main concern most experts had was how badly the contract could cripple the franchise if Mauer didn't continue to produce at the level he had been. Last season showed exactly what could happen when Joe Mauer isn't Joe Mauer: he played 82 games and Minnesota won 29 less games than they did in 2010. But now that (we presume) his nagging injuries are passed, I expect the real Joe Mauer to return. The real question is when—not if—he'll have to move off catcher.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Aaron Hicks – OF	Miguel Sano	3B	Outstanding power, way too many strikeouts. Already outgrown SS, may outgrow 3B.	A-
Ever since he taken 14 th overall in the 2008 draft, Hicks has been one of the most hyped prospects in Minnesota's system. A potential five-tool athlete, Hicks has flashed all five at times over his four-year minor league career, but never all at the same time. Last year, he hit a .242/.354/.368; he showed plus patience, but the power hasn't set in yet. At 22, he's already a plus fielder in center, but in order to be an above-average regular, he needs to take his offensive game up a notch.	Eddie Rosario	2B	Surprising power for a middle infielder. Great bat control, patience. Toolsy, still raw.	B+
	Aaron Hicks	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Kyle Gibson	RHP	TJ Surgery cut short shaky season at AAA. 2010 1 st -rounder still has high upside.	B
	Adrian Salcedo	RHP	Uses average four-pitch mix well. Puts up great numbers, needs to miss more bats.	B
	Oswaldo Arcia	OF	Showing improving power, but 18/72 BB/K ratio is alarming. Patience is key.	B
	Joe Benson	OF	Average power, speed, but no plus tools. Great athlete, solid defender. Too many Ks.	B-
	Liam Hendriks	RHP	Doesn't have great stuff, displays great control. Ceiling is a mid-rotation starter.	B-
	Levi Michael	SS	Prototype top-of-the-order bat. Range is a bit of an issue, but high OBP cancels it out.	B-
	Hudson Boyd	RHP	Big-framed prep arm with plus fastball, curve, needs to work down in the zone.	C+



AL West
Josh Hamilton

AL West

Last season proved to be a tale of four very different teams. There was the upper class: the World Series runners up Texas Rangers. There was the upper middle class: the late-fading Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim of Orange County of California. There was the lower middle class: the Oakland A's. And finally, there was the lower class: the Seattle Mariners.

The teams were eerily evenly staggered with second, third, and fourth place finishing 10, 22, and 29 games out of first place—almost no competition down the stretch for placement in the final standings. But this year should be much different; the AL West will be a tale of the Haves and the Have Nots.

Starting with the Haves, the Rangers may have had by far the best regular season in the division, but the Angels had by far the best off-season. Not only did they sign the Rangers' ace in free agency to be their third starter, they also broke the bank for the best hitter we've seen this millennium—possibly the best hitter of all-time—Albert Pujols. Texas, of course didn't stay quiet, as they added to their pitching with \$111 million man Yu Darvish and closer Joe Nathan. All of a sudden, the gap between the upper class and the upper middle class—if there is a gap any more—is shrunk. The Rangers have an incredible lineup and very good pitching while the Angels have a very good lineup and incredible pitching. There's no more class distinction, these teams are the Haves.

On the other side of the coin, the Athletics and Mariners did not have enviable winters. To start off, they were a combined 21 games under .500 last season so it would take a marked improvement over the off-season to changed their ill-fated destiny. And, of course, they didn't. The A's sold off their young pitchers and brought in six new outfielders: two prospects, a Cuban defector, a veteran, a hitter in his prime, and Manny Ramirez. Seattle, too, traded off an elite young starter, but they collected a cornucopia of catchers instead of an ocean of outfielders, bringing in Miguel Olivo, John Jaso, and Jesus Montero.

For the first time since 2006, this division will be extra competitive—for two reasons. For one, there will actually be two very competitive teams in the division. And even though they can both make the playoffs with an extra Wild Card added, there will still be fierce competition. Plus, it'll definitely be exciting to see which team, the A's or the Mariners, will be less rancid.



AL West — 1. Texas Rangers



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		REB	SB	WAR
Ian Kinsler						2B		15
.255	.355	.477	121	32		77	30	7.7
Elvis Andrus						SS		115
.279	.347	.361	96	5		60	37	4.5
Josh Hamilton						LF		28
.298	.346	.536	80	25		94	8	4.2
Michael Young						DH		106
.338	.380	.474	88	11		106	6	3.8
Adrian Beltre						3B		21
.296	.331	.561	82	32		105	1	5.7
Mike Napoli						C		10
.320	.414	.631	72	30		75	4	5.6
Nelson Cruz						RF		70
.263	.312	.509	64	29		87	9	1.6
Mitch Moreland						1B		206
.259	.320	.414	60	16		52	2	0.4
Craig Gentry						CF		163
.271	.347	.346	26	1		13	18	1.8
David Murphy						OF		149
.275	.328	.401	46	11		46	11	1.1
Julio Borbon						OF		364
.270	.305	.348	10	0		11	6	0.0
Leonys Martin						OF		NR
.375	.375	.500	2	0		0	0	0.1
Yorvit Torrealba						C		263
.273	.306	.399	40	7		37	0	1.1

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Yu Darvish						RHP	NR
18-6	1.44	1.47	0.83	232.0	276		--*
Colby Lewis						RHP	49
12-10	3.21	3.28	1.28	216.0	158		4.9
Derek Holland						RHP	118
7-15	5.25	4.56	1.40	188.2	109		1.5
Matt Harrison						RHP	136
9-17	5.05	3.70	1.51	187.0	137		2.5
Neftali Feliz						RHP	25°
4-7	3.32	4.27	1.21	59.2	39		0.1
Joe Nathan						RHP	79
2-1	4.84	4.28	1.16	44.2	43		0.0
Mike Adams						LHP	3
5-2	3.00	3.30	1.24	63.0	33		0.8
Koji Uehara						LHP	16
6-3	3.03	4.44	1.11	62.1	57		-0.1

*Japanese Pacific League Stats °Relief Pitcher Player Rank

After two straight trips to the Fall Classic, it's hard to argue that the Rangers are not one of the top franchises in the league. Last winter they lost their ace Cliff Lee. No matter. Young Derek Holland and Matt Harrison stepped up. This December, their new ace C.J. Wilson bolted for Los Angeles. No sweat. Ownership stepped up to spend over \$111 million to bring in Yu Darvish and move Neftali Feliz to the bullpen. There have been plenty of obstacles along the way for the two Rangers World Series teams, but this team adapts well, and they're not afraid to make the big move.

This off-season was a big one for Texas. Not even including the fact that they found a new ace at a hefty price, they were in on the bidding for Prince Fielder until the bitter end, and worked on an extension for Josh Hamilton. But after already investing nine figures into their Japanese righty, Fielder's \$214 million price tag was too rich for Texas' blood. Unfortunately, despite the fact that

they didn't give all that money to the free agent slugger, they weren't even able to give it to their own slugger. Hamilton will be making \$13.75 million this year, but there are heightened concerns that he may not be coming back after this season.

It's a subject that must be treaded upon lightly, but the risks surrounding Josh Hamilton pose a big risk for a long-term deal. After trying to maintain sobriety for more than six years, Hamilton had an alcoholic relapse at a party over the off-season. Hopefully he's back on the right track now, but that's not his only issue. In his four years as a Ranger, he's only had one season where he played more than 135 games, missing 149 games over that stretch. But despite his dark background and injury-plagued history, Hamilton remains one of the most talented hitters in the game. From the massive power to the great patience to the shocking-for-his-size athleticism, Hamilton is a can't-miss athlete. And if the Rangers let him slip through their hands because of off-the-field issues,

AL West — 1. Texas Rangers

they may be forfeiting a chance to build a dynasty.

But as good as Hamilton is, one player can only do so much to help an offense. Up and down, top to bottom, through and through, this lineup provides a consistent barrage of tough hitters. Sure, Mitch Moreland is no Fielder at first, but he held his own in the first half with a .272/.334/.449 line before wilting in a brutal second half.

Six hitters in this lineup finished with a WAR of 3.8 or more, and Nelson Cruz isn't even in that group. The All-Star outfielder missed 38 games and didn't see a drop-off in power,

although his OBP fell 60 points. But he was banged up for most of the year, and on the biggest stage—the playoffs—he launched eight homers with putting up a .959 OPS. Even David Murphy, who may only be in a platoon this season, stepped up with a .429 OBP in the postseason.

If there is one thing in particular that makes the Rangers offense special, it's their power. They had eight players with double-digit homers last year, including five with 25 or more and three with 30 or more. The power in the lineup is evenly distributed—they don't depend on a Fielder-Braun combo,

“I know I’m going to remember this World Series. It’s going to motivate guys, it really is. Don’t forget how this felt getting close.”

--Josh Hamilton, OF

or more currently a Fielder-Cabrera combo to put up half the power.

The other major trademark of the Rangers is strong defense. As a reference, their infield defense is so strong that Michael Young doesn't have an everyday position. Adrian Beltre is perhaps the best defender to ever man the hot corner, Elvis Andrus is on his way to becoming the top defender in the league at shortstop, and Ian Kinsler had the second best UZR in the league last season. That's not even mentioning top prospect Jurickson Profar, who profiles to be even better than Andrus when

he reaches the majors in a year or so. Even the entire outfield, except for the flat-footed Nelson Cruz, is above-average.

The Rangers have always been known as an offensive team. Sometimes that's because they've had no pitching—more recently it's because they've had one of the most prolific lineups in the league. But just as the Baltimore Ravens are slowly shifting from a defensive juggernaut to a more-than-competent offensive team, the Rangers are becoming much more balanced without sacrificing any of their young hitting.

A Reason for Hope

We've seen just how much damage a potent lineup can do with the success of the Rangers over the past two years. They didn't make any additions, but it's not as if this lineup could get much better. Texas' pitching is able to stay afloat during the tough summer, while the lineup abuses visiting pitching. In July, the Rangers hit .313/.356/.514, but the pitchers only surrendered a line of .221/.278/.347. If they can continue that trend, Texas should run away with the division, and maybe more.

The Fatal Flaw

The Rangers are highly dependent on young pitching, and that can come with problems. Specifically, Derek Holland had a 141 innings increase last year, which means there's a good chance he'll face a decrease in production or a heightened injury risk this season. Similarly, Neftali Feliz may also see a 100+ innings spike, which could very likely hamper his stuff down the stretch and in the postseason. And as exciting as Yu Darvish is, we still don't know how his skills will translate to the majors.



C Mike Napoli

AL West — 1. Texas Rangers

Lee and Wilson are gone, so the Rangers have turned to a young and surprisingly effective rotation. The rotation will be anchored by Darvish, who will go a long way to determining how far the Rangers will go this year. He put up crazy good numbers in Japan last year, but the switch from the Far East to the West is a tough transition. Some (think Kei Igawa) never catch on. Others (think Dice-K and Hideki Okajima) start off great before fading into mediocrity. Still some (think Hiroki Kuroda) have stayed consistently good.

The rest of the rotation is good, but still a bit of a mystery. Holland and Feliz just ooze potential, but they could both very easily mail in 4.50 ERA seasons. Harrison and Colby Lewis don't have nearly the upside of the other three, but they will be the rocks of the

group with ERAs sitting in the high-3.00s, maybe around 4.00.

Even if the starters falter a bit, Texas has the strongest bullpen in all the land. Behind new closer Joe Nathan, they have a bounty of great relievers, namely Mike Adams, Koji Uehara, and Alexi Ogando, along with Mark Lowe and Scott Feldman. The 'pen doesn't just have good arms, it has a surplus of good arms.

The Rangers can hit with any team. The only question that remains—now that the rest of the AL has been revamped—is how well the pitching will do. President Nolan Ryan will need Darvish, Feliz, and one more pitcher to step up in a big way if this team is going to become a championship team. I think that day will come. Maybe this October, maybe next, but this team is on their way up. ⑩

GRADE: 94



Spotlight – Neftali Feliz

It's about a year late now, but the Rangers have finally moved Neftali Feliz to the rotation for good. Before, Ron Washington only used him when Texas was up less than three in the ninth inning, but now he'll be tossing 160-180 innings. It'll be interesting to see how much his velocity drops as he stretches out his appearance, but I don't think it'll impact his effectiveness too much. He was a fantastic starter in the minors (he had a sub-3.00 career ERA), and I think it'll translate quickly in the bigs.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jurickson Profar – SS	Jurickson Profar	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	A-
Texas seems to have a thing for talented shortstops with great names. Former top-prospect and All-Star Elvis Andrus already graduated, but Profar has the potential to be even better. He's a plus defender with solid speed and developing power, not to mention great patience (65 walks to 63 strikeouts in 516 plate appearances). But since Andrus is a better defender and playing so well (and so affordable), it's very likely Profar will switch to second base, unless they trade him in a blockbuster deal.	Martin Perez	LHP	Two straight seasons of so-so numbers, just 20. Plus curve, top-of-the-rotation potential.	B+
	Leonys Martin	OF	Fantastic defender with plus arm. Offensive game built around speed, line-drive power.	B
	Mike Olt	3B	Big-time power and impressive patience. Strong defensively, strikes out too much.	B
	Neil Ramirez	RHP	Finally broke out in 4 th season. Solid three pitch mix, but injuries are concerning.	B
	Robbie Ross	LHP	Stuff isn't great, but control is exceptional. He has a limited upside, but a high floor.	B
	Christian Villanueva	3B	Far from the majors, but possesses plus speed and power. Discipline needs work.	B-
	Cody Buckel	RHP	Average stuff made up for by abnormal delivery, plus control. Lots of strikeouts.	B-
	Rougned Odor	2B	Toolsy, put up solid numbers as a 17-year-old in A-ball. Good bat, little power.	C+
	Tanner Scheppers	RHP	Has all the talent in the world, but control, durability are weak. Looks like a reliever.	C+

AL West — 2. Los Angeles Angels



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Erick Aybar						SS	213
.279	.322	.421	71	10	59	30	4.0
Howie Kendrick						2B	67
.285	.338	.464	86	18	63	14	5.8
Albert Pujols						1B	6
.299	.366	.541	105	37	99	9	5.1
Kendrys Morales						DH	142
.290	.346	.487	29	11	39	0	1.2
Torii Hunter						RF	104
.262	.336	.348	80	23	82	5	2.5
Vernon Wells						LF	339
.218	.248	.412	60	25	66	9	0.3
Alberto Callaspo						3B	137
.288	.366	.375	54	6	46	8	3.6
Chris Iannetta						C	58
.238	.370	.414	51	14	55	6	3.3
Peter Bourjos						CF	154
.271	.327	.438	72	12	43	22	4.3
Bobby Abreu						OF	83
.253	.353	.365	54	8	60	21	0.4
Maicer Izturis						SS/2B	168
.276	.334	.388	51	5	38	9	2.0
Mark Trumbo						CI/OF	174
.254	.291	.477	65	29	87	9	2.3
Hank Conger						C	287
.209	.282	.356	14	6	19	0	0.2

*2010 Stats

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Jered Weaver					RHP	8
18-8	2.41	3.20	1.01	235.2	198	5.6
Dan Haren					RHP	13
16-10	3.17	2.98	1.02	238.1	192	6.4
C.J. Wilson					LHP	56
16-7	2.94	3.24	1.19	223.1	206	5.9
Ervin Santana					RHP	87
11-12	3.38	4.00	1.22	228.2	179	3.2
Jerome Williams					RHP	55
4-0	3.68	4.62	1.36	44.0	28	0.4
Jordan Walden					RHP	28
5-5	2.98	2.79	1.24	60.1	67	1.7
Scott Downs					RHP	27
6-3	1.34	3.29	1.01	53.2	35	0.9
LaTroy Hawkins					RHP	68
3-1	2.42	2.76	1.24	48.1	28	0.7

What an off-season for the Angels. We've known for a while that owner Arte Moreno has had money to spend—just in the last five years he's spent \$261 on Torii Hunter, Vernon Wells, and Jered Weaver—but the team has never made a titanic splash like they did this off-season. That all changed on December 8, 2011, when the Angels flipped the baseball world on its head, spending over \$300 million on Albert Pujols and C.J. Wilson. They stole the best hitter in the game from the National League and their division rival's ace on the same day.

Without Pujols, Wilson, Chris Iannetta, and Kendrys Morales (and with Jeff Mathis playing over half the games), the Angels won a very solid 86 games. Unfortunately, they share a division with the two-time defending American League champion Texas Rangers, so they ended the year ten games out of the division lead. But this team is far better than the 2011 version. The Rangers, too, may have improved, but not nearly to the extent that the Angels have. So although neither team

falls exclusively into either category, the question arises: does great pitching or great hitting win more games over the regular season?

The Rangers, as discussed in the three previous pages, have one of the best three lineups in the game, but just a solid rotation. It may turn out to be a very good rotation if their pitchers develop quickly, but the unit could just as easily turn out to be one of the ten worst in the league. The Angels are a sort of foil to the Rangers. They have one of the top rotations in the league—four top-of-the-rotation starters isn't so shabby—but on offense that may fluctuate between very good and boring. We've all heard the saying "Good pitching beats good hitting," but both teams are far more balanced than that saying would suggest.

The fact that the Angels had the money to sign C.J. Wilson shouldn't come as much of a shock. Even after they signed Pujols for nearly a quarter billion dollars, it's not as if Moreno was scrambling for cash. It's just been that in the past, there

AL West — 2. Los Angeles Angels

hasn't been one player he's wanted to spend such a bounty on. Now, they did nearly break the bank on Adrian Beltre, Carl Crawford, and a few other big-name free agents over the past few winters, but ex-GM Tony Reagins always failed to seal the deal. Now, the more aggressive Jerry Dipoto has stepped in to change the culture in LA. Dipoto is far more willing to spend big on free agents like C.J. Wilson. But what was surprising about the big signing was that the Angels had no need for another high-end starter.

The Angels just locked up Jered Weaver. Dan Haren re-

established himself as a true ace. Even Ervin Santana stepped up to prove he's a quality number two starter. So going into the off-season with two rotation spots to fill, most people anticipated that the Angels would be in the hunt for one or two cost-effective, middle-of-the-rotation starters. Maybe an Erik Bedard or Aaron Harang type, someone who can hold the fort down for about \$4-\$5 million until a young pitcher is ready to take over. But no, the Angels put on their big boy pants and spent some cold hard cash on a pitcher who, at the very least, is considered a strong number two.

"We had a lot of mountains to climb. They young guys in here, they carried us all year, so the future is bright."

--Torii Hunter, RF

Now, the Angels have a team built for the playoffs. Although he's not "playoff proven" per se, Jered Weaver is just about as good of a rotation anchor as you'll find. Follow that up with three starters with a 3.17 ERA over nearly 700 innings in 2011, and that's going to form a hard team to beat over a seven games series.

The pitching is going to be great, but let's not forget about the hitting. The lineup isn't so far off from the Rangers' lineup, but there are far more questions surrounding it. For starters, not to rain on the Pujols Angels parade already, but, Albert Pujols is a 32-

year-old hitting in a new league coming off his worst season yet after just signing his final deal. Assuming he is fully motivated, I'm guessing he won't have another Pujolsian year in his Angels' debut. Additionally, new Angel Chris Iannetta should have a bit of trouble switching to the tougher AL, especially now that he's not going to be in the friendly confines of Coors Field.

The new guys aren't the only players with questions, though. The logjam in the outfield and at DH has cause for concern, at least as an outsider looking at seven players for four spots. With Pujols

A Reason for Hope

If the Angels make the playoffs—which they certainly have the talent to do—they'll be as dangerous as anyone. Although they don't have as good of a lineup as Boston, New York, and Texas do, their elite pitching will make them tough to beat. Jered Weaver is a bona fide ace, and Dan Haren is a borderline ace, while C.J. Wilson and Ervin Santana are very strong number two starters. In a one-game playoff, they'll have plenty of options, and in a series, it'll be hard to jump on their starters.

The Fatal Flaw

While the Angels' lineup is filled with impressive names, it's hard to trust many of the players. Kendrys Morales hasn't faced Major league pitching since May of 2010, Peter Bourjos hasn't amassed 750 big league plate appearances yet, and Torii Hunter is considering retiring after this season. That's not even mentioning the less-than-terrific play from Vernon Wells and Mark Trumbo last year, namely their combined .270 OBP. If the lineup doesn't clean up some serious question marks, LA could be in trouble.



SP Dan Haren

AL West — 2. Los Angeles Angels

in and Morales back, Rookie of the Year candidate Mark Trumbo had to move off first base and eventually found his way to third base. But not only am I concerned with his defense at the hot corner, I'm not sure his bat—and specifically his .291 OBP—will be good enough to merit much playing time.

The outfield, however, is where the real problem lies. Young Peter Bourjos seems to have a firm grasp of an every-day job, and Vernon Wells and Torii Hunter are apparently making “too much money to be benched.” That forces Bobby Abreu to the bench with the DH spot taken by Morales. Even more importantly, that means that there's no spot at all for the second best prospect in Major League Baseball, Mike Trout. Instead, he'll just toil away in AAA.

I don't want to frown upon the Angels offense too

much, though. Howie Kendrick has finally started to fulfill his promise as an All-Star middle infielder, and Erick Aybar continues to be steady and productive. They're going to hit, there's no doubt about it, but they just won't do it at nearly the clip that the Rangers will.

The Angels are one of the biggest beneficiaries of the second Wild Card being added. Instead of having to duke it out with the Rangers for the division crown (assuming a team from the East wins the first Wild Card), they just have to own one of the five best records. They'd be the second best team in the NL to the Phillies (including the best in the NL West by 10 games). Ultimately, they'll end up battling the Rays for the final Wild Card spot, and thanks to Pujols and their prime pitching, they'll just squeak into the postseason. ①

GRADE: 93



Spotlight – Albert Pujols

It sounds crazy, but I'm not so certain that Albert Pujols will have a great (for his standards) first season in LA. I'm sure he'll do really well, but before we announce that Pujols will set the AL ablaze with runaway MVP numbers, I think we should err on the side of caution. He's past his peak at 32-years old, and he's entering a brand new league with new pitchers. Adam Dunn, who made a living destroying NL pitching for a decade, put up a -2.9 WAR stink bomb of a year in his AL debut. Dunn is no Pujols, but it's a thought worth considering.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
C.J. Cron – 1B	Mike Trout	OF	Plus speed, bat, defense, patience. Question is how much power. 2 nd best MLB prospect.	A
The Angels took C.J. Cron with the 17 th pick in the 2011 draft hoping to find a power-hitting first baseman of the future. As it turns out, they found that man through free agency just six months later in Albert Pujols. Not only that, but Cron is buried behind 28-year old Kendrys Morales and 26-year old Mark Trumbo. Nevertheless, Cron has plus power and on-base skills, no value defensively. Most likely his role in Los Angeles will be a trade chip for another young player.	Jean Segura	SS	Defense cut short 2011 season. Plus bat, speed, solid power. Likely will stick at SS.	B+
	Garrett Richards	RHP	Average four-pitch mix, but shows good command, stamina. Draws weak contact.	B+
	C.J. Cron	1B	See Prospect Spotlight	B
	Taylor Lindsey	2B	Aggressive with great power for a middle infielder. Medium upside, needs patience.	B-
	Kaleb Cowart	3B	Solid upside, hasn't produced. Discipline, power haven't set in, but tools are there.	B-
	John Hellweg	RHP	Big frame, upper-90s heater, lacks control. Went from average reliever to good starter.	B-
	Nick Maronde	LHP	College reliever stretched into a starter. Needs 3rd pitch after fastball, curve to stick.	B-
	Kole Calhoun	OF	Flashes 3 plus tools (bat, power, speed), but big numbers were in A-Ball at 24 years old.	B-
	Cameron Bedrosian	RHP	Hasn't pitched in pro ball—he signed late, had Tommy John Surgery. Potential closer.	C+

AL West — 3. Oakland Athletics



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RBI	SB	WAR
Jemile Weeks						2B		195
.303	.340	.421	50	2		36	22	2.0
Cliff Pennington						SS		180
.264	.319	.369	57	8		58	14	1.5
Coco Crisp						LF		167
.264	.314	.379	69	8		54	49	2.2
Yoenis Cespedes						CF		NR
.333	.424	.667	89	33		99	11	--*
Seth Smith						DH		89
.284	.347	.483	67	15		59	10	1.9
Kurt Suzuki						C		246
.237	.301	.385	54	14		44	2	2.2
Brandon Allen						1B		171
.200	.277	.377	23	6		18	3	0.1
Josh Reddick						RF		311
.280	.327	.457	41	7		28	1	1.9
Josh Donaldson						3B		NR
.261	.344	.439	79	17		70	13	--*
Collin Cowgill						OF		267
.239	.300	.304	8	1		9	4	0.3
Jonny Gomes						OF		199
.209	.325	.389	41	14		43	7	1.5
Eric Sogard						SS/2B		356
.200	.243	.329	7	2		4	0	0.0
Daric Barton						1B		88
.212	.325	.267	27	0		21	2	-0.3

*Cuban National League Stats *Minor League Stats

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Brett Anderson					LHP	46
3-6	4.00	3.96	1.33	83.1	61	1.1
Dallas Braden					LHP	53
1-1	3.00	3.64	1.28	18.0	15	0.3
Brandon McCarthy					RHP	42
9-9	3.32	2.86	1.13	170.2	123	4.7
Bartolo Colon					RHP	100
8-10	4.00	3.83	1.29	164.1	135	2.9
Jarrod Parker					RHP	NR
0-0	0.00	3.20	0.88	5.2	1	0.1
Grant Balfour					RHP	54
5-2	2.47	3.77	1.03	62.0	59	0.4
Joey Devine					RHP	64
1-1	3.52	2.98	1.26	23.0	20	0.4
Fautino De Los Santos					RHP	75
3-2	4.32	3.54	1.32	33.1	43	0.3

For the kind of money they spend, Billy Beane's A's have done a remarkable job assembling a team. They didn't even spend \$62 million on their payroll and finished as the 9th most efficient team—they spent just \$832,861 per win. But the least efficient teams—the Yankees and Red Sox at \$1.98 million and \$1.74 million per win—are doing very well for themselves. From the business side, the Athletics are doing excellently, spending 32% of what the Yankees spent, while winning 76% as many games. But spending efficiency won't win you divisions, and it certainly won't win you a World Series. Additionally, it's still unclear where the A's are aiming to go.

By the end of the off-season we started to see a sliver of a hint at where Oakland was heading: build towards the future by any means necessary. This meant that everyone on the roster was on the chopping block, except then-24-year-old second base-man Jemile Weeks. Their entire outfield of Josh Willingham, Coco Crisp, and

David DeJesus was hitting free agency at once—as if their offense wasn't bad enough to begin. That trio made up three of the teams top four WAR-producers with a combined 6.5 wins.

It's bad enough if three of your top four hitters (by WAR) hit the open market, but it's even worse if the rest of your team combines to be 5.3 wins above replacement. This team is so flawed across the board that it really lacks any shot at the playoffs. And with the free-spending Rangers and Angels sharing the division, Billy Beane made the easy to see, tough to swallow connection that his team wasn't going to go win anytime soon. So with that in mind, he shipped off young pitchers Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, and Andrew Bailey to form the core of the next A's team with the prospects he got in return.

Together, Cahill, Gonzalez, and Bailey had a collective WAR of 6.9. While that may not be ultra-impressive, the group was an average age of 25 with an average of five more years of team control. Effective young pitchers aren't just hard to find,

AL West — 3. Oakland Athletics

they're the most expensive targets on the market. So while Oakland seriously hurt itself in the short-term, the team wasn't going to make the playoffs with or without the pitchers. Plus, Oakland got a serious loot of young players.

Since young pitching is so valuable, it should come as no surprise that the A's got a great return for the trio. Try six of their top 10 prospects great. Jarrod Parker should develop into an ace, A.J. Cole and Brad Peacock should become top-of-the-rotation starters, and Raul Alcantara and Tom Milone should also be mid-rotation starters. We won't see the

fruits of their trades for a while—2012 should be rather barren.

The offense will continue to suffer in Oakland—not just because of their wasteland of a stadium—but the pitching should remain very strong. Yes, their two best starters are gone, but don't forget about Brett Anderson and Dallas Braden, who combined for just sixteen starts last season. The powerful lefty combo were sorely missed last year, evidenced by the non-zero number of starts by Rich Harden, Graham Godfrey, and Josh Outman. They'll bring consistency, solid-to-good production, and continuity to a staff that could

“We're in the market for defective people. We're in the market for players whose value the market does not grasp. We're a magnet for these unattractive bodies!”

--Billy Beane, GM

otherwise be very volatile.

Brandon McCarthy was the big surprise for the A's last year with the best FIP in the AL at 2.86 over 170.2 innings. Once upon a time, he was an elite prospect for the White Sox, but those expectations have been long since tempered thanks to five seasons with an ERA over 4.00 and a year away from the majors. You can't deny how good McCarthy was last year, but it's also hard to expect an improvement, let alone the same production this season.

The rest of the rotation is very much in question. The club brought in Bartolo Colon, who hasn't been the same since the 2011 All-Star break and could probably use another one of his magical stem cell surgeries. The final spot will likely shuffle between Jarrod Parker and Brad Peacock. While they may become great pitchers one day, they're not ready for the Rangers and Angels in 2012.

Billy Beane really threw the A's Are-They-Rebuilding-Or-

A Reason for Hope

Thanks to the trades of Trevor Cahill, Gio Gonzalez, and Andrew Bailey, Oakland has developed one of the best minor-league systems around. Before the trades, their system consisted of only two good hitting prospects (Michael Choice and Grant Green) and one pitcher (Sonny Gray), but now the lower levels of Oakland's organization is brimming with young talent. Specifically, the A's have six players who project to be average at their position or better, more than most teams can say.

The Fatal Flaw

Currently, the A's might have the worst lineup in the league. Yoenis Cespedes could be a very nice hitter, but otherwise, who's going to contribute? Their 40-man roster is full of players who would make quality backups (Josh Reddick, Brandon Allen, Cliff Pennington...), but not too many starting-quality players. Last year, they had the 3rd-worst team offensive WAR, and it won't get much better this year. After all, any team depending on Manny Ramirez won't be too promising.



LF Coco Crisp

AL West — 3. Oakland Athletics

Are-They-Restocking-On-The-Fly conundrum into a loop when they signed Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes for \$36 million. Yes, they got fantastic value on him, especially considering he was looking for \$60 million at one point, but by the time the A's are ready to compete, his contract will be over. The man is a rookie at 26, just reaching his prime now. Now, when the A's will be toiling at the bottom of the American League.

Meanwhile, Oakland will sport a rather young offense. Kurt Suzuki, Yoenis Cespedes, Cliff Pennington, Brandon Allen, and Josh Reddick are all 28 or under, and 25-year olds Chris Carter and Collin Cowgill along with 26-year old Michael Taylor could also be seeing major PT. For a contending team, this would be bad because younger players have such highs and lows, but for a rebuilding team,

this is the perfect situation.

The worst thing the A's could have done would've been to bring back DeJesus, Hideki Matsui, and Willingham to keep more "proven players" in the lineup. The A's need to bottom out and see what kind of production their players can deliver if they want to compete relatively soon. Maybe forgotten prospects Chris Carter and Michael Taylor could be stars, but we'll never know if the team keeps giving time to Seth Smith.

Simply put, the A's are far from competing for a variety of reasons, all stemming from a lack of talent. Unfortunately, they're stuck in the second toughest division in the league, and it won't get easier for years. All they can do at this point is continue to develop their young players and hope for the best. 📊

GRADE: 81



Spotlight – Yoenis Cespedes

Yoenis Cespedes is the Man of Mystery for the Athletics. His popularity picked up steam this winter when he released two showcase videos—essentially of him working out, flaunting his ripped body, hitting monster home runs, and throwing the ball twice. Eventually, he signed with the A's, and now Oakland is home to one of the most exciting rookies and players in general. Cespedes' power is evident, and he's got plus speed, too, but it'll be key to see how he adjusts to the best pitching in the world.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Grant Green – OF	Jarrold Parker	RHP	Doesn't strike out many, but has dominating stuff, especially slider. Future workhorse ace.	A-
Coming out of USC in the 2009 draft, Green looked like a steal at 13 th overall for Oakland. A shortstop with serious pop is a hot commodity because of its rarity. Green showed just why they are so rare: in his second pro season, he had to move to center field because he could no longer handle shortstop. As a center fielder, his value is shot, especially with an 11-homer and 20-point OBP drop in 2011. But because of his tools and potential he flashes, Green remains a highly-touted prospect.	A.J. Cole	RHP	Average numbers, high potential. If change up improves, he could be a No. 1 starter.	B+
	Michael Choice	OF	Big-time power and lots of walks. Needs a more refined approach. Solid defender.	B+
	Brad Peacock	RHP	3 solid pitches, allows few base runners. Stamina, control are okay. Great numbers.	B+
	Sonny Gray	RHP	Small frame, big upside with plus breaking ball, fastball with sink. Quirky mechanics.	B
	Derek Norris	C	Average defender with a plus bat. Major power, but average contact. Great walker.	B
	Grant Green	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Raul Alcantara	RHP	Live arm with 2 plus pitches. High upside, could also flop in High-A. Needs a 3rd pitch.	B-
	Michael Taylor	OF	Has the tools, numbers aren't there. Old at 26, could be 20-20 if given playing time.	B-
	Tom Milone	LHP	Bad stuff, but outstanding control. Just gets the job done, makes few mistakes.	B-

AL West — 4. Seattle Mariners



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR			
Chone Figgins						3B	327
.188	.241	.243	24	1	15	11	-1.2
Dustin Ackley						2B	95
.273	.348	.417	39	6	36	6	2.7
Ichiro Suzuki						RF	203
.272	.310	.335	80	5	47	40	0.2
Justin Smoak						1B	230
.234	.323	.396	38	15	55	0	0.5
Mike Carp						LF	226
.276	.326	.466	27	12	46	0	0.5
Jesus Montero						DH	75
.328	.406	.590	9	4	12	0	0.6
Miguel Olivo						C	316
.224	.253	.388	54	19	62	6	0.9
Franklin Gutierrez						CF	184
.224	.261	.273	26	1	19	13	1.1
Brendan Ryan						SS	232
.248	.313	.326	51	3	39	13	2.6
Casper Wells						OF	125
.237	.317	.442	30	11	27	3	1.5
Michael Saunders						OF	371
.149	.207	.217	16	2	8	6	-0.5
Kyle Seager						IF	269
.258	.312	.379	22	3	13	3	0.5
John Jaso						C	197
.224	.298	.354	26	5	27	1	0.5

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Felix Hernandez					LHP	9
14-14	3.47	3.13	1.22	233.2	222	5.5
Jason Vargas					LHP	88
10-13	4.25	4.09	1.31	201.0	131	2.4
Blake Beaven					RHP	70
5-6	4.27	4.46	1.25	97.0	42	0.7
Hector Noesi					RHP	69
2-2	4.47	4.09	1.51	56.1	45	0.3
Kevin Millwood					RHP	112
4-3	3.98	4.30	1.21	54.1	36	0.7
Brandon League					RHP	46
1-5	2.79	2.78	1.08	61.1	45	1.4
Tom Wilhelmsen					RHP	69
2-0	3.31	3.36	1.16	32.2	30	0.3
George Sherrill					LHP	91
3-1	3.00	3.08	1.25	36.0	38	0.5

*Japanese Pacific League Stats

One thing that makes baseball unique is that each ballpark is vastly different. Sure, it's easier to kick long field goals in Denver, and Trail Blazer games will be far rowdier than Bobcats games, but those fields and courts are all the same sizes. However, everything is different in baseball. Fences range from 307 feet from home plate to 435 feet, and Houston has a grass mound in center field. Hell, Boston has a 37-foot high wall in left field. And because of this, teams can build around a certain aspect of the game that fits their home park. San Diego likes to build through the bullpen because spacious PETCO allows nearly any average reliever to put up All-Star caliber numbers. The Red Sox and Yankees operate in small ballparks, so they flex their economic muscle by signing great hitters. And the Mariners? They are building towards the future through lots of pitching, matching their voluminous ballpark.

The problem with the Mariners, however, is that they're

built exclusively through pitching. I don't mean that they don't have a good offense, I mean that they don't have an offense. I'm talking about a team that—for the second year in a row—put up historically bad numbers, including a sub-.300 team OBP and 5.1 total WAR. Twenty-seven players topped that figure just by themselves. Yes, Safeco Field zaps some of the team's power, but not a single hitter had an on-base percentage of .350 all year. Even the Giants—whose offensive anemia is only topped by this odious lineup—had three players break the .350 OBP barrier.

Seattle's future gameplan took a sharp turn this off-season with one trade. Back in 2010 when the M's had Cliff Lee, they very nearly traded him to New York for Jesus Montero and other prospects, before they used their leverage to land Justin Smoak from Texas. But they remained interested in the young slugger and acquired him eighteen months later—this time for 23-year-old budding star pitcher Michael Pineda.

AL West — 4. Seattle Mariners

Pineda was a highly regarded prospect last season before a strong Spring Training netted him an Opening Day roster spot and the fifth spot in the rotation. Standing tall at 6'7" 260, Pineda dominated the first half of the season with his 98-mile per hour fastball, earning an All-Star appearance with a 2.65 ERA, 1.04 WHIP, and 3.12 FIP through the first three months of the season. Alongside Felix Hernandez, Pineda was going to form one of the best 1-2 punches in the league for at least the next three years before King Felix hits free agency. But because of an extreme depth

in quality young pitching and equally extreme lack of hitters, GM Jack Zduriencik chose to trade his young flamethrower for a great young bat in Montero.

Even after trading Doug Fister last year and Pineda this winter, the Mariners are still swimming in young pitching. Three pitchers in particular look extremely promising, although they've thrown a combined 216 innings in the minors. They would be Taijuan Walker, Danny Hultzen, and James Paxton. Each is very different, but the bottom line is that in the next couple years, each should be up and making major

"There's some challenges, but nothing we won't be able to handle. Nothing's going to surprise us. We know when we're leaving for Japan."

--Eric Wedge, Manager

contributions in the Emerald City.

Hultzen likely won't end up the best pitcher in the group, despite being drafted 2nd overall in 2011, but he's going to be the first one to help out the major league team. And more so than Paxton and Walker, he's a sure thing—it'll be more shocking to see Bill Belichick win Man of the Year than to see him flop in the majors. Walker, on the other hand, has an upside approaching King Felix. But at 19 years old, he could also fizzle out and settle as a fourth starter. Lastly,

James Paxton lies somewhere in the middle. He's not quite a sure thing to succeed, but he's pretty close. And while I'd ultimately rather have Hultzen, Paxton's got the potential to become the fourth ace of this staff.

The plan for the Mariners is that before Felix Hernandez's contract runs out, their quartet of starters will combine with a just-good-enough offense to create a contending team. Of course, it's very rare for an entire class of prospects to all pan out to their ceiling, but I am nearly positive

A Reason for Hope

For the first time since the days of... who knows, the Mariners actually have multiple promising young hitters. The middle of their lineup features three top-ten league-wide prospects from just last year: Dustin Ackley, Jesus Montero, and Justin Smoak. Ackley had a fantastic rookie year in half a season, Montero played well in his limited time, but Smoak struggled to hit at a high clip. I expect all three to really break out this season and at least 2-3 WAR. It's optimistic, but they've got the talent.

The Fatal Flaw

Outside of that trio of young hitters, this lineup is absolutely dreadful. Miguel Olivo, Franklin Gutierrez, and Chone Figgins each had OBPs between .241 and .21, while Ichiro and Brendan Ryan hit at .310 and .313. It's quite evident why GM Jack Zduriencik sent Michael Pineda out of town—his team had no offense. Unfortunately, none of the other six veteran hitters have much upside left. Mike Carp certainly shouldn't hold down an every-day job, and Figgins looks like he gave up last year.



2B Dustin Ackley

AL West — 4. Seattle Mariners

that at least two of Walker, Hultzen, and Paxton will become top-of-the-rotation starters. The real problem, though, will be how long it will take for the offense to improve from depressing to watchable to adequate.

For the past decade, the name synonymous with the Mariners has always been Ichiro Suzuki. He's manned right field with exquisite defense, fantastic speed, great discipline, and 200-plus hits every season. That was until last year. 2011 was a huge step back for Ichiro and the Mariners' offense in general. Ichiro posted career low numbers in nearly every category—and they were all major drop-offs. Forty points on his OBP, 22 hits, 10.6 point off of his UZR, and a 3.2 win loss for WAR. It wasn't just a bad season; it was a sad season.

This signified a change towards a younger lineup. Ichiro

can't carry this team by himself anymore; he's going to have to depend upon the likes of Jesus Montero and Dustin Ackley, along with the emerging bats of Justin Smoak, Kyle Seager, and even Trayvon Robinson.

The only thing Seattle can do at this point is be patient. They've got money coming off the books with Ichiro in the final year of his deal and just two years and \$17 million left of Chone Figgins. They'll just have to bide their time until their bats improve and the trio of Walker, Hultzen, and Paxton reach the show. Maybe Franklin Gutierrez will re-discover his swing. Maybe prospects like Nick Franklin will take steps forward. And if all else fails, in the words of Jay-Z, "What tomorrow has in store, we can never be sure, so all we can do is pray."

GRADE: 79



Spotlight – Chone Figgins

At this point, it's clearly not just Safeco Field that's keeping Chone Figgins from being an average major leaguer. After posting a 6.9 WAR with the Angels, the Mariners gave him \$36 million. It doesn't appear as though that investment is working out. But he's still got the speed, he's still got the patience, so isn't it within reason that he could make a comeback to relevancy? Well, no. His bat as slowly been fading for five years now, and it's time to move on to young Kyle Seager, Alex Liddi, and Nick Franklin.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Danny Hultzen – LHP Most insiders thought the Mariners would snag Rice third baseman Anthony Rendon with the second pick in the 2011 draft, only to be surprised when the Mariners took Danny Hultzen. The Virginia starter lacks the ceiling of Taijuan Walker, but he has the highest floor in the system. He's going to be a number two starter when he reaches the Bigs, which could be as soon as this July. He's polished with plus control and a great changeup. Very good, just not great.	Taijuan Walker	RHP	Exceptional athlete oozing with upside. Plus fastball, solid off-speeds, future ace.	A-
	Danny Hultzen	LHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	James Paxton	LHP	Dominant with an upper-90s fastball and plus curve. Needs to improve his stamina.	B+
	Nick Franklin	SS	Nice pop for middle infielder, power down because of injuries. May have to shift to 2B.	B
	Vinnie Catricala	3B	Great bat, power, discipline, but lacks a position. Has spent time at 1B, LF, may DH.	B-
	Francisco Martinez	3B	Very raw, but shows flashes of power and speed. Athletic with plus arm strength.	B-
	Chance Ruffin	RHP	Limited upside since he's strictly a reliever, plus slider could make him a great closer.	B-
	Phillips Castillo	OF	High upside, but only 18. Too aggressive at the plate, solid power/speed potential.	B-
	Guillermo Pimentel	OF	Great raw power, but poor defensively and far too many strikeouts. Still young.	C+
	Brad Miller	SS	Jack of all trades, master of none. Should hit well for average, supply adequate defense.	C+



NL East

Chase Utley

NL East

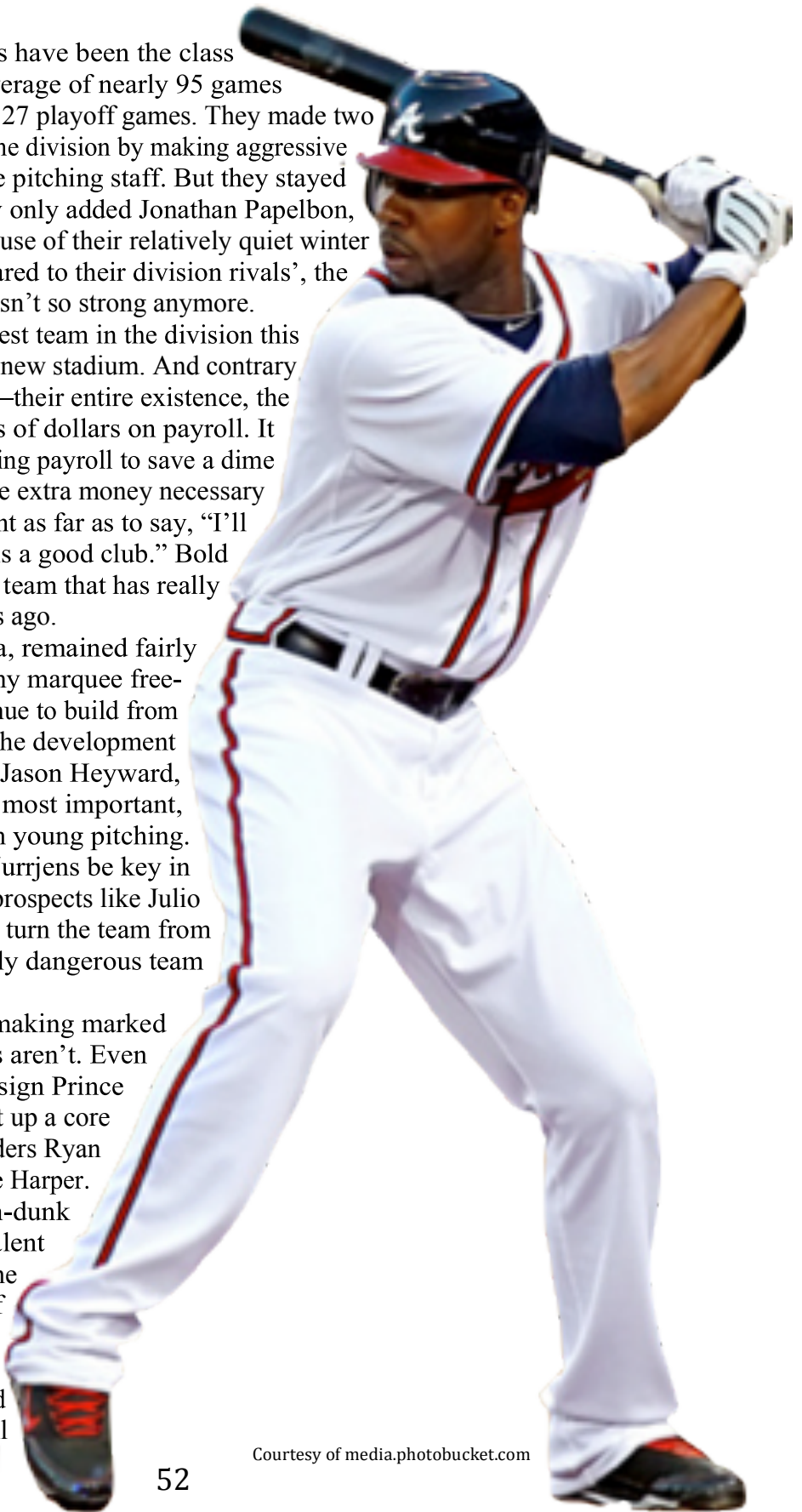
For the last five seasons, the Phillies have been the class of the NL East. They've won an average of nearly 95 games during that stretch, winning an additional 27 playoff games. They made two World Series, winning one, championing the division by making aggressive moves, specifically through adding to the pitching staff. But they stayed fairly stagnant this past off-season—they only added Jonathan Papelbon, Jim Thome, and Ty Wigginton. And because of their relatively quiet winter compared to years past, as well as compared to their division rivals', the vice grip the Phillies had on the division isn't so strong anymore.

By far, the Marlins were the noisiest team in the division this winter. They got a new name. They got a new stadium. And contrary to what they've done for—I don't know—their entire existence, the team actually spent hundreds of millions of dollars on payroll. It may come as a shock, but instead of slashing payroll to save a dime here and there, Jeffrey Loria ponied up the extra money necessary to build a competitive team. He even went as far as to say, "I'll take my chances against any team. This is a good club." Bold words for sure, and it's a great sign for a team that has really lacked life since they won it all nine years ago.

Atlanta, similarly to Philadelphia, remained fairly quiet this winter, too. They didn't sign any marquee free-agents like Jose Reyes, but they did continue to build from within. Their improvements come from the development of young players like Freddie Freeman, Jason Heyward, Craig Kimbrel, and Jonny Venters. But most important, they'll also get major contributions from young pitching. Not only will Tommy Hanson and Jair Jurrjens be key in determining the success of the team, but prospects like Julio Teheran and Arodys Vizcaino could help turn the team from a dark horse playoff team to an extremely dangerous team down the stretch and into October.

And lastly, even Washington is making marked improvements. Yes, that means the Mets aren't. Even though they fell short on their quests to sign Prince Fielder and C.J. Wilson, they've still built up a core of young players, most notably first rounders Ryan Zimmerman, Stephen Strasburg, and Bryce Harper.

This year will be far from a slam-dunk for the Phillies. There's just too much talent in the division for the race to finish like the last five seasons—Philly by an average of six games. In fact, after the AL East, this should be the most competitive division in the Majors. It's no given that a Wild Card will come from the East, but the races will be tight to the bitter end here.



Courtesy of media.photobucket.com

NL East — 1. Philadelphia Phillies



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Jimmy Rollins						SS	123
.277	.335	.339	46	5	50	3	2.8
Chase Utley						2B	18
.259	.344	.425	54	11	44	14	3.9
Hunter Pence						RF	59
.314	.370	.502	84	22	97	8	4.7
Ryan Howard						1B	65
.253	.346	.488	81	33	116	1	1.6
Shane Victorino						CF	35
.279	.355	.491	95	17	61	19	5.9
John Mayberry						LF	124
.273	.341	.513	37	15	49	8	2.5
Placido Polanco						3B	132
.277	.335	.339	46	5	50	3	2.8
Carlos Ruiz						C	68
.283	.371	.383	49	6	40	1	2.8
Laynce Nix						OF	288
.250	.299	.451	38	16	44	2	0.6
Ty Wigginton						3B/1B	330
.242	.315	.416	52	15	47	8	0.3
Michael Martinez						SS/2B	341
.196	.258	.282	25	3	24	3	-0.4
Jim Thome						1B	27
.256	.361	.477	32	15	50	0	0.0
Brian Schneider						C	366
.176	.246	.256	11	2	9	0	-0.9

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Roy Halladay					RHP	3
19-6	2.35	2.20	1.04	233.2	220	8.2
Cliff Lee					LHP	2
17-8	2.40	2.60	1.03	232.2	238	6.7
Cole Hamels					LHP	6
14-9	2.79	3.05	0.99	216.0	194	4.9
Vance Worley					RHP	50
11-3	3.01	3.32	1.23	131.2	119	2.5
Joe Blanton					RHP	89
1-2	5.01	3.63	1.48	41.1	35	0.6
Jonathan Papelbon					RHP	7
4-1	2.94	1.53	0.93	64.1	87	3.0
Antonio Bastardo					LHP	37
6-1	2.64	3.30	0.93	58.0	70	0.7
Jose Contreras					RHP	47
0-0	3.86	3.10	1.36	14.0	13	0.2

When I started writing my baseball previews in 2006, I picked the Mets to win the NL East. I don't regret that pick, New York was chock full of talent back then. Their lineup consisted of eight All-Stars, and they had Pedro Martinez and Tom Glavine atop their rotation. That year, the Mets fell one game short of the playoffs. In my own stubbornness, I picked the Mets to win the division again the next year, only to see them fall three games short of the division crown. From then on out, I've picked the Phillies to win the division behind the bats of Jimmy Rollins, Chase Utley, and Ryan Howard, along with some incredible pitching. But now, four years into picking Philadelphia to be the Beast of the East, I'm hoping that I'm not becoming stubborn again.

To say the least, the Phillies have been dominant in my three years of support for them. They've won an average of 97 games, winning the division by about eight games per year. They didn't win a World Series during that stretch, but they were as

dominant as any NL team was during that period. But I feel like their time atop the hill may start waning soon. Their problem is, like so many teams before, that they are not making moves to improve, while other teams take great strides forward.

Last season, the Phillies were the clear-cut favorites in the NL because of their four aces. Now, that number is down to three. Philadelphia didn't have any money left over after signing Jonathan Papelbon to a massive \$50 million deal and Cole Hamels' extension on the way. Joe Blanton, who missed all but 40 innings of 2011, will have to stay healthy and roll back the clock to his days in Oakland, while the three remaining aces—Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, and Hamels will have to carry an even bigger load.

My concern with this team doesn't necessarily stem from the pitching though—that's still going to be fantastic. What's got me concerned is that the offense is getting old, and GM Ruben Amaro, Jr., did nothing big to supplement it.

The last out of the season is the worst part for every team, but it was especially bitter for the Phillies. Immediately after leaving the batter's box trying to run out a ground ball to second base, Ryan Howard collapsed to the ground, his Achilles tendon completely torn. Now, the Phillies will be without their star first baseman until perhaps June. How did Amaro replace him? Try 41-year old DH Jim Thome and journeyman utility infielder Ty Wigginton.

With all due respect to Jim Thome, he should not be playing the field any more. He's listed at a generous 6'3" 250, but his hulking

frame and old-agedness has kept him off the field completely since 2007 and on a regular basis since 2005. Despite the advanced age, his OBP has taken nary a hit, and his monstrous power is still there. His only problem is that not only can he not field every day, but he can't even hit every day.

The rest of the Phillies lineup isn't nearly as old as Thome, but they're getting up there in age, too. Jimmy Rollins is no spring chicken at 33, and Utley, Shane Victorino, Carlos Ruiz, and Placido Polanco are all into their fourth decade as well. At this point, only Hunter Pence and John

“(It was a) disappointing year. We had higher goals than this.”

--Cliff Lee, SP

Mayberry, Jr., are the only players under 30 years in the starting lineup.

American sports fans are always looking for the new, shiny player or team that catches their attention. If you don't believe me, I've got one word for you: Linsanity. Old, boring teams like the Spurs get overlooked because Tim Duncan won't throw down behemoth dunks like Blake Griffin. But year after year, the Spurs are succeeding in the playoffs, and the Clippers have nothing to show. In this case, the Phillies may not have spent \$100 million on Jose Reyes or have two All-World prospects like Stephen Strasburg and Bryce Harper, but they're going to still be great.

More than anything else,

great pitching wins. The San Francisco Giants won 86 games last year with a slightly worse pitching staff than Philly's and an offense more hopeless than the survival of contraband candy at Fat Camp. Last year, the Phillies had by far the most pitching WAR (their 27.6 edged out the second-place White Sox by more than a full win), and they've still got the same core of pitchers. Talk about dominant pitching—no duo on the league compares to Halladay and Lee. The two have thrown 1869 innings over the last four seasons with a 2.71 ERA, a 1.08 WHIP, and 56.8 WAR. They're dominant, they show up in the clutch, and they never miss a start.

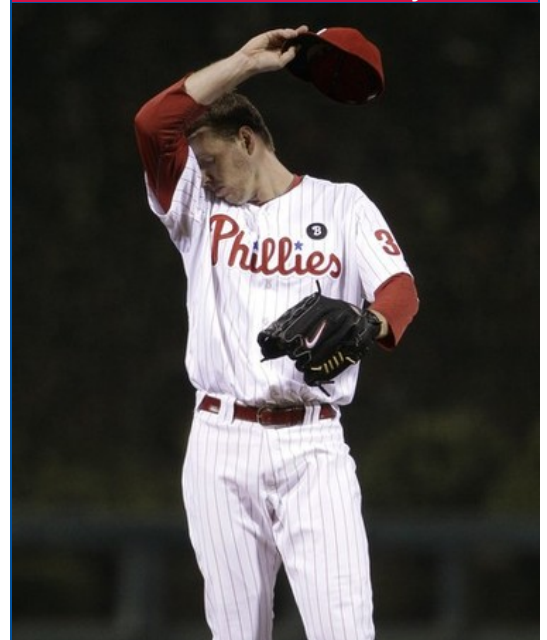
If there were any season for the Phillies to have so many

A Reason for Hope

Arizona won 94 games last year, and Ian Kennedy and Daniel Hudson anchored their rotation. That duo would've had to work hard to be the 4th and 5th starters in this rotation. Philadelphia has so much pitching, it's hard to envision this team failing. Even after Halladay, Lee, and Hamels, the back end of the rotation is strong. Vance Worley should be able to build off his strong rookie season, and Joe Blanton is among the most consistent pitchers in the league. Even Kyle Kendrick has his moments.

The Fatal Flaw

Even with the addition of Hunter Pence, the lineup is still extremely lefty-heavy, and it doesn't look so great any more compared to the American League powers like the Red Sox, Yankees, and Rangers. Philly may be able to cruise through the division and most of the way through the playoffs on their elite pitching and power hitters, but third base and left field could use serious upgrades. Unfortunately, Philly's used up all their trading chips to land Pence, Lee, and Halladay.



SP Roy Halladay

NL East — 1. Philadelphia Phillies

questions surrounding them, this would be the best year. There's no frontrunner in the NL with the departure of Albert Pujols and Prince Fielder to the American League; instead, there are lots of solid teams. And luckily for the Phillies, their offensive problems should have a built-in panacea midway through the season when Ryan Howard relieves Thome of his duties.

But even as well as Howard is perceived in the media, there is major skepticism about his future among statistical baseball communities. He's developing a horrible lefty/righty split (.224/.286/.347 vs .266/.370/.550), not to mention a steady decrease in OBP the last two seasons. His defense sure isn't improving, and his \$125 million extension is finally kicking in this year. Joy.

Perhaps I haven't been the most optimistic in this year's

Phillies preview, but every team at the top has holes. The Tigers don't have defense, the Rangers need more starters, and the Red Sox need less fried chicken. But this team is absolutely great. Ever since they added Hunter Pence last summer, their lineup looks even more potent, and we know Amaro is willing to take a risk and make a big splash.

In the end, the Phillies will pitch their way to sixth straight division championship. This team would be good enough with just one or two of their starters, but all three makes them too good to beat. Barring injuries or horrible luck, I also expect this team to go deep into the playoffs. I've been predicting a World Series run for the past three years, and at some point I'd like to see results, but it's hard to argue with the star-power and numbers of this team. ①

GRADE: 94



Spotlight – Cole Hamels

Roy Halladay had reason to be upset when the Phillies told him they don't give pitchers more than three years on a contract, only to hand Cliff Lee 5-year, \$120 million deal. Now Cole Hamels is the man that needs to be paid. A free agent just entering his prime, Hamels will easily earn a 9-figure contract. But with Ryan Howard's \$125 million extension just now kicking in, the Phillies may not have the money he's looking for. With an aging team, it's essential that Philadelphia can lock up their young ace.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jiwan James – OF	Trevor May	RHP	Workhorse with 4-pitch mix featuring plus curve, changeup. Racks up lots of strikeouts.	B+
The Phillies really like to collect toolsy players, especially toolsy outfielders (think Zach Collier, Tyson Gillies, and potential breakout star Kyrell Hudson). Jiwan James is no exception. A former pitcher, James is great on the base paths and can cover a lot of ground defensively. However, his power hasn't set in yet. Right now, it looks like he may only become a good 4 th outfielder, but he's only 22 and very raw. Look for at least one outfielder to make a big leap this year.	Jesse Biddle	LHP	Durable with high ceiling, lacks a quality third pitch. Needs to cut down on walks.	B+
	Brody Colvin	RHP	2011 was derailed by injuries, mechanics. Absolutely dominant when on, can hit 97.	B
	Sebastian Valle	C	Strong defender with upside offensively. Power comes, goes; needs more patience.	B
	Phillippe Aumont	RHP	Has electric stuff, shutdown closer potential. Control is in question, is erratic at times.	B-
	Larry Greene	OF	Huge power, doesn't hit well for average. Raw, but big upside. Defensively challenged.	B-
	Freddy Galvis	SS	Slick fielding, can play multiple positions. Switch-hitting with speed, average power	B-
	Jonathan Pettibone	RHP	Innings eater with great control. Good stuff, puts up great numbers, pitches to contact.	B-
	Julio Rodriguez	RHP	Fastball sits in high 80s, but strikes out an unruly amount of hitters. Has great stuff.	C+
	Jiwan James	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	C+

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Jose Reyes						SS	61
.337	.384	.493	101	7	44	39	6.2
Emilio Bonafacio						CF	155
.296	.360	.393	78	5	36	40	3.3
Hanley Ramirez						3B	99
.243	.333	.379	55	10	45	20	1.3
Mike Stanton						RF	38
.262	.356	.537	79	34	87	5	4.5
Logan Morrison						LF	141
.247	.330	.468	54	23	72	2	1.0
Gaby Sanchez						1B	86
.266	.352	.427	72	19	78	3	3.0
Omar Infante						2B	219
.276	.315	.382	55	7	49	4	2.7
John Buck						C	231
.226	.316	.367	41	16	57	0	1.8
Chris Coghlan						OF/2B	295
.230	.296	.368	33	5	22	7	-0.3
Bryan Petersen						OF	129
.265	.357	.387	18	2	10	7	1.7
Greg Dobbs						3B	362
.244	.292	.333	2	0	2	0	-0.2
Donnie Murphy						2B/SS	318
.185	.240	.315	10	2	9	0	0.1
Brett Hayes						C	283
.231	.291	.415	19	5	16	0	0.6

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Josh Johnson					RHP	1
3-1	1.64	2.64	0.98	60.1	56	1.7
Mark Buehrle					LHP	90
13-9	3.59	3.98	1.30	205.1	109	3.4
Ricky Nolasco					RHP	67
10-12	4.67	3.54	1.40	206.0	148	3.5
Anibal Sanchez					RHP	40
8-9	3.67	3.35	1.28	196.1	202	3.8
Carlos Zambrano					RHP	113
9-7	4.82	4.59	1.44	145.2	101	0.9
Heath Bell					RHP	21
3-4	2.44	3.23	1.15	62.2	51	0.5
Edward Mujica					RHP	65
9-6	2.96	3.20	1.03	76.0	63	1.0
Michael Dunn					LHP	80
5-6	3.43	4.30	1.30	63.0	68	-0.1

Talk about a change of culture. Last season, the Marlins finished last in the division—yes, behind the Mets and Nationals—as a non-descript, penny-pinching, fan-less franchise with no clear future. But six months and \$191 million later, the now-Miami Marlins have a brand new look with a brand new stadium, and a brand new outlook. With a fun Latin flare to the team, a payroll more than doubled to around \$120 million, and a rejuvenated fan base, the Marlins are poised to make a run at the playoffs for the first time since they won it all in 2003.

First and foremost: where did the Marlins come up with all this money? How could a team so averse to paying players more than the league minimum pony up nearly \$200 million in one off-season? Well, there are two main reasons, actually. For one, Major League Baseball forced the Marlins to increase payroll—it rose \$11 million last year—to prove that they're doing more with revenue sharing money than just pocketing checks. Secondly, the Marlins have

always drawn extremely high television numbers, despite being one of three teams to draw less than 20,000 fans per game. So with their state-of-the-art stadium opening up with trendy new gear, they can expect a spike in revenue from tickets, merchandise, and \$8 hotdogs.

Last season, the Marlins were just average offensively. 18th in WAR. 16th in OBP. 18th in ISO. And what offense they did have was slightly tempered by their home stadium, which favored pitchers. But despite only adding Jose Reyes, this Marlins team should be much improved.

To start things off, Hanley Ramirez remains the most talented player on the team. From 2006 to 2010, Hanley produced the fourth most WAR at an average of 6 WAR per season. But at 27, he couldn't stay healthy, and when he was, he was a shell of himself with career lows in nearly every hitting category. Now, he's moving to a much less demanding defensive position in third base, so I definitely expect his numbers to return to his 4.6-WAR

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins

2010 production at the very least.

But a much improved left side of the infield isn't the only reason the offense will almost certainly rise to the upper ranks of the NL; what's great about this team is that their core is very young. Ramirez and Reyes are entering their primes at just 28 years of age, while Mike Stanton, Logan Morrison, Emilio Bonifacio, and Gaby Sanchez come in at an average age of 25. Stanton, the true star of the group, boasts the second best raw power in the league (to Jose Bautista), and, at 22, is already the 3rd-best right fielder in the game behind Justin Upton, and, of course, Jose Bautista.

As for the other three, they combined for 7.3 WAR in 2011. 2.4 wins per player isn't so bad, and if you consider that none are close to their peaks yet, this offense could get really good really quickly.

One of my favorite aspects to the Marlins new stadium is the competitive edge they'll have over their opponents. No, I'm not talking about the fish tanks behind home plate or the beyond-wacky home run display (featured in the spotlight on the next page). My favorite part of the new stadium is their new grass. There's nothing special about the turf itself, but the Marlins are growing the grass longer than it was

"I have a lot of faith in this organization. In the past, this has been a very smart organization. They know what they're doing."

--Ozzie Guillen, Manager

last year, making Bonifacio, Reyes, and Ramirez far more potent on the base paths in terms of infield singles. Back in the day, the Astros gained their edge by blowing air conditioners inwards when the other team was batting, but the Marlins will gain their home field advantage by augmenting their speed and infield defense.

The Marlins' offense sure looks better, but the main reason the Marlins will be in the playoff hunt is because of their pitching. Judging by where they were at last year, that should be a big surprise. Just like their hitting, the Marlins' pitching was in the middle of the

pack last season—15th in WAR, 16th in ERA—but it's the changes over the off-season that have really put them over the top.

A day before losing out on the Albert Pujols sweepstakes, the Marlins looked like big winners, already having landed Reyes, Heath Bell, and now Mark Buehrle. The lefty returned to play for his manager he won a World Series with in 2005, Ozzie Guillen, giving Miami something they hadn't seen in nearly a decade: a consistent starting pitcher. The Marlins have seen all sorts of talent come through from Dontrelle Willis to A.J. Burnett to Josh Beckett, but

A Reason for Hope

When's the last time Marlins fans went into the season with hope for something other than Hanley Ramirez not to be traded? The front office is finally putting together a talented team—while still maintaining youth. The core of the team, both on offense and pitching-wise is under 30, so even after some of the free agent deals run up (like Bell and Buehrle), the Marlins will still have the main blueprint in place with Stanton, Johnson, Ramirez, and Sanchez here for the long haul.

The Fatal Flaw

This batting lineup really lacks experience. Albert Pujols would help any team, but the Marlins especially. John Buck is the only hitter over 30, and only Jose Reyes and Omar Infante have even played in the playoffs. Miami has the pitching to survive to the playoffs, but I don't think they'll have the offense to take down one of the giants like Philly. Their speed and defense helps to make up for their slight lack of pop, but they could still see big improvements from within to the lineup.



3B Hanley Ramirez

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins

never in recent history have they had a surefire 200-inning, 3-4 WAR pitcher. On the other side of the coin is Carlos Zambrano, who Miami picked up for next to nothing. He has all the talent in the world—he just can't reel it in. Maybe, as I believe, Ozzie Guillen will be able to bring out the best in him, making him a 2-starter talent as Miami's 5th starter. But truth be told, he's just as likely to boil over in the South Florida heat.

Buehrle and Zambrano join an already strong rotation anchored by the man who holds the key to the Marlins' season: Josh Johnson. If he's the Josh Johnson of 2009-10 with 11.9 WAR, the Marlins are a post-season team. But if he's hurt or ineffective coming off shoulder surgery, the Marlins are in deep trouble. Anibal Sanchez and Ricky Nolasco, good for 400 innings and 7.3 WAR last year, will round

out the young rotation, easily one of the best units in the league.

This may just be the perfect storm for the Marlins. The new stadium, logo, uniforms, and culture will spark more fan interest than ever before, and they've spent \$15 million more on this team than they did last two Marlins teams combined. Yes, it would have been perfect had they landed Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes, but not everything can work out perfectly. Finally, as I've pointed out before, major uniform changes do correlate well to surprise playoff runs (think '07 D-Backs and '08 Rays), further proof that the Royals will change their names to the Kings in a year or two when they're ready for a postseason run. Either way, the Marlins have too much pitching to flop—they're going to surprise, but they've got what it takes to be a playoff team. ①

GRADE: 91



Spotlight – Home Run Thing

What on Earth are the Marlins thinking? I'm starting to dig the new uniforms, and the stadium is absolutely fantastic, but then this shows up. Every time the Marlins hit a home run—which I can assure you will be often as long as Mike Stanton is hitting—this contraption will go off. We're talking flashing lights, leaping fish, and crazy colors. I haven't seen something this atrocious since Rebecca Black's "hit single" Friday. This isn't some carnival; this is baseball. Come on Marlins, you can do better.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Matt Dominguez – 3B	Christian Yelich	OF	Great bat, patience, speed. Defense adapted well after playing 1B, arm is weak for CF.	B+
We've been waiting on Dominguez to break through for three years now, but we're still waiting. The man was drafted 12 th overall in 2007 as a prime defensive infielder with a chance to develop a solid bat, but he only has a career .325 OBP with marginal power in five minor league years. He still looks like at least a quality utility man, but with Hanley Ramirez taking over at third, Dominguez's future in Miami is murky at best, and he may be a trade chip this season.	Marcell Ozuna	OF	Huge power and cannon arm, but gets too aggressive at the plate. Surprising speed.	B
	Jose Fernandez	RHP	Live arm with upper-90s fastball. Could be No. 2 starter, closer. Great pitching frame.	B
	Matt Dominguez	3B	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	J.T. Realmuto	C	Raw, potentially plus bat and power. Great athlete, but still making transition from SS.	B-
	Chad James	LHP	Average repertoire, throws strikes. Often gets hit hard when he fails to command.	B-
	Mason Hope	RHP	Has plus fastball and curveball, pounds the strike zone. HS teammate of Archie Bradley.	B-
	Austin Brice	RHP	Big strikeout numbers, hurt by control. Dominating stuff, needs better stamina.	B-
	Rob Rasmussen	LHP	Average stuff, poor control. Future Back-of-the-rotation starter, if not a reliever.	C+
	Noah Perio	2B	Toolsy, but numbers don't match skills after 3 years. Could develop a solid bat.	C+

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Michael Bourn						CF	50
.294	.349	.386	94	2	50	61	3.0
Martin Prado						LF	176
.260	.302	.385	66	13	57	4	1.6
Chipper Jones						3B	120
.275	.344	.470	56	18	70	2	2.1
Dan Uggla						2B	91
.233	.311	.453	88	36	82	1	2.5
Brian McCann						C	42
.270	.351	.466	51	24	71	3	3.7
Freddie Freeman						1B	209
.282	.346	.448	67	21	76	4	1.0
Jason Heyward						RF	63
.227	.319	.389	50	14	42	9	2.2
Tyler Pastornicky						SS	NR
.314	.359	.414	22	2	15	11	..*
Matt Diaz						OF/1B	343
.263	.302	.323	16	0	20	5	0.6
Jose Constanza						OF	262
.303	.339	.385	21	2	10	7	0.8
Eric Hinske						OF/1B	152
.233	.311	.403	24	10	28	0	0.9
Jack Wilson						SS/2B	373
.243	.274	.285	25	0	11	5	0.0
David Ross						C	81
.263	.333	.428	14	6	23	0	1.3

*Minor League Stats

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Tim Hudson					RHP	44
16-10	3.22	3.39	1.14	215.0	158	3.7
Jair Jurrjens					RHP	48
13-6	2.96	3.99	1.22	152.0	90	1.5
Tommy Hanson					RHP	12
11-7	3.60	3.67	1.17	130.0	142	1.8
Brandon Beachy					LHP	28
7-3	3.68	3.19	1.21	141.2	169	2.8
Mike Minor					LHP	93
5-3	4.14	3.39	1.49	82.2	77	1.4
Craig Kimbrel					RHP	2
4-3	2.10	1.52	1.04	77.0	127	3.2
Jonny Venters					LHP	6
6-2	1.84	2.78	1.09	88.0	96	1.7
Eric O'Flaherty					LHP	30
2-4	0.98	2.54	1.09	73.2	67	1.6

I have lots of favorite quotes, but when it comes to sports, two stick out more than the rest. The first is attributed to many people, including Ben Franklin and Albert Einstein: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The other is a quote by A's GM Billy Beane, which I don't know word for word, but it goes, "you can't get better by staying the same." They may sound dumb, and they may sound obvious, but the Braves fell right into the trap laid by the quotes. Atlanta didn't make any additions this off-season, so it's hard to see them finishing much better than they did last year.

Atlanta was so close last season. Despite a complete drop-off in production from Jason Heyward, the Braves held onto the Wild Card for 161 games of the season. Unfortunately, they let the eventual champion St. Louis Cardinals surpass them, and they finished with the fifth-best record in the National League. Fifth place is a whole lot better than finishing

twelfth, like the Marlins, but at the end of the day, both teams watched the playoffs from their couches.

The team collapsed last September for a variety of reasons. In the last week, they only scored seven runs in their last five games, all of which were losses. But the crux of the problem was a collapse in overall pitching. The dynamic relief duo of Craig Kimbrel and Jonny Venters combined to give up more than a run every other inning in September, all after sporting a respective 1.64 and 1.31 ERA the rest of the year. Derek Lowe may have been the worst with an 8.75 ERA and 1.99 WHIP in the final month. He was traded to Cleveland this off-season for a bag of balls and a corked bat. But if anything was most telling, it would have to be the fact that starters pitched six innings only three times in the last twenty-three games.

Luckily for the Braves, their (in)activity this off-season won't especially hurt their rotation. It's probably the strongest point of the team—even before their big four pitching prospects

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves

are ready to contribute. After 36-year old Tim Hudson, who remains the most consistent pitcher on the staff, the rest of the starters are all 26 or younger. Jair Jurrjens is actually viewed as a veteran of the staff, despite just four full seasons in the majors. After a down, injury-filled 2010 season, Jurrjens rebounded extremely well with a sharp increase in innings along with an ERA under 3.00 for the second time in his career.

But what follows Hudson and Jurrjens is actually what makes the rotation really interesting. Atlanta finishes out the rotation with a somewhat

underwhelming, immensely talented starter, an overachieving, solid starter, and their pick from a litter of high-quality minor league arms. Tommy Hanson, by far the best pitcher on the team based on pure stuff, missed over two months of time due to arm trouble. When he was healthy, his ERA sat in the mid-3.00s, but he can get at least a half point lower. Brandon Beachy, who put up more or less the exact same numbers, doesn't have even close to the potential that Hanson possesses, but he continually got the job done last season.

Finally, the last rotation spot

“The fact that we’re going home now won’t sit well with any of us. It’s going to take a while for us to get over this.”

--Dan Uggla, 2B

will come down to which youngster can help out the most immediately. Arodys Vizcaino may have been the man, but he's lost for the season with Tommy John Surgery. Mike Minor, Julio Teheran, and Randall Delgado have all seen time in the majors one way or another, but there is obviously limited space for the trio. Minor, who is most major league ready, is likely to see the most time, but Delgado could really use time out of the Braves 'pen—especially since his future may be out of the Turner Field bullpen. Teheran is by far the most talented, but could use a bit more seasoning before a mid-season call-up.

Atlanta's problem is that they did nothing to supplement their pitching—they even lost out on about 150 innings from Derek Lowe. And although their rotation may improve enough because of the natural progression of their young pitchers, they really missed out on picking up an extra arm like a Roy Oswalt. Now, if Teheran steps up and becomes that extra pitcher they've been looking for, all will be good in the ATL. However, for the offense that stood pat this winter, there aren't any reinforcements on the horizon like the four young starters.

Really, there are only two

A Reason for Hope

Have you seen Atlanta's pitching? Not only do they have a great, young pitching staff, they also have the best crop of pitching prospects coming up—at the very least in the conversation with Oakland and Seattle. Mike Minor will likely spend most of the season—if not all of it—in the majors, and Julio Teheran should follow soon. While they may not be fantastic this season, Atlanta will have a chance to rule the NL East with their cost-effective and extremely talented young pitching.

The Fatal Flaw

Atlanta didn't improve their offense, which wasn't that great to start with. I'm a strong believer in Jason Heyward, but he needs to fix his mechanics to prove he's not just a one-hit wonder. However, aside from Pastornicky (and Prado to an extent), there aren't any easy outs. Unfortunately, there aren't any tough outs, either. Brian McCann, Freddie Freeman, and Dan Uggla all have their good moments, but the lineup is too inconsistent to be considered a great offense.



CF Michael Bourn

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves

changes to the Braves offense for 2012: Michael Bourn gets to play a full season, and Tyler Pastornicky succeeds Alex Gonzalez. But that's not going to make a big difference over a full season, even to a team that was 21st in WAR and 26th on OBP.

The Braves' offense is filled with solid-to-good bats, but no great ones. Chipper Jones isn't close to that level any more, and another year of worn down knees can't help his cause. Martin Prado is just an average hitter in left field, a position that demands more than just a .302 OBP hitter with 13 home runs.

The real key to the offense, though, will be the progress made by three hitters: Freddie Freeman, Dan Uggla, and Jason Heyward. Freeman had an excellent rookie season, and at just 22, you can expect his power output to rise above 21 homers. The only question is whether

that leap will happen this year or farther in the future. As for Uggla and Heyward, they've each shown they can wield great bats with 30+ home run power. But the two looked lost last season, far from All-Star consideration, let alone consistent play.

We've seen this story before, and we've seen how this story ends. However, there's a twist to the plot this time around. Now, there's a second Wild Card, so I have the Braves slated for the fifth and final playoff spot. Although they didn't do much to improve the team, many of the other NL contenders (Milwaukee and St. Louis, specifically) have gotten worse. Assuming Hanson and Jurrjens won't be hurt down the stretch, this team should be good position to make the playoffs, especially if Teheran and Delgado can give them a boost down the stretch. ①

GRADE: 90



Spotlight – Tommy Hanson

One year ago, Tommy Hanson looked like a future bona fide ace. But after tearing his rotator cuff in August, his future appears far murkier. Now, since the Braves have a surplus of potential aces in the minor leagues (Julio Teheran, Arodys Vizcaino, Randall Delgado, Mike Minor...) they don't have to bank on Hanson becoming a number one starter. But I still think that's just what he'll become. He's got a workhorse frame and number one starter stuff. The hope is he can just stay healthy and mature.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Edward Salcedo – SS	Julio Teheran	RHP	Electric stuff, easy velocity, plus changeup. Needs improved curve to fulfill ace ceiling.	A
The Braves signed Salcedo two years ago at 18 years old for a hefty \$1.8 million bonus. The man has shown signs of being a good Major Leaguer, but the production just hasn't been there. Originally touted as a five-tool player, Salcedo's defense has been so raw, he's been forced him to play some at third base. Additionally, he hasn't been able to consistently hit for average. It's far too soon to give up on Salcedo, but it'd be nice to see more than flashes of talent.	Arodys Vizcaino	RHP	Potentially better stuff than Teheran, but elbow health and durability are concerns.	A-
	Randall Delgado	RHP	Big frame with plus velocity and change-up. Question remains if he's start or relieve.	B+
	Andrelton Simmons	SS	Plus glove with cannon arm. May only end up with gap power, but bat, speed are there.	B
	Sean Gilmartin	LHP	Polished with limited upside and average stuff. Should reach the majors fairly soon.	B
	Edward Salcedo	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Zeke Spruill	RHP	Returned to relevancy with plus control. Off speeds need consistency, command.	B-
	Christian Bethancourt	C	Absolutely great defensively with a great arm, but his offense is seriously lacking.	B-
	Brandon Drury	3B	Great bat with solid power potential and defense. Rarely strikes out, but never walks.	C+
	J.J. Hoover	RHP	A tad old; has never had an ERA over 3.50. With other Braves pitchers, may relieve.	C+

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Ian Desmond						SS	331
.253	.298	.358	65	8	49	25	1.4
Danny Espinosa						2B	156
.236	.323	.414	72	21	66	17	3.5
Ryan Zimmerman						3B	29
.289	.355	.443	52	12	49	3	2.5
Mike Morse						LF	130
.303	.360	.550	73	31	95	2	3.4
Adam LaRoche						1B	222
.172	.288	.258	15	3	15	1	-0.2
Jayson Werth						RF	22
.232	.330	.389	69	20	58	19	2.5
Wilson Ramos						C	198
.267	.334	.445	48	15	52	0	3.1
Roger Bernadina						CF	259
.243	.301	.362	40	7	27	17	0.8
Rick Ankiel						OF	281
.239	.296	.363	46	9	37	10	1.4
Mark DeRosa						Util	337
.279	.351	.302	9	0	12	1	0.1
Steve Lombardozzi						IF	NR
.194	.219	.226	3	0	1	0	-0.2
Chris Marrero						1B	352
.248	.274	.294	6	0	10	0	-0.7
Jesus Flores						C	323
.209	.253	.314	5	1	2	0	-0.1

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Stephen Strasburg					RHP	23
1-1	1.50	1.28	0.71	24.0	24	1.1
Jordan Zimmerman					RHP	26
8-11	3.18	3.16	1.15	161.1	124	3.4
Gio Gonzalez					LHP	92
16-12	3.12	3.64	1.32	202.0	197	3.5
Edwin Jackson					RHP	82
12-9	3.79	3.55	1.44	199.2	148	3.8
John Lannan					LHP	123
10-13	3.70	4.28	1.46	184.2	106	1.3
Drew Storen					RHP	63
6-3	2.75	3.32	1.02	75.1	74	0.9
Tyler Clippard					RHP	18
3-0	1.83	3.17	0.84	88.1	104	1.2
Henry Rodriguez					RHP	71
3-3	3.56	3.24	1.51	65.2	70	0.6

In their seven years of existence, we've all made our fair share of Nationals jokes. But finally, it looks like the team is making moves in the right direction. No, they didn't sign Prince Fielder, C.J. Wilson, or even Yoenis Cespedes, but they're starting to look more and more like they have an actual plan for success. They cashed in four big trade chips to land Gio Gonzalez and brought in Edwin Jackson on a short-term deal. With a lot of help coming on the way in terms of prospects, this team could actually be a playoff threat soon.

Don't be fooled; the Nationals are not built to win now. Their pitching is exponentially better with the return of Stephen Strasburg and the two other new hurlers, but this team has the exact same offense that finished 25th in the league in on-base percentage last year. They didn't make any moves to strengthen the offense, unless you think Mark DeRosa will be a major difference-maker. Don't get me wrong, there's all sorts of potential throughout the

lineup between Danny Espinosa, Wilson Ramos, Ian Desmond and even Mike Morse, but the offense isn't even close to the league of even the Marlins or Phillies.

For just the 2011 season, the Nationals are a team stuck in the middle. They've got Edwin Jackson in the nation's capitol for just one year—I'd be shocked if he re-signed to another one-year deal next off-season—but the offense isn't there to back him up. They could call on Bryce Harper to pick up some of the slack, but that addition still wouldn't be enough to put the team over the top. Furthermore, he's not entirely ready for a full season in the majors; even if his arbitration clock didn't matter, it'd still be best to give him a few months in the minors.

Without Bryce Harper, the Nationals offense doesn't even look like a threat. Ian Desmond isn't developing as quickly as the team would like him to—it would even make sense to switch him and Danny Espinosa at second base and shortstop. And another disappointment, Jayson

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals

Werth saw his 'O' really suffer across the board. In his contract year in Philly, he hit .296/.388/.532, but his first season in Washington only produced a .232/.330/.389 line. That, after getting \$126 million from the Nats.

But not everything was a disappointment. Mike Morse went from being a platoon hitter without a position to a near-All-Star. He was the main source of power with 31 bombs and a monstrous .550 slugging percentage, picking up where Adam Dunn left off and Ryan Zimmerman couldn't help because

the other big surprise—he finished just three steals short of a 20-20 season at just 24 years old. Wilson Ramos, too, made a great rookie impression, posting 15 bombs in about two-thirds of a season. One of the keys to the season, for sure, will be how well the trio responds to a big 2011.

Of course, the most important player offensively for the Nats is Ryan Zimmerman. The All-Star is by far the best third baseman in the National League with elite defense, plus power, and a great bat. The Nats just gave him a massive \$100 million extension, buying out four years of his free

“Short-term, plenty of things could have gone better this season. We should have won a few more games. But looking ahead, there is not a lot of negative.”

--Ryan Zimmerman, 3B

agency. It was key for Washington to re-sign him because he will be at his peak performance during that contract right when Nationals will be in prime position to make a playoff run. They'll need him more than ever. Sure, their second best prospect, Anthony Rendon, also plays the hot corner, but he's not proven and can also be shifted to second base if need be. Zimmerman may be slightly overpaid, but he's well worth the money for the Nats.

In contrast to their weak hitting, the Nationals' young

pitching rotation is actually rather strong. The staff is anchored by star Stephen Strasburg, who is truly one of the biggest delights to watch. If you haven't gotten to see him at all over his seventeen major league starts, you may reconsider if you've actually known what good pitching is. I (slightly) kid.

Another thing great about the Nats' pitching is that it's entirely young. For all intents and purposes, Strasburg is headed into his second pro season, and Jordan Zimmermann is headed into

A Reason for Hope

It's hard to not be excited about the Nationals if you're a fan of the team or just a fan of baseball in general. Not only did they win 80 games for the first time since their inaugural season in 2005, but they also flashed promise and a bright future. After missing most of the season, Stephen Strasburg came back to pitch five starts, good for a 1.50 ERA and 12 K/BB. It was clearly just a small comeback, but it showed that he's ready to return to the level he was at in his dominant rookie season.

The Fatal Flaw

Besides the fact that the Nationals always find a way to blow things, the reason the Nationals won't compete for a playoff spot is that they don't have enough offense. The pitching is there with four top-of-the-rotation guys, but they only have three sure-fire above-average hitters. Danny Espinosa and Wilson Ramos could develop into just that, but beyond Ryan Zimmerman, Mike Morse, and Jayson Werth, they lack dependable hitting. They needed to sign Prince Fielder.



C Wilson Ramos

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals

his third. Washington may have overpaid for 26-year old Gio Gonzalez, but they've really solidified a great, young rotation with tremendous upside.

Finally, the end of the rotation is capped off with one of the more consistent 4th/5th starter combinations in the league: Edwin Jackson and John Lannan. They may have combined for an average-looking 3.75 ERA last season, but they bring stability to a staff that, at the top, can get wild at times. While the two starters are the veterans of the staff, neither starter is over 28. This staff is great now and should be even better once their reinforcements come in.

Losing A.J. Cole, Brad Peacock, Derek Norris, and Tom Milone really hurt the minor league system, but Gio Gonzalez was the real gem of the deal. Furthermore, the depth of their

minor league pitching—Matt Purke, Alex Meyer, Sammy Solis, and Robbie Ray, all projected Major League starters—helped cushion the blow. What money they didn't spend in free agency over the last couple of seasons has paid off big-time in the draft, where they spent over \$16 million on their first four draft picks last year. Those four players came in second to fifth on their top ten prospects.

It's going to be shocking, but in the near future, the Nationals are going to be in the playoffs. It won't be this year because they just don't have enough might offensively, but Harper, Rendon, and crew should be up in the majors before long. And assuming there are no major regressions on either side of the ball, the Nats could be a good team in a very tough 2013 NL East.

GRADE: 84



Spotlight – Bryce Harper

Between the Phillies firepower, Miami's sudden emergence, Atlanta's young guns, and the Nats' general lack of production, Washington is unlikely to compete for a playoff spot. But the buzz in DC is not as much about Roger Bernadina and John Lannan as it is about when Bryce Harper will get the call. At just 19 years old, there is no reason to rush him to the majors and start his arbitration clock, especially on such a dismal team. Expect him to get more seasoning in the minors before a mid-2013 call-up.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Matt Purke – LHP	Bryce Harper	OF	As good power and arm strength as you'll see. Quite simply the next big superstar.	A+
The Rangers drafted Purke 14th overall in the 2009 draft and had a pre-draft deal with him for \$6 million, only to have the agreement scuttled before the signing deadline. Purke looked to be one of the top prospects in 2011 as a draft eligible sophomore, but his velocity dropped while his ERA dropped and his money demands remained high. Washington eventually took him in the 3 rd round and gave him a \$2 million bonus, a big investment for a risky prospect with serious health concerns.	Anthony Rendon	3B	Fell in the draft because of injuries, but has great power, arm. Likely will move to 2B.	A-
	Brian Goodwin	OF	Has some risk, but the upside is a 25-25 star. His swing, defense still need work.	B+
	Matt Purke	LHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Alex Meyer	RHP	Has knockout fastball and slider, but 6'9" frame causes shaky mechanics, command.	B
	Destin Hood	OF	Talented, but raw; very athletic. Power starting to set in as strikeouts decrease.	B-
	Sammy Solis	LHP	Big-framed innings-eater with solid control. Velocity ticked up, but has shoulder issues.	B-
	Robbie Ray	LHP	Small sized, doesn't throw hard, but puts up great numbers. Advanced for a 19-year old.	B-
	Chris Marrero	1B	2006 1 st rounder who never lived up to his potential. Solid power, but not for 1B.	C+
	Jason Martinson	SS	Walks, has power, has speed, but can be aggressive to a fault. Behind track age-wise.	C+

NL East — 5. New York Mets



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Andres Torres						CF	45
.221	.312	.330	50	4	19	19	2.1
David Murphy						2B	138
.275	.328	.401	46	11	46	11	1.1
David Wright						3B	76
.254	.345	.427	60	14	61	13	1.9
Ike Davis						1B	62
.302	.383	.543	20	7	25	0	1.4
Jason Bay						LF	145
.245	.329	.374	59	12	57	11	0.7
Lucas Duda						RF	215
.282	.370	.482	38	10	50	1	0.9
Josh Thole						C	236
.268	.345	.344	22	3	40	0	1.0
Ruben Tejada						SS	256
.284	.360	.335	31	0	36	5	1.8
Scott Hairston						OF	244
.235	.303	.470	20	7	24	1	0.3
Ronny Cedeño						SS	333
.249	.297	.339	43	2	32	2	1.4
Justin Turner						IF	248
.260	.334	.356	49	4	51	7	0.8
Nick Evans						1B	235
.256	.314	.403	26	4	25	0	0.7
Mike Nickeas						C	332
.189	.246	.246	4	1	6	0	-0.1

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Johan Santana					LHP	25
11-9	2.98	3.54	1.18	199.0	144	3.5*
R.A. Dickey					RHP	37
8-13	3.28	3.77	1.23	208.2	134	2.5
Jon Niese					LHP	84
11-11	4.40	3.36	1.41	157.1	138	2.7
Mike Pelfrey					RHP	125
7-13	4.74	4.47	1.47	193.2	105	0.7
Dillon Gee					RHP	79
13-6	4.43	4.65	1.38	160.2	114	0.2
Frank Francisco					RHP	77
1-4	3.55	3.80	1.32	50.2	53	0.5
Bobby Parnell					RHP	78
4-6	3.64	3.21	1.47	59.1	64	0.6
Ramon Ramirez					RHP	56
3-3	2.62	2.94	1.17	68.2	66	0.9

At the very least, the Mets appear to be starting anew. Omar Minaya? Long gone. Carlos Beltran? He's been shown the door. Fred Wilpon? Well, it sounds like he's actually staying. The New York Mets are almost entirely purging themselves of the old guard, which turned the Mets into the laughing stock of Major League Baseball. For now, these moves will make the Mets even harder to watch—as impossible as that may sound—but it was the best move possible for the club.

If you're an infrequent Mets fan, I wouldn't blame you for not knowing a single player on this roster. Hey, even if you were an average, dedicated, or fanatical fan, I wouldn't blame you for not knowing a single name on this roster. Dillon Gee. Lucas Duda. R.A. Dickey. So many of these players are completely non-descript—many of whom have non-descript names to match. All in all, this team just isn't very talented.

These thirteen months have been a major crossroad for the Mets. Since the start of last season, there

was a debate over how to deal with impending free agent Jose Reyes, no-longer-young David Wright, and the \$41 million duo of Beltran and Johan Santana. The only trade the Mets were able to make was sending off Beltran to San Francisco in a steal of a deal for their current top prospect, Zach Wheeler. Otherwise, the Mets couldn't move the debilitated Santana, and they missed out on trading Reyes before he left town for sunny Miami. Instead, they'll collect a supplementary draft pick and a third rounder for the dynamic infielder. But the most important move—or lack of a move, rather—was the Mets holding onto Wright.

Realistically, the Mets won't be in contention until 2016. Optimistically, they may come back to resembling a coherent team in three years. But by that time, what state will David Wright be in? Yes, he's a ticket draw, a homegrown star, and the only redeemable player on the roster, but he's 29 and set to hit the open market in two years. Even if he returns to the

NL East — 5. New York Mets

Queens, he'll be well past his peak—and consequently vastly overpaid—by the time the Mets are back to competitiveness. You know, assuming they can ever get back to competitiveness.

As painful as it may seem, it's time for the Mets to move on and trade David Wright. But it's not as if we're talking about cutting the five-time all-star, the Mets will get a serious return for him. We're talking about one of the best under-30 hitters in the game—plus he's at a relatively prime position. New York should be looking at a combination of either top-flight prospects or established

young players with a year or two of service time in return.

There is one quirk, however, with Wright's contract that may complicate trade talks. If and when he's traded, Wright is allowed to void his 2013 club option for \$16 million. So in order for a trade to happen, the other team will either have to a) have an extension in place b) have assurance he will not void the option c) have big cajones or d) send such a low-quality package for Wright. Since they're risking losing him with no compensation.

The Mets need to build around the young pieces they

A Reason for Hope

At least their amateur ranks seem to be improving. Headlining their crop of youngsters are two young guns, who could help out by the end of this season: Zach Wheeler and Matt Harvey. Wheeler is on pace to become an ace, and Harvey has the stuff, although his control can often be questionable. Really, the Mets haven't had quality pitching atop their rotation since the first few years of Pedro Martinez and Johan Santana's contracts, so this would be a warmly welcomed change.

The Fatal Flaw

There's just no way to nicely put this. The Mets fatal flaw is a lack of pitching matched with a lack of hitting. They had poor planning with Omar Minaya at the helm, and they're feeling the reverberations of his moves now. The only strength of this team (in the majors) is a depth of average relievers. They may have blown a huge chunk of their off-season budget on these average relievers, but at least we won't have to see lots of Jason Isringhausen and Ryoto Irigashi anymore.

"We're not going to punt 2012 if Jose Reyes doesn't re-sign."

--Sandy Alderson, GM

have in place now. Andres Torres and Jason Bay have absolutely no future with the team, so it only makes sense to pare down their playing time for youngsters. For instance, Kirk Nieuwenhuis would have broken into the majors last season, but thanks to a shoulder injury, he never got that shot. Now, he'll likely get a call up around May, and when he does, he needs to play every day. It doesn't matter how much Bay and Torres are making, Nieuwenhuis needs to get the nod. That money has already been spent, so the Mets cannot compound their problem by sacrificing their future to "develop" veteran hitters.

The club also needs to have patience with five position players in particular: Ike Davis, Ruben

Tejada, Josh Thole, Daniel Murphy, and Lucas Duda. The group is not even an average age of 25, and they have just over an average of 700 plate appearances among them. They may be inexperienced, but they desperately need time to develop. I'd be shocked if any of them, except Davis, became more than an average regular, but nothing's for certain. And more than anything else, the Mets need to find out what they have in these youngsters much more than what they have in Ronny Cedeño and Scott Hairston.

The Mets' offense may be terrifyingly bad, but the pitching is slightly better. So they have that. R.A. Dickey was a surprisingly effective pitcher last year with a



1B Ike Davis

NL East — 5. New York Mets

3.28 ERA over 206 innings and a WAR over 2.4 for the second straight season. He's not flashy, and I've never been a big buyer of dominance from knuckleball pitchers, but he gets the job done.

Dickey may have been a quality pickup off the scrap heap, but the rest of the rotation more nearly resembles the scrap heap than Dickey. Mike Pelfrey, Dillon Gee, and Jon Niese all have a sliver of promise, but none has been productive since 2010. Together, they posted a 4.54 ERA over more than 500 innings. At just 25-years old, Niese may eventually develop into a solid back-of-the-rotation starter, but for now he just looks like a spot starter or long relief pitcher.

The rebuilding process for the Mets will be a long and painful one. Luckily, they're located in only the single biggest market in Major League

Baseball, so spending money shouldn't be a big issue. But for now, it's time for the club to completely wipe their slate clean. Similarly to what the Cubs are doing, the Mets need to rid themselves of everyone and everything associated with the old regime, especially Wright and the depressingly average Jason Bay.

What the Mets really need to do is invest their money in better ways. I'm not just talking about personal mistakes made by the Wilpons, but they need to allot more money to acquiring amateur talent, rather than spend over \$15 million to "shore up the bullpen" with Frank Francisco and Jon Rauch. At the very least, that money should go to the draft. Or international free agency. Or just anywhere other than to two wildly inconsistent relievers. ①

GRADE: 78



Spotlight - Johan Santana

Everybody—you, myself, and Bernie Madoff—know that the Mets are going nowhere this season. But they could potentially have a very nice trade piece in Johan Santana if he has a Carlos Beltran-esque comeback. We forget just how good Santana was since he missed the entire 2011 season. He has a 2.90 ERA over the last decade, including a 2.98 ERA 2010. If a 34-year-old-Carlos Beltran landed the Mets their 2nd best prospect, I'm sure they could get a B+ prospect for a 33-year old Johan Santana.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jenrry Mejia – RHP	Zack Wheeler	RHP	Great mix with plus fastball, curve. Lots of strikeouts, but can lose control. Future ace.	A-
Last year, Mejia was the Mets top prospect. But after just five starts in AAA Buffalo, he tore the MCL in his right elbow and had Tommy John Surgery. Now, while that isn't the Kiss of Death to a young prospect, it certainly isn't good. He will presumably have the same great arsenal, but there is a raised concern that he may not be able to stick as a starter in the majors. He'll return this summer, and that'll be a great tell for what his future holds: top-of-the-rotation starter or late-inning reliever.	Matt Harvey	RHP	Big frame, plus fastball. If changeup doesn't improve, he'll relieve. Control is on-and-off.	B+
	Brandon Nimmo	OF	Smooth swing with consistent, hard contact. Toolsy, solid speed, but lacks experience.	B
	Jeurys Familia	RHP	Has dominating stuff. Strikeout pitcher, should keep the ball down, improve control.	B
	Jenrry Mejia	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B
	Kirk Nieuwenhuis	OF	Nice power, speed, great on-base skills, too many Ks. Injury prevented debut in 2011.	B
	Michael Fulmer	RHP	Workhorse starter with live arm. Has two potential plus pitches, No. 2 starter ceiling.	B
	Wilmer Flores	SS	Has untapped power potential, needs more walks. Hasn't made The Leap, but only 20.	B-
	Cesar Puello	OF	Has all the tools, but yet to turn them into production. Power improving, patience not.	B-
	Darin Gorski	LHP	Sleeper prospect, posted great numbers with average stuff. Plus changeup, control.	C+

NL East

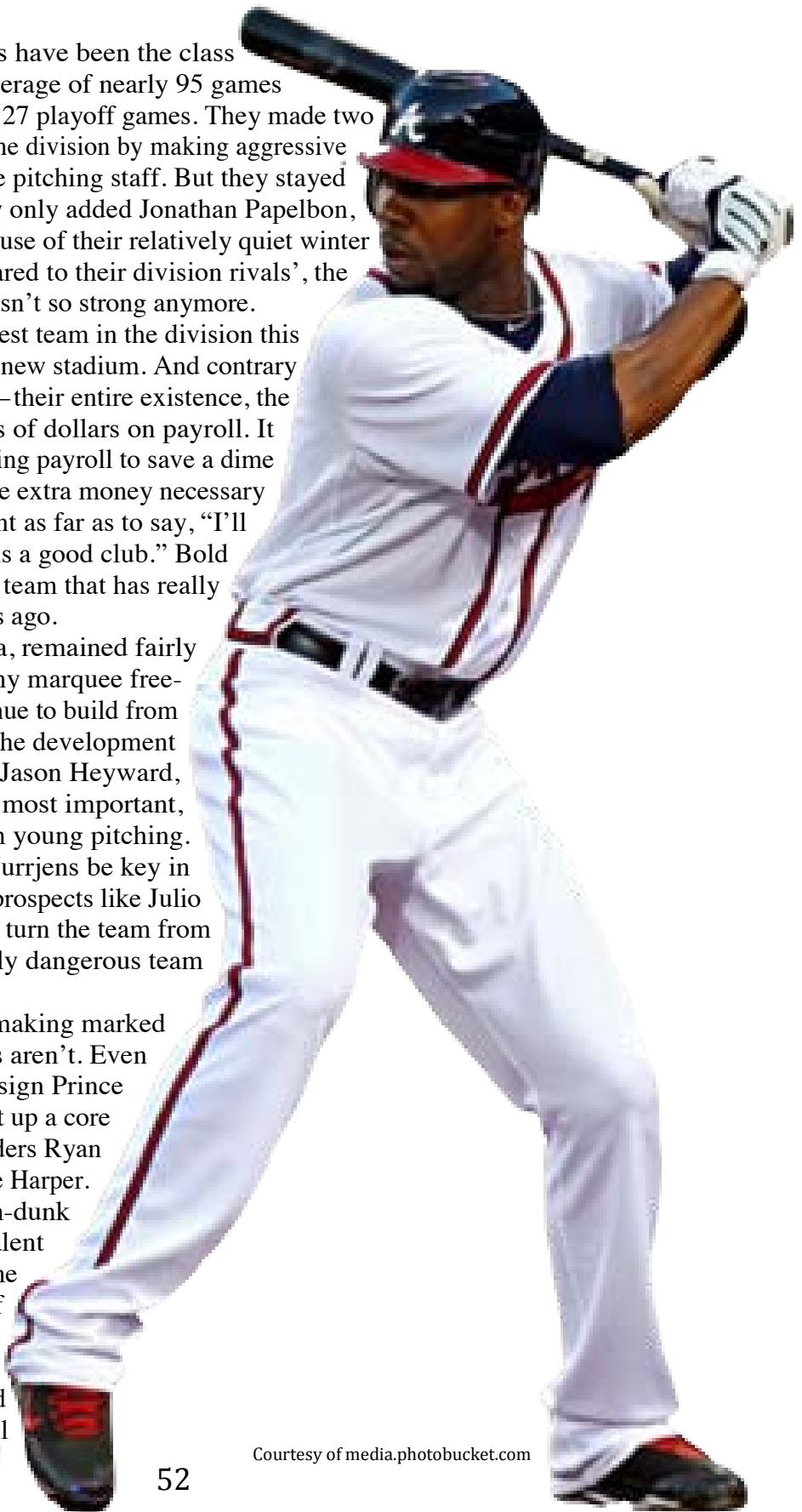
For the last five seasons, the Phillies have been the class of the NL East. They've won an average of nearly 95 games during that stretch, winning an additional 27 playoff games. They made two World Series, winning one, championing the division by making aggressive moves, specifically through adding to the pitching staff. But they stayed fairly stagnant this past off-season—they only added Jonathan Papelbon, Jim Thome, and Ty Wigginton. And because of their relatively quiet winter compared to years past, as well as compared to their division rivals', the vice grip the Phillies had on the division isn't so strong anymore.

By far, the Marlins were the noisiest team in the division this winter. They got a new name. They got a new stadium. And contrary to what they've done for—I don't know—their entire existence, the team actually spent hundreds of millions of dollars on payroll. It may come as a shock, but instead of slashing payroll to save a dime here and there, Jeffrey Loria ponied up the extra money necessary to build a competitive team. He even went as far as to say, "I'll take my chances against any team. This is a good club." Bold words for sure, and it's a great sign for a team that has really lacked life since they won it all nine years ago.

Atlanta, similarly to Philadelphia, remained fairly quiet this winter, too. They didn't sign any marquee free-agents like Jose Reyes, but they did continue to build from within. Their improvements come from the development of young players like Freddie Freeman, Jason Heyward, Craig Kimbrel, and Jonny Venters. But most important, they'll also get major contributions from young pitching. Not only will Tommy Hanson and Jair Jurrjens be key in determining the success of the team, but prospects like Julio Teheran and Arodys Vizcaino could help turn the team from a dark horse playoff team to an extremely dangerous team down the stretch and into October.

And lastly, even Washington is making marked improvements. Yes, that means the Mets aren't. Even though they fell short on their quests to sign Prince Fielder and C.J. Wilson, they've still built up a core of young players, most notably first rounders Ryan Zimmerman, Stephen Strasburg, and Bryce Harper.

This year will be far from a slam-dunk for the Phillies. There's just too much talent in the division for the race to finish like the last five seasons—Philly by an average of six games. In fact, after the AL East, this should be the most competitive division in the Majors. It's no given that a Wild Card will come from the East, but the races will be tight to the bitter end here.



Courtesy of media.photobucket.com

NL East — 1. Philadelphia Phillies



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Jimmy Rollins						SS	123
.277	.335	.339	46	5	50	3	2.8
Chase Utley						2B	18
.259	.344	.425	54	11	44	14	3.9
Hunter Pence						RF	59
.314	.370	.502	84	22	97	8	4.7
Ryan Howard						1B	65
.253	.346	.488	81	33	116	1	1.6
Shane Victorino						CF	35
.279	.355	.491	95	17	61	19	5.9
John Mayberry						LF	124
.273	.341	.513	37	15	49	8	2.5
Placido Polanco						3B	132
.277	.335	.339	46	5	50	3	2.8
Carlos Ruiz						C	68
.283	.371	.383	49	6	40	1	2.8
Laynce Nix						OF	288
.250	.299	.451	38	16	44	2	0.6
Ty Wigginton						3B/1B	330
.242	.315	.416	52	15	47	8	0.3
Michael Martinez						SS/2B	341
.196	.258	.282	25	3	24	3	-0.4
Jim Thome						1B	27
.256	.361	.477	32	15	50	0	0.0
Brian Schneider						C	366
.176	.246	.256	11	2	9	0	-0.9

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Roy Halladay					RHP	3
19-6	2.35	2.20	1.04	233.2	220	8.2
Cliff Lee					LHP	2
17-8	2.40	2.60	1.03	232.2	238	6.7
Cole Hamels					LHP	6
14-9	2.79	3.05	0.99	216.0	194	4.9
Vance Worley					RHP	50
11-3	3.01	3.32	1.23	131.2	119	2.5
Joe Blanton					RHP	89
1-2	5.01	3.63	1.48	41.1	35	0.6
Jonathan Papelbon					RHP	7
4-1	2.94	1.53	0.93	64.1	87	3.0
Antonio Bastardo					LHP	37
6-1	2.64	3.30	0.93	58.0	70	0.7
Jose Contreras					RHP	47
0-0	3.86	3.10	1.36	14.0	13	0.2

When I started writing my baseball previews in 2006, I picked the Mets to win the NL East. I don't regret that pick, New York was chock full of talent back then. Their lineup consisted of eight All-Stars, and they had Pedro Martinez and Tom Glavine atop their rotation. That year, the Mets fell one game short of the playoffs. In my own stubbornness, I picked the Mets to win the division again the next year, only to see them fall three games short of the division crown. From then on out, I've picked the Phillies to win the division behind the bats of Jimmy Rollins, Chase Utley, and Ryan Howard, along with some incredible pitching. But now, four years into picking Philadelphia to be the Beast of the East, I'm hoping that I'm not becoming stubborn again.

To say the least, the Phillies have been dominant in my three years of support for them. They've won an average of 97 games, winning the division by about eight games per year. They didn't win a World Series during that stretch, but they were as

dominant as any NL team was during that period. But I feel like their time atop the hill may start waning soon. Their problem is, like so many teams before, that they are not making moves to improve, while other teams take great strides forward.

Last season, the Phillies were the clear-cut favorites in the NL because of their four aces. Now, that number is down to three. Philadelphia didn't have any money left over after signing Jonathan Papelbon to a massive \$50 million deal and Cole Hamels' extension on the way. Joe Blanton, who missed all but 40 innings of 2011, will have to stay healthy and roll back the clock to his days in Oakland, while the three remaining aces—Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, and Hamels will have to carry an even bigger load.

My concern with this team doesn't necessarily stem from the pitching though—that's still going to be fantastic. What's got me concerned is that the offense is getting old, and GM Ruben Amaro, Jr., did nothing big to supplement it.

NL East — 1. Philadelphia Phillies

The last out of the season is the worst part for every team, but it was especially bitter for the Phillies. Immediately after leaving the batter's box trying to run out a ground ball to second base, Ryan Howard collapsed to the ground, his Achilles tendon completely torn. Now, the Phillies will be without their star first baseman until perhaps June. How did Amaro replace him? Try 41-year old DH Jim Thome and journeyman utility infielder Ty Wigginton.

With all due respect to Jim Thome, he should not be playing the field any more. He's listed at a generous 6'3" 250, but his hulking

frame and old-agedness has kept him off the field completely since 2007 and on a regular basis since 2005. Despite the advanced age, his OBP has taken nary a hit, and his monstrous power is still there. His only problem is that not only can he not field every day, but he can't even hit every day.

The rest of the Phillies lineup isn't nearly as old as Thome, but they're getting up there in age, too. Jimmy Rollins is no spring chicken at 33, and Utley, Shane Victorino, Carlos Ruiz, and Placido Polanco are all into their fourth decade as well. At this point, only Hunter Pence and John

“(It was a) disappointing year. We had higher goals than this.”

--Cliff Lee, SP

Mayberry, Jr., are the only players under 30 years in the starting lineup.

American sports fans are always looking for the new, shiny player or team that catches their attention. If you don't believe me, I've got one word for you: Linsanity. Old, boring teams like the Spurs get overlooked because Tim Duncan won't throw down behemoth dunks like Blake Griffin. But year after year, the Spurs are succeeding in the playoffs, and the Clippers have nothing to show. In this case, the Phillies may not have spent \$100 million on Jose Reyes or have two All-World prospects like Stephen Strasburg and Bryce Harper, but they're going to still be great.

More than anything else,

great pitching wins. The San Francisco Giants won 86 games last year with a slightly worse pitching staff than Philly's and an offense more hopeless than the survival of contraband candy at Fat Camp. Last year, the Phillies had by far the most pitching WAR (their 27.6 edged out the second-place White Sox by more than a full win), and they've still got the same core of pitchers. Talk about dominant pitching—no duo on the league compares to Halladay and Lee. The two have thrown 1869 innings over the last four seasons with a 2.71 ERA, a 1.08 WHIP, and 56.8 WAR. They're dominant, they show up in the clutch, and they never miss a start.

If there were any season for the Phillies to have so many

A Reason for Hope

Arizona won 94 games last year, and Ian Kennedy and Daniel Hudson anchored their rotation. That duo would've had to work hard to be the 4th and 5th starters in this rotation. Philadelphia has so much pitching, it's hard to envision this team failing. Even after Halladay, Lee, and Hamels, the back end of the rotation is strong. Vance Worley should be able to build off his strong rookie season, and Joe Blanton is among the most consistent pitchers in the league. Even Kyle Kendrick has his moments.

The Fatal Flaw

Even with the addition of Hunter Pence, the lineup is still extremely lefty-heavy, and it doesn't look so great any more compared to the American League powers like the Red Sox, Yankees, and Rangers. Philly may be able to cruise through the division and most of the way through the playoffs on their elite pitching and power hitters, but third base and left field could use serious upgrades. Unfortunately, Philly's used up all their trading chips to land Pence, Lee, and Halladay.



SP Roy Halladay


NL East — 1. Philadelphia Phillies

questions surrounding them, this would be the best year. There's no frontrunner in the NL with the departure of Albert Pujols and Prince Fielder to the American League; instead, there are lots of solid teams. And luckily for the Phillies, their offensive problems should have a built-in panacea midway through the season when Ryan Howard relieves Thome of his duties.

But even as well as Howard is perceived in the media, there is major skepticism about his future among statistical baseball communities. He's developing a horrible lefty/righty split (.224/.286/.347 vs .266/.370/.550), not to mention a steady decrease in OBP the last two seasons. His defense sure isn't improving, and his \$125 million extension is finally kicking in this year. Joy.

Perhaps I haven't been the most optimistic in this year's

Phillies preview, but every team at the top has holes. The Tigers don't have defense, the Rangers need more starters, and the Red Sox need less fried chicken. But this team is absolutely great. Ever since they added Hunter Pence last summer, their lineup looks even more potent, and we know Amaro is willing to take a risk and make a big splash.

In the end, the Phillies will pitch their way to sixth straight division championship. This team would be good enough with just one or two of their starters, but all three makes them too good to beat. Barring injuries or horrible luck, I also expect this team to go deep into the playoffs. I've been predicting a World Series run for the past three years, and at some point I'd like to see results, but it's hard to argue with the star-power and numbers of this team. 

GRADE: 94



Spotlight – Cole Hamels

Roy Halladay had reason to be upset when the Phillies told him they don't give pitchers more than three years on a contract, only to hand Cliff Lee 5-year, \$120 million deal. Now Cole Hamels is the man that needs to be paid. A free agent just entering his prime, Hamels will easily earn a 9-figure contract. But with Ryan Howard's \$125 million extension just now kicking in, the Phillies may not have the money he's looking for. With an aging team, it's essential that Philadelphia can lock up their young ace.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jiwan James – OF	Trevor May	RHP	Workhorse with 4-pitch mix featuring plus curve, changeup. Racks up lots of strikeouts.	B+
The Phillies really like to collect toolsy players, especially toolsy outfielders (think Zach Collier, Tyson Gillies, and potential breakout star Kyrell Hudson). Jiwan James is no exception. A former pitcher, James is great on the base paths and can cover a lot of ground defensively. However, his power hasn't set in yet. Right now, it looks like he may only become a good 4 th outfielder, but he's only 22 and very raw. Look for at least one outfielder to make a big leap this year.	Jesse Biddle	LHP	Durable with high ceiling, lacks a quality third pitch. Needs to cut down on walks.	B+
	Brody Colvin	RHP	2011 was derailed by injuries, mechanics. Absolutely dominant when on, can hit 97.	B
	Sebastian Valle	C	Strong defender with upside offensively. Power comes, goes; needs more patience.	B
	Phillippe Aumont	RHP	Has electric stuff, shutdown closer potential. Control is in question, is erratic at times.	B-
	Larry Greene	OF	Huge power, doesn't hit well for average. Raw, but big upside. Defensively challenged.	B-
	Freddy Galvis	SS	Slick fielding, can play multiple positions. Switch-hitting with speed, average power	B-
	Jonathan Pettibone	RHP	Innings eater with great control. Good stuff, puts up great numbers, pitches to contact.	B-
	Julio Rodriguez	RHP	Fastball sits in high 80s, but strikes out an unruly amount of hitters. Has great stuff.	C+
	Jiwan James	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	C+

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Jose Reyes						SS	61
.337	.384	.493	101	7	44	39	6.2
Emilio Bonafacio						CF	155
.296	.360	.393	78	5	36	40	3.3
Hanley Ramirez						3B	99
.243	.333	.379	55	10	45	20	1.3
Mike Stanton						RF	38
.262	.356	.537	79	34	87	5	4.5
Logan Morrison						LF	141
.247	.330	.468	54	23	72	2	1.0
Gaby Sanchez						1B	86
.266	.352	.427	72	19	78	3	3.0
Omar Infante						2B	219
.276	.315	.382	55	7	49	4	2.7
John Buck						C	231
.226	.316	.367	41	16	57	0	1.8
Chris Coghlan						OF/2B	295
.230	.296	.368	33	5	22	7	-0.3
Bryan Petersen						OF	129
.265	.357	.387	18	2	10	7	1.7
Greg Dobbs						3B	362
.244	.292	.333	2	0	2	0	-0.2
Donnie Murphy						2B/SS	318
.185	.240	.315	10	2	9	0	0.1
Brett Hayes						C	283
.231	.291	.415	19	5	16	0	0.6

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Josh Johnson						RHP	1
3-1	1.64	2.64	0.98	60.1	56	1.7	
Mark Buehrle						LHP	90
13-9	3.59	3.98	1.30	205.1	109	3.4	
Ricky Nolasco						RHP	67
10-12	4.67	3.54	1.40	206.0	148	3.5	
Anibal Sanchez						RHP	40
8-9	3.67	3.35	1.28	196.1	202	3.8	
Carlos Zambrano						RHP	113
9-7	4.82	4.59	1.44	145.2	101	0.9	
Heath Bell						RHP	21
3-4	2.44	3.23	1.15	62.2	51	0.5	
Edward Mujica						RHP	65
9-6	2.96	3.20	1.03	76.0	63	1.0	
Michael Dunn						LHP	80
5-6	3.43	4.30	1.30	63.0	68	-0.1	

Talk about a change of culture. Last season, the Marlins finished last in the division—yes, behind the Mets and Nationals—as a non-descript, penny-pinching, fan-less franchise with no clear future. But six months and \$191 million later, the now-Miami Marlins have a brand new look with a brand new stadium, and a brand new outlook. With a fun Latin flare to the team, a payroll more than doubled to around \$120 million, and a rejuvenated fan base, the Marlins are poised to make a run at the playoffs for the first time since they won it all in 2003.

First and foremost: where did the Marlins come up with all this money? How could a team so averse to paying players more than the league minimum pony up nearly \$200 million in one off-season? Well, there are two main reasons, actually. For one, Major League Baseball forced the Marlins to increase payroll—it rose \$11 million last year—to prove that they're doing more with revenue sharing money than just pocketing checks. Secondly, the Marlins have

always drawn extremely high television numbers, despite being one of three teams to draw less than 20,000 fans per game. So with their state-of-the-art stadium opening up with trendy new gear, they can expect a spike in revenue from tickets, merchandise, and \$8 hotdogs.

Last season, the Marlins were just average offensively. 18th in WAR. 16th in OBP. 18th in ISO. And what offense they did have was slightly tempered by their home stadium, which favored pitchers. But despite only adding Jose Reyes, this Marlins team should be much improved.

To start things off, Hanley Ramirez remains the most talented player on the team. From 2006 to 2010, Hanley produced the fourth most WAR at an average of 6 WAR per season. But at 27, he couldn't stay healthy, and when he was, he was a shell of himself with career lows in nearly every hitting category. Now, he's moving to a much less demanding defensive position in third base, so I definitely expect his numbers to return to his 4.6-WAR

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins

2010 production at the very least.

But a much improved left side of the infield isn't the only reason the offense will almost certainly rise to the upper ranks of the NL; what's great about this team is that their core is very young. Ramirez and Reyes are entering their primes at just 28 years of age, while Mike Stanton, Logan Morrison, Emilio Bonifacio, and Gaby Sanchez come in at an average age of 25. Stanton, the true star of the group, boasts the second best raw power in the league (to Jose Bautista), and, at 22, is already the 3rd-best right fielder in the game behind Justin Upton, and, of course, Jose Bautista.

As for the other three, they combined for 7.3 WAR in 2011. 2.4 wins per player isn't so bad, and if you consider that none are close to their peaks yet, this offense could get really good really quickly.

One of my favorite aspects to the Marlins new stadium is the competitive edge they'll have over their opponents. No, I'm not talking about the fish tanks behind home plate or the beyond-wacky home run display (featured in the spotlight on the next page). My favorite part of the new stadium is their new grass. There's nothing special about the turf itself, but the Marlins are growing the grass longer than it was

A Reason for Hope

When's the last time Marlins fans went into the season with hope for something other than Hanley Ramirez not to be traded? The front office is finally putting together a talented team—while still maintaining youth. The core of the team, both on offense and pitching-wise is under 30, so even after some of the free agent deals run up (like Bell and Buehrle), the Marlins will still have the main blueprint in place with Stanton, Johnson, Ramirez, and Sanchez here for the long haul.

The Fatal Flaw

This batting lineup really lacks experience. Albert Pujols would help any team, but the Marlins especially. John Buck is the only hitter over 30, and only Jose Reyes and Omar Infante have even played in the playoffs. Miami has the pitching to survive to the playoffs, but I don't think they'll have the offense to take down one of the giants like Philly. Their speed and defense helps to make up for their slight lack of pop, but they could still see big improvements from within to the lineup.

“I have a lot of faith in this organization. In the past, this has been a very smart organization. They know what they're doing.”

--Ozzie Guillen, Manager

last year, making Bonifacio, Reyes, and Ramirez far more potent on the base paths in terms of infield singles. Back in the day, the Astros gained their edge by blowing air conditioners inwards when the other team was batting, but the Marlins will gain their home field advantage by augmenting their speed and infield defense.

The Marlins' offense sure looks better, but the main reason the Marlins will be in the playoff hunt is because of their pitching. Judging by where they were at last year, that should be a big surprise. Just like their hitting, the Marlins' pitching was in the middle of the

pack last season—15th in WAR, 16th in ERA—but it's the changes over the off-season that have really put them over the top.

A day before losing out on the Albert Pujols sweepstakes, the Marlins looked like big winners, already having landed Reyes, Heath Bell, and now Mark Buehrle. The lefty returned to play for his manager he won a World Series with in 2005, Ozzie Guillen, giving Miami something they hadn't seen in nearly a decade: a consistent starting pitcher. The Marlins have seen all sorts of talent come through from Dontrelle Willis to A.J. Burnett to Josh Beckett, but



3B Hanley Ramirez

NL East — 2. Miami Marlins

never in recent history have they had a surefire 200-inning, 3-4 WAR pitcher. On the other side of the coin is Carlos Zambrano, who Miami picked up for next to nothing. He has all the talent in the world—he just can't reel it in. Maybe, as I believe, Ozzie Guillen will be able to bring out the best in him, making him a 2-starter talent as Miami's 5th starter. But truth be told, he's just as likely to boil over in the South Florida heat.

Buehrle and Zambrano join an already strong rotation anchored by the man who holds the key to the Marlins' season: Josh Johnson. If he's the Josh Johnson of 2009-10 with 11.9 WAR, the Marlins are a post-season team. But if he's hurt or ineffective coming off shoulder surgery, the Marlins are in deep trouble. Anibal Sanchez and Ricky Nolasco, good for 400 innings and 7.3 WAR last year, will round

out the young rotation, easily one of the best units in the league.

This may just be the perfect storm for the Marlins. The new stadium, logo, uniforms, and culture will spark more fan interest than ever before, and they've spent \$15 million more on this team than they did last two Marlins teams combined. Yes, it would have been perfect had they landed Cuban defector Yoenis Cespedes, but not everything can work out perfectly. Finally, as I've pointed out before, major uniform changes do correlate well to surprise playoff runs (think '07 D-Backs and '08 Rays), further proof that the Royals will change their names to the Kings in a year or two when they're ready for a postseason run. Either way, the Marlins have too much pitching to flop—they're going to surprise, but they've got what it takes to be a playoff team. 🐟

GRADE: 91



Spotlight – Home Run Thing

What on Earth are the Marlins thinking? I'm starting to dig the new uniforms, and the stadium is absolutely fantastic, but then this shows up. Every time the Marlins hit a home run—which I can assure you will be often as long as Mike Stanton is hitting—this contraption will go off. We're talking flashing lights, leaping fish, and crazy colors. I haven't seen something this atrocious since Rebecca Black's "hit single" Friday. This isn't some carnival; this is baseball. Come on Marlins, you can do better.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Matt Dominguez – 3B	Christian Yelich	OF	Great bat, patience, speed. Defense adapted well after playing 1B, arm is weak for CF.	B+
We've been waiting on Dominguez to break through for three years now, but we're still waiting. The man was drafted 12 th overall in 2007 as a prime defensive infielder with a chance to develop a solid bat, but he only has a career .325 OBP with marginal power in five minor league years. He still looks like at least a quality utility man, but with Hanley Ramirez taking over at third, Dominguez's future in Miami is murky at best, and he may be a trade chip this season.	Marcell Ozuna	OF	Huge power and cannon arm, but gets too aggressive at the plate. Surprising speed.	B
	Jose Fernandez	RHP	Live arm with upper-90s fastball. Could be No. 2 starter, closer. Great pitching frame.	B
	Matt Dominguez	3B	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	J.T. Realmuto	C	Raw, potentially plus bat and power. Great athlete, but still making transition from SS.	B-
	Chad James	LHP	Average repertoire, throws strikes. Often gets hit hard when he fails to command.	B-
	Mason Hope	RHP	Has plus fastball and curveball, pounds the strike zone. HS teammate of Archie Bradley.	B-
	Austin Brice	RHP	Big strikeout numbers, hurt by control. Dominating stuff, needs better stamina.	B-
	Rob Rasmussen	LHP	Average stuff, poor control. Future Back-of-the-rotation starter, if not a reliever.	C+
	Noah Perio	2B	Toolsy, but numbers don't match skills after 3 years. Could develop a solid bat.	C+

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		REB	SB	WAR
Michael Bourn						CF		50
.294	.349	.386	94	2		50	61	3.0
Martin Prado						LF		176
.260	.302	.385	66	13		57	4	1.6
Chipper Jones						3B		120
.275	.344	.470	56	18		70	2	2.1
Dan Uggla						2B		91
.233	.311	.453	88	36		82	1	2.5
Brian McCann						C		42
.270	.351	.466	51	24		71	3	3.7
Freddie Freeman						1B		209
.282	.346	.448	67	21		76	4	1.0
Jason Heyward						RF		63
.227	.319	.389	50	14		42	9	2.2
Tyler Pastornicky						SS		NR
.314	.359	.414	22	2		15	11	--*
Matt Diaz						OF/1B		343
.263	.302	.323	16	0		20	5	0.6
Jose Constanza						OF		262
.303	.339	.385	21	2		10	7	0.8
Eric Hinske						OF/1B		152
.233	.311	.403	24	10		28	0	0.9
Jack Wilson						SS/2B		373
.243	.274	.285	25	0		11	5	0.0
David Ross						C		81
.263	.333	.428	14	6		23	0	1.3

*Minor League Stats

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Tim Hudson						RHP	44
16-10	3.22	3.39	1.14	215.0	158		3.7
Jair Jurrjens						RHP	48
13-6	2.96	3.99	1.22	152.0	90		1.5
Tommy Hanson						RHP	12
11-7	3.60	3.67	1.17	130.0	142		1.8
Brandon Beachy						LHP	28
7-3	3.68	3.19	1.21	141.2	169		2.8
Mike Minor						LHP	93
5-3	4.14	3.39	1.49	82.2	77		1.4
Craig Kimbrel						RHP	2
4-3	2.10	1.52	1.04	77.0	127		3.2
Jonny Venters						LHP	6
6-2	1.84	2.78	1.09	88.0	96		1.7
Eric O'Flaherty						LHP	30
2-4	0.98	2.54	1.09	73.2	67		1.6

I have lots of favorite quotes, but when it comes to sports, two stick out more than the rest. The first is attributed to many people, including Ben Franklin and Albert Einstein: the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The other is a quote by A's GM Billy Beane, which I don't know word for word, but it goes, "you can't get better by staying the same." They may sound dumb, and they may sound obvious, but the Braves fell right into the trap laid by the quotes. Atlanta didn't make any additions this off-season, so it's hard to see them finishing much better than they did last year.

Atlanta was so close last season. Despite a complete drop-off in production from Jason Heyward, the Braves held onto the Wild Card for 161 games of the season. Unfortunately, they let the eventual champion St. Louis Cardinals surpass them, and they finished with the fifth-best record in the National League. Fifth place is a whole lot better than finishing

twelfth, like the Marlins, but at the end of the day, both teams watched the playoffs from their couches.

The team collapsed last September for a variety of reasons. In the last week, they only scored seven runs in their last five games, all of which were losses. But the crux of the problem was a collapse in overall pitching. The dynamic relief duo of Craig Kimbrel and Jonny Venters combined to give up more than a run every other inning in September, all after sporting a respective 1.64 and 1.31 ERA the rest of the year. Derek Lowe may have been the worst with an 8.75 ERA and 1.99 WHIP in the final month. He was traded to Cleveland this off-season for a bag of balls and a corked bat. But if anything was most telling, it would have to be the fact that starters pitched six innings only three times in the last twenty-three games.

Luckily for the Braves, their (in)activity this off-season won't especially hurt their rotation. It's probably the strongest point of the team—even before their big four pitching prospects

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves

are ready to contribute. After 36-year old Tim Hudson, who remains the most consistent pitcher on the staff, the rest of the starters are all 26 or younger. Jair Jurrjens is actually viewed as a veteran of the staff, despite just four full seasons in the majors. After a down, injury-filled 2010 season, Jurrjens rebounded extremely well with a sharp increase in innings along with an ERA under 3.00 for the second time in his career.

But what follows Hudson and Jurrjens is actually what makes the rotation really interesting. Atlanta finishes out the rotation with a somewhat

underwhelming, immensely talented starter, an overachieving, solid starter, and their pick from a litter of high-quality minor league arms. Tommy Hanson, by far the best pitcher on the team based on pure stuff, missed over two months of time due to arm trouble. When he was healthy, his ERA sat in the mid-3.00s, but he can get at least a half point lower. Brandon Beachy, who put up more or less the exact same numbers, doesn't have even close to the potential that Hanson possesses, but he continually got the job done last season.

Finally, the last rotation spot

“The fact that we’re going home now won’t sit well with any of us. It’s going to take a while for us to get over this.”

--Dan Uggla, 2B

will come down to which youngster can help out the most immediately. Arodys Vizcaino may have been the man, but he's lost for the season with Tommy John Surgery. Mike Minor, Julio Teheran, and Randall Delgado have all seen time in the majors one way or another, but there is obviously limited space for the trio. Minor, who is most major league ready, is likely to see the most time, but Delgado could really use time out of the Braves 'pen—especially since his future may be out of the Turner Field bullpen. Teheran is by far the most talented, but could use a bit more seasoning before a mid-season call-up.

Atlanta's problem is that they did nothing to supplement their pitching—they even lost out on about 150 innings from Derek Lowe. And although their rotation may improve enough because of the natural progression of their young pitchers, they really missed out on picking up an extra arm like a Roy Oswalt. Now, if Teheran steps up and becomes that extra pitcher they've been looking for, all will be good in the ATL. However, for the offense that stood pat this winter, there aren't any reinforcements on the horizon like the four young starters.

Really, there are only two

A Reason for Hope

Have you seen Atlanta's pitching? Not only do they have a great, young pitching staff, they also have the best crop of pitching prospects coming up—at the very least in the conversation with Oakland and Seattle. Mike Minor will likely spend most of the season—if not all of it—in the majors, and Julio Teheran should follow soon. While they may not be fantastic this season, Atlanta will have a chance to rule the NL East with their cost-effective and extremely talented young pitching.

The Fatal Flaw

Atlanta didn't improve their offense, which wasn't that great to start with. I'm a strong believer in Jason Heyward, but he needs to fix his mechanics to prove he's not just a one-hit wonder. However, aside from Pastornicky (and Prado to an extent), there aren't any easy outs. Unfortunately, there aren't any tough outs, either. Brian McCann, Freddie Freeman, and Dan Uggla all have their good moments, but the lineup is too inconsistent to be considered a great offense.



CF Michael Bourn

NL East — 3. Atlanta Braves

changes to the Braves offense for 2012: Michael Bourn gets to play a full season, and Tyler Pastornicky succeeds Alex Gonzalez. But that's not going to make a big difference over a full season, even to a team that was 21st in WAR and 26th on OBP.

The Braves' offense is filled with solid-to-good bats, but no great ones. Chipper Jones isn't close to that level any more, and another year of worn down knees can't help his cause. Martin Prado is just an average hitter in left field, a position that demands more than just a .302 OBP hitter with 13 home runs.

The real key to the offense, though, will be the progress made by three hitters: Freddie Freeman, Dan Uggla, and Jason Heyward. Freeman had an excellent rookie season, and at just 22, you can expect his power output to rise above 21 homers. The only question is whether

that leap will happen this year or farther in the future. As for Uggla and Heyward, they've each shown they can wield great bats with 30+ home run power. But the two looked lost last season, far from All-Star consideration, let alone consistent play.

We've seen this story before, and we've seen how this story ends. However, there's a twist to the plot this time around. Now, there's a second Wild Card, so I have the Braves slated for the fifth and final playoff spot. Although they didn't do much to improve the team, many of the other NL contenders (Milwaukee and St. Louis, specifically) have gotten worse. Assuming Hanson and Jurrjens won't be hurt down the stretch, this team should be good position to make the playoffs, especially if Teheran and Delgado can give them a boost down the stretch. ①

GRADE: 90



Spotlight – Tommy Hanson

One year ago, Tommy Hanson looked like a future bona fide ace. But after tearing his rotator cuff in August, his future appears far murkier. Now, since the Braves have a surplus of potential aces in the minor leagues (Julio Teheran, Arodys Vizcaino, Randall Delgado, Mike Minor...) they don't have to bank on Hanson becoming a number one starter. But I still think that's just what he'll become. He's got a workhorse frame and number one starter stuff. The hope is he can just stay healthy and mature.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Edward Salcedo – SS	Julio Teheran	RHP	Electric stuff, easy velocity, plus changeup. Needs improved curve to fulfill ace ceiling.	A
The Braves signed Salcedo two years ago at 18 years old for a hefty \$1.8 million bonus. The man has shown signs of being a good Major Leaguer, but the production just hasn't been there. Originally touted as a five-tool player, Salcedo's defense has been so raw, he's been forced him to play some at third base. Additionally, he hasn't been able to consistently hit for average. It's far too soon to give up on Salcedo, but it'd be nice to see more than flashes of talent.	Arodys Vizcaino	RHP	Potentially better stuff than Teheran, but elbow health and durability are concerns.	A-
	Randall Delgado	RHP	Big frame with plus velocity and change-up. Question remains if he's start or relieve.	B+
	Andrelton Simmons	SS	Plus glove with cannon arm. May only end up with gap power, but bat, speed are there.	B
	Sean Gilmartin	LHP	Polished with limited upside and average stuff. Should reach the majors fairly soon.	B
	Edward Salcedo	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Zeke Spruill	RHP	Returned to relevancy with plus control. Off speeds need consistency, command.	B-
	Christian Bethancourt	C	Absolutely great defensively with a great arm, but his offense is seriously lacking.	B-
	Brandon Drury	3B	Great bat with solid power potential and defense. Rarely strikes out, but never walks.	C+
	J.J. Hoover	RHP	A tad old; has never had an ERA over 3.50. With other Braves pitchers, may relieve.	C+

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Ian Desmond						SS	331
.253	.298	.358	65	8	49	25	1.4
Danny Espinosa						2B	156
.236	.323	.414	72	21	66	17	3.5
Ryan Zimmerman						3B	29
.289	.355	.443	52	12	49	3	2.5
Mike Morse						LF	130
.303	.360	.550	73	31	95	2	3.4
Adam LaRoche						1B	222
.172	.288	.258	15	3	15	1	-0.2
Jayson Werth						RF	22
.232	.330	.389	69	20	58	19	2.5
Wilson Ramos						C	198
.267	.334	.445	48	15	52	0	3.1
Roger Bernadina						CF	259
.243	.301	.362	40	7	27	17	0.8
Rick Ankiel						OF	281
.239	.296	.363	46	9	37	10	1.4
Mark DeRosa						Util	337
.279	.351	.302	9	0	12	1	0.1
Steve Lombardozzi						IF	NR
.194	.219	.226	3	0	1	0	-0.2
Chris Marrero						1B	352
.248	.274	.294	6	0	10	0	-0.7
Jesus Flores						C	323
.209	.253	.314	5	1	2	0	-0.1

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Stephen Strasburg						RHP	23
1-1	1.50	1.28	0.71	24.0	24		1.1
Jordan Zimmerman						RHP	26
8-11	3.18	3.16	1.15	161.1	124		3.4
Gio Gonzalez						LHP	92
16-12	3.12	3.64	1.32	202.0	197		3.5
Edwin Jackson						RHP	82
12-9	3.79	3.55	1.44	199.2	148		3.8
John Lannan						LHP	123
10-13	3.70	4.28	1.46	184.2	106		1.3
Drew Storen						RHP	63
6-3	2.75	3.32	1.02	75.1	74		0.9
Tyler Clippard						RHP	18
3-0	1.83	3.17	0.84	88.1	104		1.2
Henry Rodriguez						RHP	71
3-3	3.56	3.24	1.51	65.2	70		0.6

In their seven years of existence, we've all made our fair share of Nationals jokes. But finally, it looks like the team is making moves in the right direction. No, they didn't sign Prince Fielder, C.J. Wilson, or even Yoenis Cespedes, but they're starting to look more and more like they have an actual plan for success. They cashed in four big trade chips to land Gio Gonzalez and brought in Edwin Jackson on a short-term deal. With a lot of help coming on the way in terms of prospects, this team could actually be a playoff threat soon.

Don't be fooled; the Nationals are not built to win now. Their pitching is exponentially better with the return of Stephen Strasburg and the two other new hurlers, but this team has the exact same offense that finished 25th in the league in on-base percentage last year. They didn't make any moves to strengthen the offense, unless you think Mark DeRosa will be a major difference-maker. Don't get me wrong, there's all sorts of potential throughout the

lineup between Danny Espinosa, Wilson Ramos, Ian Desmond and even Mike Morse, but the offense isn't even close to the league of even the Marlins or Phillies.

For just the 2011 season, the Nationals are a team stuck in the middle. They've got Edwin Jackson in the nation's capitol for just one year—I'd be shocked if he re-signed to another one-year deal next off-season—but the offense isn't there to back him up. They could call on Bryce Harper to pick up some of the slack, but that addition still wouldn't be enough to put the team over the top. Furthermore, he's not entirely ready for a full season in the majors; even if his arbitration clock didn't matter, it'd still be best to give him a few months in the minors.

Without Bryce Harper, the Nationals offense doesn't even look like a threat. Ian Desmond isn't developing as quickly as the team would like him to—it would even make sense to switch him and Danny Espinosa at second base and shortstop. And another disappointment, Jayson

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals

Werth saw his 'O' really suffer across the board. In his contract year in Philly, he hit .296/.388/.532, but his first season in Washington only produced a .232/.330/.389 line. That, after getting \$126 million from the Nats.

But not everything was a disappointment. Mike Morse went from being a platoon hitter without a position to a near-All-Star. He was the main source of power with 31 bombs and a monstrous .550 slugging percentage, picking up where Adam Dunn left off and Ryan Zimmerman couldn't help because of injuries. Rookie Espinosa was

the other big surprise—he finished just three steals short of a 20-20 season at just 24 years old. Wilson Ramos, too, made a great rookie impression, posting 15 bombs in about two-thirds of a season. One of the keys to the season, for sure, will be how well the trio responds to a big 2011.

Of course, the most important player offensively for the Nats is Ryan Zimmerman. The All-Star is by far the best third baseman in the National League with elite defense, plus power, and a great bat. The Nats just gave him a massive \$100 million extension, buying out four years of his free

“Short-term, plenty of things could have gone better this season. We should have won a few more games. But looking ahead, there is not a lot of negative.”

--Ryan Zimmerman, 3B

agency. It was key for Washington to re-sign him because he will be at his peak performance during that contract right when Nationals will be in prime position to make a playoff run. They'll need him more than ever. Sure, their second best prospect, Anthony Rendon, also plays the hot corner, but he's not proven and can also be shifted to second base if need be. Zimmerman may be slightly overpaid, but he's well worth the money for the Nats.

In contrast to their weak hitting, the Nationals' young

pitching rotation is actually rather strong. The staff is anchored by star Stephen Strasburg, who is truly one of the biggest delights to watch. If you haven't gotten to see him at all over his seventeen major league starts, you may reconsider if you've actually known what good pitching is. I (slightly) kid.

Another thing great about the Nats' pitching is that it's entirely young. For all intents and purposes, Strasburg is headed into his second pro season, and Jordan Zimmermann is headed into

A Reason for Hope

It's hard to not be excited about the Nationals if you're a fan of the team or just a fan of baseball in general. Not only did they win 80 games for the first time since their inaugural season in 2005, but they also flashed promise and a bright future. After missing most of the season, Stephen Strasburg came back to pitch five starts, good for a 1.50 ERA and 12 K/BB. It was clearly just a small comeback, but it showed that he's ready to return to the level he was at in his dominant rookie season.

The Fatal Flaw

Besides the fact that the Nationals always find a way to blow things, the reason the Nationals won't compete for a playoff spot is that they don't have enough offense. The pitching is there with four top-of-the-rotation guys, but they only have three sure-fire above-average hitters. Danny Espinosa and Wilson Ramos could develop into just that, but beyond Ryan Zimmerman, Mike Morse, and Jayson Werth, they lack dependable hitting. They needed to sign Prince Fielder.



C Wilson Ramos

NL East — 4. Washington Nationals

his third. Washington may have overpaid for 26-year old Gio Gonzalez, but they've really solidified a great, young rotation with tremendous upside.

Finally, the end of the rotation is capped off with one of the more consistent 4th/5th starter combinations in the league: Edwin Jackson and John Lannan. They may have combined for an average-looking 3.75 ERA last season, but they bring stability to a staff that, at the top, can get wild at times. While the two starters are the veterans of the staff, neither starter is over 28. This staff is great now and should be even better once their reinforcements come in.

Losing A.J. Cole, Brad Peacock, Derek Norris, and Tom Milone really hurt the minor league system, but Gio Gonzalez was the real gem of the deal. Furthermore, the depth of their

minor league pitching—Matt Purke, Alex Meyer, Sammy Solis, and Robbie Ray, all projected Major League starters—helped cushion the blow. What money they didn't spend in free agency over the last couple of seasons has paid off big-time in the draft, where they spent over \$16 million on their first four draft picks last year. Those four players came in second to fifth on their top ten prospects.

It's going to be shocking, but in the near future, the Nationals are going to be in the playoffs. It won't be this year because they just don't have enough might offensively, but Harper, Rendon, and crew should be up in the majors before long. And assuming there are no major regressions on either side of the ball, the Nats could be a good team in a very tough 2013 NL East.

GRADE: 84



Spotlight – Bryce Harper

Between the Phillies firepower, Miami's sudden emergence, Atlanta's young guns, and the Nats' general lack of production, Washington is unlikely to compete for a playoff spot. But the buzz in DC is not as much about Roger Bernadina and John Lannan as it is about when Bryce Harper will get the call. At just 19 years old, there is no reason to rush him to the majors and start his arbitration clock, especially on such a dismal team. Expect him to get more seasoning in the minors before a mid-2013 call-up.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Matt Purke – LHP The Rangers drafted Purke 14th overall in the 2009 draft and had a pre-draft deal with him for \$6 million, only to have the agreement scuttled before the signing deadline. Purke looked to be one of the top prospects in 2011 as a draft eligible sophomore, but his velocity dropped while his ERA dropped and his money demands remained high. Washington eventually took him in the 3 rd round and gave him a \$2 million bonus, a big investment for a risky prospect with serious health concerns.	Bryce Harper	OF	As good power and arm strength as you'll see. Quite simply the next big superstar.	A+
	Anthony Rendon	3B	Fell in the draft because of injuries, but has great power, arm. Likely will move to 2B.	A-
	Brian Goodwin	OF	Has some risk, but the upside is a 25-25 star. His swing, defense still need work.	B+
	Matt Purke	LHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Alex Meyer	RHP	Has knockout fastball and slider, but 6'9" frame causes shaky mechanics, command.	B
	Destin Hood	OF	Talented, but raw; very athletic. Power starting to set in as strikeouts decrease.	B-
	Sammy Solis	LHP	Big-framed innings-eater with solid control. Velocity ticked up, but has shoulder issues.	B-
	Robbie Ray	LHP	Small sized, doesn't throw hard, but puts up great numbers. Advanced for a 19-year old.	B-
	Chris Marrero	1B	2006 1 st rounder who never lived up to his potential. Solid power, but not for 1B.	C+
	Jason Martinson	SS	Walks, has power, has speed, but can be aggressive to a fault. Behind track age-wise.	C+

NL East — 5. New York Mets



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Andres Torres						CF	45
.221	.312	.330	50	4	19	19	2.1
David Murphy						2B	138
.275	.328	.401	46	11	46	11	1.1
David Wright						3B	76
.254	.345	.427	60	14	61	13	1.9
Ike Davis						1B	62
.302	.383	.543	20	7	25	0	1.4
Jason Bay						LF	145
.245	.329	.374	59	12	57	11	0.7
Lucas Duda						RF	215
.282	.370	.482	38	10	50	1	0.9
Josh Thole						C	236
.268	.345	.344	22	3	40	0	1.0
Ruben Tejada						SS	256
.284	.360	.335	31	0	36	5	1.8
Scott Hairston						OF	244
.235	.303	.470	20	7	24	1	0.3
Ronny Cedeño						SS	333
.249	.297	.339	43	2	32	2	1.4
Justin Turner						IF	248
.260	.334	.356	49	4	51	7	0.8
Nick Evans						1B	235
.256	.314	.403	26	4	25	0	0.7
Mike Nickeas						C	332
.189	.246	.246	4	1	6	0	-0.1

Pitchers					L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR
Johan Santana					LHP	25
11-9	2.98	3.54	1.18	199.0	144	3.5*
R.A. Dickey					RHP	37
8-13	3.28	3.77	1.23	208.2	134	2.5
Jon Niese					LHP	84
11-11	4.40	3.36	1.41	157.1	138	2.7
Mike Pelfrey					RHP	125
7-13	4.74	4.47	1.47	193.2	105	0.7
Dillon Gee					RHP	79
13-6	4.43	4.65	1.38	160.2	114	0.2
Frank Francisco					RHP	77
1-4	3.55	3.80	1.32	50.2	53	0.5
Bobby Parnell					RHP	78
4-6	3.64	3.21	1.47	59.1	64	0.6
Ramon Ramirez					RHP	56
3-3	2.62	2.94	1.17	68.2	66	0.9

At the very least, the Mets appear to be starting anew. Omar Minaya? Long gone. Carlos Beltran? He's been shown the door. Fred Wilpon? Well, it sounds like he's actually staying. The New York Mets are almost entirely purging themselves of the old guard, which turned the Mets into the laughing stock of Major League Baseball. For now, these moves will make the Mets even harder to watch—as impossible as that may sound—but it was the best move possible for the club.

If you're an infrequent Mets fan, I wouldn't blame you for not knowing a single player on this roster. Hey, even if you were an average, dedicated, or fanatical fan, I wouldn't blame you for not knowing a single name on this roster. Dillon Gee. Lucas Duda. R.A. Dickey. So many of these players are completely non-descript—many of whom have non-descript names to match. All in all, this team just isn't very talented.

These thirteen months have been a major crossroad for the Mets. Since the start of last season, there

was a debate over how to deal with impending free agent Jose Reyes, no-longer-young David Wright, and the \$41 million duo of Beltran and Johan Santana. The only trade the Mets were able to make was sending off Beltran to San Francisco in a steal of a deal for their current top prospect, Zach Wheeler. Otherwise, the Mets couldn't move the debilitated Santana, and they missed out on trading Reyes before he left town for sunny Miami. Instead, they'll collect a supplementary draft pick and a third rounder for the dynamic infielder. But the most important move—or lack of a move, rather—was the Mets holding onto Wright.

Realistically, the Mets won't be in contention until 2016. Optimistically, they may come back to resembling a coherent team in three years. But by that time, what state will David Wright be in? Yes, he's a ticket draw, a homegrown star, and the only redeemable player on the roster, but he's 29 and set to hit the open market in two years. Even if he returns to the

NL East — 5. New York Mets

Queens, he'll be well past his peak—and consequently vastly overpaid—by the time the Mets are back to competitiveness. You know, assuming they can ever get back to competitiveness.

As painful as it may seem, it's time for the Mets to move on and trade David Wright. But it's not as if we're talking about cutting the five-time all-star, the Mets will get a serious return for him. We're talking about one of the best under-30 hitters in the game—plus he's at a relatively prime position. New York should be looking at a combination of either top-flight prospects or established

young players with a year or two of service time in return.

There is one quirk, however, with Wright's contract that may complicate trade talks. If and when he's traded, Wright is allowed to void his 2013 club option for \$16 million. So in order for a trade to happen, the other team will either have to a) have an extension in place b) have assurance he will not void the option c) have big cajones or d) send such a low-quality package for Wright. Since they're risking losing him with no compensation.

The Mets need to build around the young pieces they

A Reason for Hope

At least their amateur ranks seem to be improving. Headlining their crop of youngsters are two young guns, who could help out by the end of this season: Zach Wheeler and Matt Harvey. Wheeler is on pace to become an ace, and Harvey has the stuff, although his control can often be questionable. Really, the Mets haven't had quality pitching atop their rotation since the first few years of Pedro Martinez and Johan Santana's contracts, so this would be a warmly welcomed change.

The Fatal Flaw

There's just no way to nicely put this. The Mets fatal flaw is a lack of pitching matched with a lack of hitting. They had poor planning with Omar Minaya at the helm, and they're feeling the reverberations of his moves now. The only strength of this team (in the majors) is a depth of average relievers. They may have blown a huge chunk of their off-season budget on these average relievers, but at least we won't have to see lots of Jason Isringhausen and Ryoto Irigashi anymore.

"We're not going to punt 2012 if Jose Reyes doesn't re-sign."

--Sandy Alderson, GM

have in place now. Andres Torres and Jason Bay have absolutely no future with the team, so it only makes sense to pare down their playing time for youngsters. For instance, Kirk Nieuwenhuis would have broken into the majors last season, but thanks to a shoulder injury, he never got that shot. Now, he'll likely get a call up around May, and when he does, he needs to play every day. It doesn't matter how much Bay and Torres are making, Nieuwenhuis needs to get the nod. That money has already been spent, so the Mets cannot compound their problem by sacrificing their future to "develop" veteran hitters.

The club also needs to have patience with five position players in particular: Ike Davis, Ruben

Tejada, Josh Thole, Daniel Murphy, and Lucas Duda. The group is not even an average age of 25, and they have just over an average of 700 plate appearances among them. They may be inexperienced, but they desperately need time to develop. I'd be shocked if any of them, except Davis, became more than an average regular, but nothing's for certain. And more than anything else, the Mets need to find out what they have in these youngsters much more than what they have in Ronny Cedeño and Scott Hairston.

The Mets' offense may be terrifyingly bad, but the pitching is slightly better. So they have that. R.A. Dickey was a surprisingly effective pitcher last year with a



1B Ike Davis

NL East — 5. New York Mets

3.28 ERA over 206 innings and a WAR over 2.4 for the second straight season. He's not flashy, and I've never been a big buyer of dominance from knuckleball pitchers, but he gets the job done.

Dickey may have been a quality pickup off the scrap heap, but the rest of the rotation more nearly resembles the scrap heap than Dickey. Mike Pelfrey, Dillon Gee, and Jon Niese all have a sliver of promise, but none has been productive since 2010. Together, they posted a 4.54 ERA over more than 500 innings. At just 25-years old, Niese may eventually develop into a solid back-of-the-rotation starter, but for now he just looks like a spot starter or long relief pitcher.

The rebuilding process for the Mets will be a long and painful one. Luckily, they're located in only the single biggest market in Major League

Baseball, so spending money shouldn't be a big issue. But for now, it's time for the club to completely wipe their slate clean. Similarly to what the Cubs are doing, the Mets need to rid themselves of everyone and everything associated with the old regime, especially Wright and the depressingly average Jason Bay.

What the Mets really need to do is invest their money in better ways. I'm not just talking about personal mistakes made by the Wilpons, but they need to allot more money to acquiring amateur talent, rather than spend over \$15 million to "shore up the bullpen" with Frank Francisco and Jon Rauch. At the very least, that money should go to the draft. Or international free agency. Or just anywhere other than to two wildly inconsistent relievers. 🍷

GRADE: 78



Spotlight – Johan Santana

Everybody—you, myself, and Bernie Madoff—know that the Mets are going nowhere this season. But they could potentially have a very nice trade piece in Johan Santana if he has a Carlos Beltran-esque comeback. We forget just how good Santana was since he missed the entire 2011 season. He has a 2.90 ERA over the last decade, including a 2.98 ERA 2010. If a 34-year-old-Carlos Beltran landed the Mets their 2nd best prospect, I'm sure they could get a B+ prospect for a 33-year old Johan Santana.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jenrry Mejia – RHP	Zack Wheeler	RHP	Great mix with plus fastball, curve. Lots of strikeouts, but can lose control. Future ace.	A-
Last year, Mejia was the Mets top prospect. But after just five starts in AAA Buffalo, he tore the MCL in his right elbow and had Tommy John Surgery. Now, while that isn't the Kiss of Death to a young prospect, it certainly isn't good. He will presumably have the same great arsenal, but there is a raised concern that he may not be able to stick as a starter in the majors. He'll return this summer, and that'll be a great tell for what his future holds: top-of-the-rotation starter or late-inning reliever.	Matt Harvey	RHP	Big frame, plus fastball. If changeup doesn't improve, he'll relieve. Control is on-and-off.	B+
	Brandon Nimmo	OF	Smooth swing with consistent, hard contact. Toolsy, solid speed, but lacks experience.	B
	Jeurys Familia	RHP	Has dominating stuff. Strikeout pitcher, should keep the ball down, improve control.	B
	Jenrry Mejia	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B
	Kirk Nieuwenhuis	OF	Nice power, speed, great on-base skills, too many Ks. Injury prevented debut in 2011.	B
	Michael Fulmer	RHP	Workhorse starter with live arm. Has two potential plus pitches, No. 2 starter ceiling.	B
	Wilmer Flores	SS	Has untapped power potential, needs more walks. Hasn't made The Leap, but only 20.	B-
	Cesar Puello	OF	Has all the tools, but yet to turn them into production. Power improving, patience not.	B-
	Darin Gorski	LHP	Sleeper prospect, posted great numbers with average stuff. Plus changeup, control.	C+



NL Central
Yovani Gallardo

NL Central

The NL Central may be the biggest division by size, but it is in no way is it the most talented. Sure, this is home to the World Series champion Cardinals as well as the 96-win Brewers, but even if you don't factor in the 56-win Houston Astros, overall the division was not that great. Three teams finished with a win total in the seventies. And furthermore, the division had a combined .308 winning percentage outside of intradivision play. Last year, they were not very good as a whole. And with all the losses sustained this winter, it won't get a whole lot better in 2012.

The big two players who left the division are obviously Albert Pujols and Prince Fielder. The two mashers put up 10.6 WAR last year, but more importantly, they were the catalysts to their respective offenses in St. Louis and Milwaukee. Fielder had a the second-best season of his career with a .415 OBP and 38 homers without missing a game, while Pujols had possibly the worst year of his career. Amid a contract dispute starting in Spring Training, he had his first sub-.400 OBP since 2002 and his lowest WAR ever—5.5. That may be a great number for most hitters, but for the greatest hitter of the generation, it's not enough.

There will certainly be changes. Fielder and Pujols are off to the AL, so the division as a whole will be a little more pitching-focused. With apologies to Carlos Beltran and Mat Gamel, pitchers won't be nearly as worried about other lineups, since really only one team in the entire division made any improvements with on-field personnel.

The Cards and Brew Crew clearly got worse, while the Pirates and Astros stayed bad, and the Cubs still field a bad team—although their fancy new front office makes their future look far more promising. The Reds were the only team to actually make their roster better, and boy did they make big improvements. Cincinnati's biggest weakness of the 2011 season—pitching—was really bolstered with the acquisitions of Mat Latos, Ryan Madson, and Sean Marshall, and they still remain in the hunt for Roy Oswalt, as he continues to search for an available job of his liking.

There's a lot of uncertainty going into this season. There's going to be turnover, surprises, and changes galore. The division will be almost certainly be competitive—but for all the wrong reasons. There's a lot of mediocrity permeating the teams, even towards the top of the standings.



Courtesy of fathead.com

NL Central — 1. Cincinnati Reds



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Brandon Phillips						2B	56
.300	.353	.457	94	18	82	14	6.0
Zack Cozart						SS	NR
.324	.324	.486	6	2	3	0	0.7
Joey Votto						1B	2
.309	.416	.531	101	29	103	8	6.9
Ryan Ludwick						LF	261
.237	.310	.363	56	13	75	1	0.3
Jay Bruce						RF	52
.256	.344	.474	84	32	97	8	3.3
Scott Rolen						3B	126
.242	.279	.397	31	5	36	1	1.3
Drew Stubbs						CF	118
.243	.321	.364	92	15	44	40	2.6
Devin Mesoraco						C	353
.180	.226	.360	5	2	6	0	-1.0
Chris Heisey						OF	162
.254	.309	.487	44	18	50	6	1.6
Wilson Valdez						2B/SS	369
.249	.294	.341	39	1	30	3	0.0
Paul Janish						SS/2B	365
.214	.259	.262	27	0	23	3	-0.4
Miguel Cairo						3B/1B	189
.265	.330	.412	33	8	33	3	1.9
Ryan Hanigan						C	87
.267	.356	.357	27	6	31	0	1.8

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Mat Latos						RHP	19
9-14	3.47	3.16	1.18	194.1	185		3.2
Johnny Cueto						RHP	39
9-5	2.31	3.45	1.09	156.0	104		2.8
Mike Leake						RHP	96
12-9	3.86	4.22	1.17	167.2	118		1.5
Homer Bailey						RHP	83
9-7	4.43	4.06	1.28	132.0	106		1.5
Aroldis Chapman						LHP	45*
4-1	3.60	3.29	1.30	50.0	71		0.6
Sean Marshall						LHP	4
6-6	2.26	1.86	1.10	75.2	79		2.8
Nick Masset						RHP	73
3-6	3.71	3.55	1.52	70.1	62		0.6
Bill Bray						LHP	52
5-3	2.98	3.19	1.08	48.1	44		0.7

*Relief Pitcher Player Rater

After earning their first playoff appearance in fifteen years, the Cincinnati Reds' 79-83 2011 record can only be looked at as a failure. The team finished 17 games out of first place in the division and an additional 11 games out of the Wild Card. To make matters worse, it was really the same team that won 91 games the year before, save for Orlando Cabrera. But maybe that was the problem: every other team around them improved while they stood pat.

This off-season, the Reds stood at a crossroad for their franchise. While they remain one of the youngest teams in the league, their two biggest offensive weapons—Joey Votto and Brandon Phillips—are set to hit the open market next winter. Clearly the Reds are ready to compete now, but the future beyond the next two seasons was very murky. So Cincinnati was faced with a tough decision: move Votto for a boatload of prospects and be ready to compete in 2013 or 2014 or go all in for 2012.

At first, I thought the right move

for GM Walt Jocketty would be to trade Votto to a team like the Rays for a King's Ransom of young players (Desmond Jennings, Matt Moore, etc.). Gio Gonzalez, an above-average at best, landed Oakland four very good prospects—and Gonzalez isn't even in the same zip code as Votto, the second best hitter in the game. 23-year-old Yonder Alonso was ready to take over at first, and his bat isn't a colossal drop-off from Votto's.

But instead of shipping off Votto, the Reds traded Alonso with two other prospects and Edinson Volquez to San Diego for a bona fide young ace: Mat Latos. Sure, his numbers won't be nearly the same after making the switch from a Pitcher's Heaven in PETCO Park to a Pitcher's Hell in the Great American Ballpark, but Latos is only 24 years old and under team control for at least four more years.

After cashing in three major trade chips to solidify their rotation, it's hard not to be impressed by Cincinnati's guts. The move was certainly laden with risk, but when the name of the game is winning

NL Central — 1. Cincinnati Reds

championships, I can never blame a team for making a run for it all. At this point, I really liked the Reds. With a potent, young lineup and hard-throwing, young starters, this group had the potential to win the NL Central and much more. But Walt Jocketty wasn't done revamping the team quite yet.

Jocketty made a shrewd move early with the Latos Trade, but just as impressively, he avoided high prices later in the off-season when he signed closer Ryan Madson in the 11th hour. The market for closers shrunk beyond most everyone's—especially Scott

Boras'—wildest dreams. So instead of signing for a Papelbonian \$50 million, the \$44 million he nearly got from Philadelphia, or even a Rafael Soriano-esque cool \$35 mil, Madson had to settle for a one-year, \$8 million contract to reestablish his value. Unfortunately, Madson was just lost for the season with Tommy John Surgery, but Sean Marshall, acquired three weeks before the Madson coup, will step up to be a fine closer.

Last season, the Reds made the fatal flaw of standing still. And instead of shocking the baseball world with another playoff run like they did in 2010, they ended

“It's been a long, long disappointing season. All you can really do is just learn from this season and next year we can get things going.”

--Brandon Phillips, 2B

up shocking the baseball world by winning 12 less games than the year before. This year, it's the complete opposite. St. Louis lost Albert Pujols, Tony La Russa, and Dave Duncan while Milwaukee lost Prince Fielder completely and nearly lost Ryan Braun for 50 games. And the Reds? They've made themselves into a World Series contender.

We can't forget, though, that this Reds team was extremely dangerous even before Latos, Madson, and Marshall were brought in. Even in their 79-83 season, the Reds finished fourth in

runs, homers, and offensive WAR. From Bruce to Votto, the lineup is a well-oiled machine with no weak spots. Rookies Devin Mesoraco and Zack Cozart have much to learn, but both have torn up the minors for the last two seasons.

In a way, this team reminds me of the 2011 Brewers. Playing half their games in extreme hitter's ballparks, both teams are built around a power-hitting first baseman (Prince Fielder vs. Joey Votto), two young slugging outfielders (Ryan Braun and Corey Hart vs. Jay Bruce and Drew Stubbs), all-around great second

A Reason for Hope

Even if this team doesn't go the distance in 2012, their team is extremely young. This is especially true for the starting rotation, which consists of a 23-year-old, two 24-year olds, and two 25-year olds. None will become a free agent until 2015, so they should have great continuity for at least the next four seasons. But for now, they still have the potential to be a great group, especially if Aroldis Chapman and Mike Leake can join Johnny Cueto and Mat Latos atop the rotation.

The Fatal Flaw

That very same group of young pitchers could be the reason they don't make it deep into October, or even into October at all. There hasn't been a team this millennium to win a World Series with a rotation this young, and for a good reason. We're not sure if Chapman is ready to have a 100-inning increase, if Mat Latos is just a product of PETCO Park, or if Cueto and Leake can continue their string of good health. This rotation has great potential all around, but these are serious questions.



SP Johnny Cueto

NL Central — 1. Cincinnati Reds

basemen (Rickie Weeks vs. Brandon Phillips), and lots of young pitching (Zack Greinke, Yovani Gallardo, and Jon Axford vs. Latos, Jonny Cueto, and Aroldis Chapman). Milwaukee went all-in last season, and while they did finish two games short of a World Series birth, a trip to the NLCS is nothing to scoff at.

I'm a big fan of this Reds team. They've got great depth across the board—even before they picked up Ryan Ludwick off the scrap heap for pennies on the dollar. They've got power up and down the lineup and a great ballpark to match it. And while they may not have the premier pitching of the Phillies, Giants, and Rays, they'll be able to outslug almost any team they face.

In my mind, the fate of this Reds team falls into three pitchers' hands: Mat Latos, Mike Leake, and Aroldis Chapman. In order to have a legitimate shot

at the World Series, they'll need a bit more pitching. We've seen Latos flash number one-stuff, but I'd like to see if he can keep his emotions in check and become a true ace. We've seen Leake flash number two-starter stuff before, but I'd like to see if he can string together an entire season of (mostly) strong starts. And most importantly, there is Aroldis Chapman. The flame-thrower looked sensational at times, and lost at other times. If he can develop into a top-of-the-rotation starter, there is no ceiling for this team.

The comparisons to the 2011 Brewers strike home at so many levels. With their potent offense and potentially killer pitching staff, I have a hard time seeing this team falling short of the playoffs. Pending mid-season acquisitions, this is a real World Series contender. 🍷

GRADE: 93



Spotlight – Scott Rolen

Despite having one of the youngest teams in the league (eight starters and all five starters are 28 or under), the Reds will be right in the thick of things down the stretch for the NL Central title. The grizzled vet Scott Rolen is by far the oldest member of the starting lineup. He hasn't hit 21 homers since 2006, and since then he's had a line of just .276/.344/.441. If he doesn't pick up his production this season, he runs risk of losing his starting spot to a young hitter like Todd Frazier, Juan Francisco, or eventually Neftali Soto.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Todd Frazier – Util Frazier has always been atop the Reds' prospect list since he was taken in the first round of the 2007 draft. But since he was drafted out of Rutgers as a shortstop, his frame has grown to 6'3" 220 pounds, and he can't play there anymore. Now, he's just a corner infield/outfield prospect with little left to prove in the minors at 26 and a much lower ceiling than we originally thought. He'll never hit .290 or 20 homers, but he can be a quality utility man off the bench for the Reds.	Billy Hamilton	SS	Unbelievable speed (103 steals in 2011), good bat, no power. May move to 2B or CF.	B+
	Daniel Corcino	RHP	Undersized, but stuff is dominating. Plus fastball, control, 2 developing off-speeds.	B+
	Robert Stephenson	RHP	Power-armed with upper-90s fastball has great movement, breaking balls are raw.	B
	Tony Cingrani	LHP	Hard-thrower, lots of strikeouts. Converted reliever, innings load needs monitoring.	B
	Henry Rodriguez	2B	Speedy with legitimate bat right now. Gap power should improve; defense is poor.	B-
	Didi Gregorius	SS	Great defensive tools, can be sloppy. Solid upside offensively, likely modest power.	B-
	Yorman Rodriguez	OF	'08 Bonus baby (\$2M), production hasn't matched the hype. Strong arm, raw power.	B-
	Todd Frazier	Util	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Neftali Soto	1B	Huge power, but defense is a problem. Discipline and contact rates aren't great.	B-
	J.C. Sulbaran	RHP	Good arsenal (plus curve) with great K/BB numbers, but production hasn't matched.	C+

NL Central — 2. St. Louis Cardinals



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Rafael Furcal						SS	223
.231	.298	.348	44	8	28	9	0.5
Carlos Beltran						RF	55
.300	.385	.525	78	22	84	4	4.7
Matt Holliday						LF	16
.296	.388	.525	83	22	75	2	5.0
Lance Berkman						1B	33
.301	.412	.547	90	31	94	2	5.0
David Freese						3B	110
.297	.350	.441	41	10	55	1	2.7
Yadier Molina						C	150
.305	.349	.465	55	14	65	4	4.1
Jon Jay						CF	181
.297	.344	.424	56	10	37	6	2.8
Tyler Greene						2B	280
.212	.322	.288	22	1	11	11	0.1
Allen Craig						OF/1B	107
.315	.362	.555	33	11	40	5	2.6
Daniel Descalso						2B/3B	271
.264	.334	.353	35	1	28	2	0.5
Skip Schumaker						2B/OF	355
.283	.333	.351	34	2	38	0	0.6
Mark Hamilton						1B	325
.213	.275	.277	5	0	4	0	-0.1
Tony Cruz						C	289
.262	.333	.338	8	0	6	0	0.3

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Adam Wainwright						RHP	11
20-11	2.42	2.86	1.05	230.1	213		6.1*
Chris Carpenter						RHP	21
11-9	3.45	3.06	1.26	237.1	191		5.0
Jaime Garcia						LHP	73
13-7	3.56	3.23	1.32	194.2	156		3.6
Jake Westbrook						RHP	115
12-9	4.66	4.25	1.53	183.1	104		1.1
Kyle Lohse						RHP	121
14-8	3.39	3.67	1.17	188.1	111		2.5
Jason Motte						RHP	31
5-2	2.25	2.48	0.96	68.0	63		1.5
Fernando Salas						RHP	53
5-6	2.28	3.16	0.95	75.0	75		1.0
Marc Rzepczynski						LHP	74
2-6	3.34	3.14	1.23	62.0	61		1.0

*2010 Stats

It was really tough for me to pick the NL Central champ last season. In early February 2011, it was a tight, three-team race between the Brewers, Reds, and Cardinals. The Reds were crowned division champions for the first time since 1990, and they had a roster loaded with young talent. The Brewers added two ace pitchers and had the best 3-4 hitting punch in the league with Ryan Braun and Prince Fielder. And the Cardinals? They had Albert Pujols, Matt Holliday, Adam Wainwright, and Chris Carpenter, and that was about it. So when word came out that Wainwright had Tommy John Surgery and was going to miss the entire season, it was an easy choice to bump them to third place.

To say the least, the Cards exceeded my expectations. Lance Berkman had an absolute career resurgence—after he flopped in New York I figured he would have a rough year patrolling the outfield for the first time regularly since '07. But he stepped up big-time, as did the rest of

the team. I sure didn't agree with most of—if not all of—Tony La Russa's decisions, but he worked his magic into a World Series trophy.

I picked against the Cardinals the whole way, and I still stand by my picks. I thought the Braves were a better team for the Wild Card, the Phillies would sweep them in the first round, and the Brewers and Rangers would take them out in six. But that team was resilient and pitched just well enough. And I was wrong.

But the 2012 St. Louis Cardinals are an entirely different animal than the 2011 version. In case you've been living under a rock, the Cards lost one of their biggest contributors last season. You can take a quick glance at their lineup and see how vastly different it is now. Out of nowhere, a mystery team swooped in with an unbelievably high offer to sign Nick Punto, and now their former starting second baseman is off making \$1.5 million in Boston, while the Cardinals offense is a shell of what it used to be. Oh, yeah, and Albert Pujols

NL Central — 2. St. Louis Cardinals

signed with the Angels. That, too.

While there's almost no way to fully replace the offense of Punto and Pujols, the Cards did a mighty fine job with what money remained in the budget. For an economical \$26 million, St. Louis brought in Carlos Beltran for two years, a bargain contract for a man who nearly produced 5 WAR last year. Berkman gets to slide back to his natural position at first base, and World Series hero Allen Craig will get some serious playing time if Beltran can ever figure out how to play center field again competently.

But the strength of this

team throughout the season wasn't always hitting. They did finish tops in the NL in runs last year, but the trademark for a great La Russa/Dave Duncan team is quality pitching. And even though Wainwright didn't throw a single pitch all year, they still managed to finished above league-average in most pitching categories. Chris Carpenter continued to prove that he's an ace, and Jaime Garcia, Edwin Jackson, and Kyle Lohse combined for a prime ERA of 3.49 over 461 innings.

The addition of Wainwright, however, means much more than just having a

“We just kept battling. That defines out team, that game, the way we kept coming back. We’ve been doing that for a long time.”

--David Freese, 3B

pitcher with a career ERA of 2.97, including 2.53 in his last two seasons. Just as importantly, Wainwright saves the bullpen from being overtaxed—which shouldn't be as much of a problem anyway with La Russa retired. In three of his four seasons as a starter, Wainwright pitched at least 200 innings and 32 starts, crossing the 230-inning threshold each of his past two seasons. It's not just that he's dominant—he makes the other pitchers on his team better.

With or without their ace, the Cardinals will have great pitching at the top of their

rotation. But without Pitching Coach Dave Duncan, the young pitchers and journeymen won't be nearly as productive. Now, I expect the main principles of the system (use two-seam fastballs and pitch to contact) to stay in St. Louis, but nobody in baseball could turn Joel Piñeiro into Joe Niekro like Duncan could. I've never been concerned about how the Wainwright and Carpenter will fare, but I am a little worried about the progression of Garcia and other young arms like Mitchell Boggs and Lance “Not Motte” Lynn.

In the end, this season all

A Reason for Hope

I haven't been a fan of this lineup—and I'm still not a big buyer on the bottom half of the lineup—but they put up the fifth most runs last year and fourth most offensive WAR. They're going to hit, Adam Wainwright is a huge addition to the rotation, and the rest of the NL Central isn't markedly better. Cincy made some great additions—and didn't lose their superstar first baseman—but they were a sub-.500 team last year. And for the next seven months, they're the Champions.

The Fatal Flaw

No offense to Lance Berkman and Carlos Betlran, but neither player puts nearly the same fear in other pitchers as Albert Pujols does. Not only he one of the best hitters in the game, but he also made each of his teammates better. Now, teams can more easily pitch around Matt Holliday, and Berkman will have much more pressure on him to live up to the old first baseman. In all, the Cards lost too much with the departure of Albert Pujols, not to mention Tony La Russa and Dave Duncan.



RP Jason Motte

NL Central — 2. St. Louis Cardinals

comes down to how well the Cardinals can replace the Big Four they lost: Tony La Russa, Dave Duncan, Nick Punto, and Albert Pujols. At first glance, the offense will recover. Even if Berkman and Beltran are two-thirds as productive as they were in their resurgent 2011s, the St. Louis lineup still doesn't have an easy out. I'm no fan of Skip Schumaker, Rafael Furcal, or even Yadier Molina offensively, but they got the job done in the playoffs, and they proved me wrong.

This is a very good team. They're constructed very similarly to the team that brought home the bacon last year, just with some minor losses. But in this league of constant shifts of power each off-season, you can't just tread water and hope to succeed. And unfortunately for the Cardinals, they weren't even close to

treading water this winter. They made their team significantly worse since they couldn't (or wouldn't) pony up an extra \$40 million to sign Albert Pujols. And while they attempted to stay afloat, the Reds took hold of their moment and leapfrogged St. Louis in terms of talent.

Yes, they are the defending champs. Yes, I picked against them the whole way last year, and I'm doing it again this year. But GM John Mozeliak did not make enough improvements to claim a Wild Card spot. They're a couple bats (Punto? Pujols?) behind the Reds, and that's what separates the good teams from the great. The Angels were willing to spend the extra dollar to win. But the Cardinals weren't willing to stretch their budget for another shot at glory. ⑦

GRADE: 89



Spotlight – Adam Wainwright

The bottom of the Cardinals will sorely miss the departure of pitching coach Dave Duncan, but luckily, the Cardinals have 3 top-notch starters in Chris Carpenter, Jaime Garcia, and Adam Wainwright. But Wainwright missed the entire 2011 season recovering from Tommy John Surgery, which could be an issue going forward. We've seen plenty of pitchers recover well from the surgery (Josh Johnson and Tim Hudson to name two), but if the Cardinals want a shot at the playoffs, Wainwright will need to return better than ever.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Tyrell Jenkins – RHP In a year from now, Jenkins could really be interchanged with Carlos Martinez. A high pick two years ago, Jenkins hasn't played above rookie ball yet, but he's pitched extremely well thanks to great athleticism (he was a three-sport athlete in high school), plus velocity, and good breaking pitches. He's a potential breakout star once he can focus on baseball for an entire season and can tinker with his command. If he adds weight to his lanky frame, his velocity and durability could tick up even more.	Shelby Miller	RHP	A true ace with plus velocity, good arsenal, projectable size. Command could improve.	A
	Carlos Martinez	RHP	Consistently hits 100 mph despite 6' frame. Plus curve; command, approach need work.	B+
	Oscar Taveras	OF	Fantastic bat, plus patience, put up crazy numbers. Only 19, should see power boost.	B+
	Tyrell Jenkins	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
	Zack Cox	3B	Can be a streaky hitter, but shows a plus bat. Gap power should become stronger.	B+
	Kolten Wong	2B	Polished hitter with limited upside. Small frame, above-average speed and glove.	B
	Jordan Swagerty	RHP	High-energy college closer turned starter with plus velocity. Durability will be key.	B
	Matt Adams	1B	Big frame with big power with great bat control, but platoon splits are an issue.	B-
	Lance Lynn	RHP	Could be an innings-eater or a late-inning reliever. Stuff is much better out of relief.	B-
	Trevor Rosenthal	RHP	Gets ground balls and strikeouts with hard sinker. Needs better secondary offerings.	C+

NL Central — 3. Milwaukee Brewers



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RFI	SB	WAR
Rickie Weeks						2B		37
.269	.350	.468	77	20		49	9	3.7
Nyjer Morgan						CF		113
.304	.357	.421	61	4		37	13	4.0
Ryan Braun						LF		8
.332	.397	.597	109	33		111	33	7.8
Aramis Ramirez						3B		164
.306	.361	.510	80	26		93	1	3.6
Corey Hart						RF		69
.285	.356	.510	80	26		63	7	4.2
Mat Gamel						1B		196
.115	.148	.154	1	0		2	0	-0.4
Alex Gonzalez						SS		326
.241	.270	.372	59	15		56	3	1.1
Jonathan Lucroy						C		250
.265	.313	.391	45	12		59	2	1.9
Carlos Gomez						OF		290
.225	.276	.403	37	8		24	16	2.0
Norichika Aoki						OF		NR
.292	.358	.360	73	4		44	8	~*
Taylor Green						3B/1B		NR
.270	.270	.351	2	0		1	0	0.1
Cesar Izturis						SS/2B		334
.200	.250	.200	4	0		1	0	0.1
George Kottaras						C		247
.252	.311	.459	15	5		17	0	0.7

*Japanese Central League Stats

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Zack Greinke						RHP	10
16-6	3.83	2.98	1.20	171.2	201		3.9
Yovani Gallardo						RHP	35
17-10	3.52	3.59	1.22	207.1	207		3.1
Shaun Marcum						RHP	22
13-7	3.54	3.73	1.16	200.2	158		2.7
Randy Wolf						LHP	97
13-10	3.69	4.29	1.32	212.1	134		1.4
Chris Narveson						LHP	103
11-8	4.45	4.06	1.39	161.2	126		1.5
Jon Axford						RHP	11
2-2	1.95	2.41	1.14	73.2	86		1.9
Francisco Rodriguez						RHP	22
4-8	4.08	3.67	1.21	92.2	88		0.8
Kameron Loe						RHP	60
4-7	3.50	2.80	1.13	72.0	61		1.2

Nearly everything went right for the Brewers in 2011. They picked up a true ace in Zack Greinke for young players that don't look so promising right now, Ryan Braun won the MVP, and the team won the NL Central by six games, finishing 30 games over .500. For a small market team—and any team in general—a trip to the NLCS is a huge success. But when you go all in, you need to finish better than Top-Four. Because this off-season, they validated Murphy's Law as everything that possibly could have gone wrong did.

The Brewers and their fans have been anticipating and preparing for about the past three to four seasons that Prince Fielder would not be in Milwaukee in 2012. They knew he'd be hitting the open market, and they knew they wouldn't have the nine-figure contract he was looking for. Little did they know Detroit would blow every other team in the running (at that point the Dodgers) out of the water with a \$214 million offer. But the number next to Fielder's name doesn't matter because

ownership has known for a while that this day was coming. And what's the best solution they could come up with to alleviate the giant loss? Mat Gamel. Yes, that failed third base prospect who's hit .222/.309/.374 since being called up in 2008.

But Fielder wasn't even the best hitter on the team. That honor belongs to Ryan Braun. The MVP mashed his way to a 30-30 season while nearly posting a .400 OBP. Oh, and there was also a whole hullabaloo over a leaked positive drug test of his.

The test actually took place in October—when the team was still playing—and the test showed an extremely high level of testosterone. Not just an elevated level, but “insanely high, the highest ever for anyone who has ever taken a test, twice the level of the highest test ever taken.” Word broke in December, and all hell broke loose in Milwaukee and across the national media. But as it turned out, the test should never have been released to the public, and the person in charge of sending the Braun's test

NL Central — 3. Milwaukee Brewers

sample couldn't get it to FedEx in time, and Braun got off Scot free because of a breach in protocol.

The last incarnation of the Brewers was dependent on power, a few really good starters, and power. But now the lineup that once boasted one of the most unreal 3-4 combos in league history will feature Gamel and Norichika Aoki. The offense went from Top-10 to bottom of the pack in the matter of a winter.

But all is not lost; the team did make some improvements. In the deal that brought them Zack Greinke, they were also saddled with the curse that is Yuniesky

Betancourt. The no-glove, flat-footed, undisciplined, free-swinging shortstop hit the open market and actually found another job. The Brewers added career .291 OBP Alex Gonzalez on a one-year deal, an automatic full step up from the kind of production they had last year.

They did actually up-grade in one area, though. Milwaukee brought in Aramis Ramirez, who parlayed a full season of good health and strong play into a \$36 million contract, and Alex Gonzalez. That's a big improvement over Yuni Betancourt and Casey McGehee. That dreadful duo

"Take each day as it comes. Just don't get out of our realm. Sometimes you're going to get spanked a little bit."

--Nyjer Morgan, CF

formed the worst left side of the infield in the league last year, hitting .238/.276/.364 with well below-average defense. After what happened to Fielder and Braun, this seems minor, but it's a minor improvement nonetheless.

For the most part, this team will be shockingly average. Their pitching is just good enough to be carried by a good offense, and the offense is just good enough to be carried by a good pitching staff. Combine those two, and you have the perfect formula for a .500 team. Without Fielder in the middle of the lineup, this team is just destined be like the town

they play in: boring, but not bad. With lots of beer.

Even with Ryan Braun for a whole season, the Brewers are in a hole trying to out-pace the Reds and Cards for a division crown. They caught a spark last year behind their "Beast Mode" theme and hot young hitting. But they'll be licking their wounds left by Fielder's departure, and the rest of the team has to compensate for the drop-off in production at first base. They'll be depending upon Corey Hart making "the leap" from an above-average regular to a star in addition to hoping that Aramis Ramirez's production doesn't fall off a cliff

A Reason for Hope

There's something to be said about having a strong top of the rotation, and Milwaukee has just that. Although they had just the ninth best team ERA, the 1-2-3 punch of Greinke, Gallardo, and Marcum should stand to improve with more time in Milwaukee. With Fielder gone, the pitching will have to increasingly carry the load for this team, and they're up for the challenge. The bullpen is strong, too, so if the team is headed for the playoffs, it'll look far different from the previous year.

The Fatal Flaw

The offense on this team is seriously lacking. Prince Fielder is gone, and not even the hitter-friendly confines of Miller Park, where they'll play half of their games, can fix that. The back portion of the lineup—Mat Gamel, Alex Gonzalez, and Jonathan Lucroy—is among the worst in the majors, and should anyone miss time due to injuries, Milwaukee has one of the worst benches in the league with Carlos Gomez, Norichika Aoki, Cesar Izturis, and George Kotarras.



CF Nyjer Morgan

NL Central — 3. Milwaukee Brewers

after signing him to a massive three-year deal (reminiscent of Randy Wolf's \$29.75 million deal two winters ago). But even if one or two of their young players do break out, they'll be far from a great offense.

The Milwaukee Brewers are treading on dangerous ground. Because of the magnitude of their personnel losses, it doesn't look like they'll be awfully competitive in 2011. And with no promising hitters coming along in the foreseeable future and a commitment to 33-year old Aramis Ramirez, I'm not sure what their future holds. The team is too talented to blow up the core for prospects, and the division is too weak to drop out of a potential playoff race. But the team is not built to win a World Series, which is, of course, the ultimate goal.

Nevertheless, I remain optimistic about Brewers for two

reasons. First, the core players—Braun, Greinke, Weeks, Gallardo, and Hart—are all under 30, and they all have room to grow. While they may not all be able to stay under long-term contracts, I expect a majority to be around for the long-haul. Second, the NL Central is not built to last. The Cubs, Pirates, and Astros stink, while the Reds will likely lose Joey Votto in the next two off-seasons, and the Cardinals are getting old.

The week before Prince Fielder finally left town, word leaked that he was considering a one-year deal to re-establish his value for next winter, when the Dodgers and Mets could offer bigger deals. The Brewers were momentarily let back in the picture. But that ship has sailed along with Braun's reputation and the chances of the 2011 Brewers competing.

GRADE: 88



Spotlight – Rickie Weeks

Two years ago we saw Rickie Weeks make the step up from an average Major Leaguer to a potential star. After posting a 8.5 WAR in his first five seasons, Weeks broke out with a 6.5 WAR while posting a .366 OBP and 29 long balls. But his 2011 season was cut short when he missed 44 games due to an ankle sprain, his potential jump to superstardom was ended. So in 2012, the pressure will shift to Weeks to replace Prince Fielder and hit 30 homers for the first time, while perhaps rediscovering his 25-steal speed.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Orlando Arcia – SS	Taylor Jungmann	RHP	Big Texas starter with three plus pitches. Dominant, needs to work around the plate.	B+
This is a very aggressive ranking for the 17-year-old out of the Dominican Republic; most people don't even have Arcia in their Top 15 prospects. But I believe that he is a potential breakout star. As a 16-year-old, he lit up the Dominican Summer League—where most players are 19 or 20. He's patient (30/20 BB/K ratio), he's speedy (13 steals in 64 games), and he can flat out hit (.294/.386/.459). He's still very young and yet to hit in the minors, but Arcia could be a top-5 prospect soon.	Jed Bradley	LHP	Low-risk with solid four-pitch mix. Great control, not overpowering. Innings-eater.	B
	Tyler Thornburg	RHP	Dominating stuff, often hard to hit. Size (5'11") and control can be problematic.	B
	Wily Peralta	RHP	Reliable, good strikeout numbers. Doesn't have much upside, likely a No. 3 starter	B
	Scooter Gennett	2B	Some power, some speed, some defense, but can absolutely hit. Prototype No. 2 hitter.	B-
	Jorge Lopez	RHP	Very young, but still projectable. Very accurate, but doesn't have top-notch stuff.	B-
	Cody Scarpetta	RHP	Good fastball and curve, but lacks solid control. May have to move to the bullpen.	C+
	Orlando Arcia	SS	See Prospect Spotlight	C+
	Kentrail Davis	OF	Great speed and above-average defense, but that's about it. Needs more patience.	C+
	Logan Schafer	OF	Great glove with solid bat, but little power. Above-average speed, likely 4 th outfielder.	C+

NL Central — 4. Chicago Cubs



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR	
David DeJesus						RF	96	
.240	.323	.376	60	10	46	4	2.2	
Starlin Castro						SS	194	
.307	.341	.432	91	10	66	22	3.4	
Marlon Byrd						CF	204	
.276	.324	.395	51	9	35	3	2.0	
Bryan LaHair						1B	90	
.288	.377	.508	9	2	6	0	0.3	
Alfonso Soriano						LF	193	
.244	.289	.469	50	26	88	2	1.3	
Geovany Soto						C	101	
.228	.310	.411	46	17	54	0	2.1	
Ian Stewart						3B	320	
.156	.243	.221	14	0	6	3	-0.6	
Darwin Barney						2B	252	
.276	.313	.353	66	2	43	9	2.2	
Reed Johnson						OF	278	
.309	.348	.467	33	5	28	2	1.2	
Tony Campana						OF	218	
.259	.303	.301	24	1	6	24	1.5	
Jeff Baker						3B/2B	304	
.269	.302	.383	20	3	23	0	-0.1	
Adrian Cardenas						2B/3B	NR	
.314	.374	.418	70	5	51	13	---	
Steve Clevenger						C	NR	
.250	.400	.500	1	0	0	0	0.1	

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Matt Garza						RHP	65
10-10	3.32	2.95	1.26	198.0	197	5.0	
Ryan Dempster						RHP	85
10-14	4.80	3.91	1.45	202.1	191	2.8	
Paul Maholm						LHP	107
6-14	3.66	3.78	1.29	162.1	97	2.1	
Chris Volstad						LHP	132
5-13	4.89	4.32	1.42	165.2	117	1.3	
Jeff Samardzija						RHP	76*
8-4	2.97	3.66	1.30	88.0	87	0.6	
Carlos Marmol						RHP	36
2-6	4.01	3.54	1.38	74.0	99	0.8	
Kerry Wood						RHP	85
3-5	3.35	3.59	1.29	51.0	57	0.5	
James Russell						LHP	94
1-6	4.12	4.77	1.33	67.2	43	-0.2	

*Relief Pitcher Player Rater

After 103 years of “Wait ‘til next year!” the Cubs future looked pretty bleak. For the fifth straight season, Chicago was staring at a payroll well over \$100 million with a better chance of seeing Michael Jordan manning left field than winning the NL Central.

And for the next couple of years, that’s mostly still going to be the case. As long as they’ve still got Alfonso Soriano’s, Ryan Dempster’s, and what’s left of Carlos Zambano’s contracts on the books, they won’t have the budget to upgrade and compete for a World Series.

But the formerly murky future suddenly cleared up when the franchise underwent a front-office renaissance, nabbing Theo Epstein from the Red Sox along with Jed Hoyer and Jason McLeod from the Padres. This sudden influx of bright minds—along with the exit of former GM Jim Hendry—signals that the Cubs mean business under new ownership.

During the new regime’s first off-season, the Cubs made two major

moves that signal changes abound for the North Siders: trading Zambrano to Miami and acquiring Anthony Rizzo from San Diego.

Carlos Zambrano has been—and still is—the most talented pitcher in Chicago over the last ten years. He’s got the same stuff that Kerry Wood and Mark Prior had during their primes, but instead of having his career marred by injuries, his temper did the trick. Big Z is beyond explosive. He’s nuclear. And in a losing clubhouse full of young, impressionable players, that just would not do for Epstein and Co.

The Cubs had to do everything in their power to get Zambrano out of Chicago. He’d drawn his final straw nearly a dozen times, but because his massive contract was even larger than his temper, he was nearly immovable. But the Cubs found a suitor in the Marlins and saved themselves \$2.5 million and a world of frustration in the process.

The first of the two moves proved that the Cubs would be willing

NL Central — 4. Chicago Cubs

to pay the extra dollar and to win—even if it means blowing up the team. The second big move proved they're on the path towards success.

In a strange series of front office switches, Cubs GM Jed Hoyer acquired Anthony Rizzo for the third time in his five-year minor league career. Hoyer drafted him in the 6th round of the 2007 draft as Boston's Assistant GM, acquired him from Epstein as the Padres GM in the Adrian Gonzalez trade, and finally acquired Rizzo from San Diego as the Cubs GM. Now, Rizzo won't contribute immediately for

Chicago, but he is the centerpiece of the Cubs' future—a testament to the front office's patience.

As you look up and down Chicago's roster, you're not likely to be impressed, unless you run the official Marlon Byrd fan site (www.byrdistheword.com). Outside of Starlin Castro, Carlos Marmol, and Jeff Samardzija, there aren't any keepers on the team. Geovany Soto and Darwin Barney are both still young, but neither are better than just good enough. Matt Garza is a Top-20 pitcher, but he's been shopped around all winter and is not likely a part of this team's long-term future.

“Given these criteria that we laid out, I simply cannot imagine a better person for this job than Theo Epstein.”

--Tom Ricketts, Owner

The process of turning around a perennial loser won't be quick. Every player on the roster except for Castro is on the trade block—even top prospects. Brett Jackson and Matt Szczur may have been major players in Hendry's future, but Epstein and Hoyer likely don't have the same emotional connection to them.

When Epstein took over the Red Sox in November of 2002, it took him two years to deliver and championship to Boston. But he inherited Manny Ramirez, Pedro Martinez, Jason Varitek, and Johnny Damon. There aren't any

players nearly of that quality on Chicago's roster.

Instead, Cubbies fans will have to show a little patience. After all, what's the difference between waiting 104 years for a championship and 107 years? For the next few years, Chicago will be treading water. When they chose Anthony Rizzo's promise over Prince Fielder's immediate, gargantuan impact, that point became even more evident.

The Cubs aren't close to competing right now. And to put it simply, they're not a top-20 team. They're so flawed across the

A Reason for Hope

I've said it several times before, but the Cubs now have the smartest front office in the league with Theo Epstein, Jed Hoyer, Jason McLeod and crew. That same group turned Boston into a perennial AL East powerhouse, so it's far from a stretch to suggest they can flip the Cubs luck and land them atop the weaker NL Central. Don't worry too much about the general lack of talent on the 2012 Cubs, they're stockpiling for the future. Look for smart spending in the draft and international free agency this year.

The Fatal Flaw

I don't think there's one fatal flaw with this team as much as an overall flawed team. Their veteran players have far surpassed their prime, and the young players aren't nearing their peaks yet. Also, Bryan LaHair, Ian Stewart, and Darwin Barney are going to get about 1500 at-bats combined. If that's not bad enough, Randy Wells and Chris Volstad will be tossing about 300 innings. It's not just that this team is untalented, but Starlin Castro is their only player in the pros with a promising future.



SS Starlin Castro

NL Central — 4. Chicago Cubs

board that I'd be more surprised to see the team with a winning record than I would to see them falling to fifth place. If not for the utterly dysfunctional Astros, they'd be competing for the honorable 6th place spot.

For what it's worth, the team is sound defensively with David DeJesus, Byrd, Castro, and Barney, but ultimately they don't have the offensive output to make up for their lack of strong pitching. After Garza, they have four rotation spots for Ryan Dempster, Paul Maholm, Randy Wells, Chris Volstad, and Travis Wood. That may not sound so bad at first, but that group has an ERA of 4.62. I just don't see an offense carried by Alfonso Soriano and Geovany Soto averaging even 4.2 runs per game.

There's going to be a lot of negative talk around Chicago, and rightfully so. This team is not good. They're aging in all the

wrong places, and most of the young players on the team (think Ian Stewart, Bryan LaHair, and Travis Wood) have been picked up off the scrap heap and have little future with the team. But before long, this team will take on an entirely new identity.

If there were one person capable of turning around a franchise, it would be Theo Epstein. And adding Hoyer and McLeod to the equation only makes things better. By June, I'd like to see Rizzo, Jackson, and even Josh Vitters up in the majors—The Cubs won't win with them in the minors, so they might as well see what they can do in the Bigs. Rome wasn't built in one day, and it'll take a while for the Cubbies to turn their luck around. But I'm nearly positive we'll see Chicago back competing before 2015. 🍷

GRADE: 82

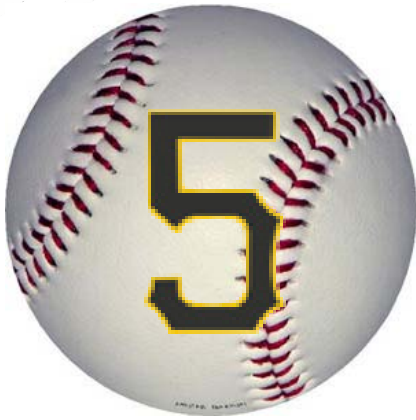


Spotlight – Alfonso Soriano

In the last eight months, we've seen the Cubs eat a majority of the contracts of Carlos Zambrano and Kosuke Fukudome just to get them out of town, so naturally the attention turns to Alfonso Soriano and the \$54 million left on his deal. He's still showing power—132 homers in his 5 seasons in Chicago—but his OBP dropped consistently over the same period from .337 to .289. He's best suited to be a DH, so Chicago's market is cut in half—I doubt they'll find a suiter soon unless they eat 95% of the money.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Josh Vitters – 3B	Anthony Rizzo	1B	Tough with a great bat, very nice power. Was not ready for a call-up last year at 21.	B+
There might not be a single more frustrating prospect than Josh Vitters. The man was drafted 3 rd overall in 2007, and he's certainly flashed potential. He's put up nice power numbers and continues to have just about the prettiest swing in the minors. But after five years in the minors, he still hasn't figured out the importance of patience and finding the right pitch. Since he's only 22, I'm not giving up on him yet, but he needs a good year in AA to stay on the prospect radar.	Brett Jackson	OF	Potential 5-tool player with great patience, athleticism. Needs to cut down strikeouts.	B+
	Javier Baez	SS	Great prep bat taken 9 th overall in 2011 with plus bat speed. May have to shift to 3B.	B
	Matt Szczur	OF	Good athlete with plus speed, defensive potential. Slap-like swing has no power.	B
	Dillon Maples	RHP	Nice 3-pitch mix, needs to refine command. 2-sport athlete can solely focus on baseball.	B
	Trey McNutt	RHP	Great athlete, big frame, but injuries held back production. Lacks a good 3 rd pitch.	B-
	Junior Lake	SS	Great athlete with plus speed, arm, growing power. Highly impatient, has high ceiling.	B-
	Dan Vogelbach	1B	Massive power with massive frame, which keeps him from being a solid defender.	B-
	Josh Vitters	3B	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Welington Castillo	C	Good power, patience, but currently only projects as a backup. Plus throwing arm.	C+

NL Central — 5. Pittsburgh Pirates



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Alex Presley						LF	133
.298	.339	.465	27	4	20	9	1.2
Jose Tabata						RF	207
.266	.349	.362	53	4	21	16	1.0
Andrew McCutchen						CF	25
.259	.364	.456	87	23	89	23	5.7
Neil Walker						2B	148
.273	.334	.408	76	12	83	9	3.0
Garrett Jones						1B	8
.243	.321	.433	51	16	58	6	0.9
Pedro Alvarez						3B	310
.191	.272	.289	18	4	19	1	-0.8
Rod Barajas						C	303
.230	.287	.430	29	16	47	0	1.3
Clint Barmes						SS	214
.244	.312	.386	47	12	39	3	3.1
Nate McLouth						OF	285
.228	.344	.333	35	4	16	4	0.2
Josh Harrison						3B/2B	308
.272	.281	.374	21	1	16	4	0.9
Chase d'Arnaud						SS/2B	372
.217	.242	.287	17	0	6	12	-0.2
Casey McGehee						3B/1B	242
.223	.280	.346	46	13	67	0	0.3
Michael McKenry						C	292
.222	.276	.322	17	2	11	0	0.1

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Erik Bedard						LHP	51
5-9	3.62	3.64	1.28	129.1	125	2.4	
Jeff Karstens						RHP	91
9-9	3.38	4.29	1.21	162.1	96	1.0	
A.J. Burnett						RHP	135
11-11	5.15	4.77	1.43	190.1	173	1.5	
Kevin Correia						RHP	133
12-11	4.79	4.85	1.39	154.0	77	0.0	
James McDonald						RHP	172
9-9	4.21	4.68	1.49	171.0	142	0.4	
Joel Hanrahan						RHP	12
1-4	1.83	2.18	1.05	68.2	61	2.0	
Evan Meek						RHP	43
1-1	3.48	3.75	1.89	20.2	17	0.1	
Chris Resop						RHP	88
5-4	4.39	3.67	1.48	69.2	79	0.3	

The Pirates' ship has been sinking for the past 19 years. They've won just 1295 of their 3009 games, good for an MLB worst .430 winning percentage. Long gone are the days of Barry Bonds and Bobby Bonilla and even the days of Jason Bay and Jack Wilson.

It's easy to look up and down the Pirates lineup and say that this team has less power than New York City during a blackout, but I won't go there. It would be easy to say that Pittsburgh's rotation has less heat than an Alaskan Winter, but I'm bigger than that. It would even be easy to say that there is less talent on this roster than budding boy band, but that's not how I go about my business. I'll just put it simply: this Pirates team is bad.

Pittsburgh's lineup may look terribly short on talent—and you're right. It really is. But they aren't completely devoid of talent. No, I'm not talking about their big off-season acquisitions Rod Barajas and Clint Barmes—good for a combined .302

OBP—I'm talking about Andrew McCutchen, Neil Walker, Jose Tabata, and Pedro Alvarez. Each has a little different story in terms of their future and present with the organization, but each has a chance to be special.

Andrew McCutchen may be the best Pirate since Barry Bonds. Those are big shoes—and cap-sizes—to fill, but McCutchen truly is an elite player. In his seven seasons as a Pirate (ages 21 up through 27) Bonds hit .275/.380/.503 with an average of 25 long balls and 36 steals. In just his first three big league seasons, McCutchen has hit .276/.365/.453 with 17 homers and 26 steals. Of course, it's highly unlikely that McCutchen will approach Bonds' 7.1 WAR per season in Pittsburgh—he's sitting at 4.3—and I certainly don't foresee him entering the conversation as the greatest hitters ever. But I do see his game taking another step up as a vital part of the Pirates' future.

After McCutchen, however, there is a huge drop-off in both production and potential. Neil Walker

NL Central — 5. Pittsburgh Pirates

and Jose Tabata may have received honorable mention for the 2010 NL Rookie of the Year Award (with Tabata's lone vote coming from—get this—a Pittsburgh writer), but neither of them are future stars. Walker has a solid bat, for a second baseman, at least, and could have a long, productive career as a Freddy Sanchez-type two-hole hitter with good enough defense, good enough power, and good enough on-base skills.

That doesn't sound like high praise at all, but the Pirates will take what they can get. Tabata has a much higher ceiling, and

Pittsburgh GM Neal Huntington could see that when he gave the young man a six-year extension worth upwards of \$37.25 million. He's a great defender next to McCutchen in right field with great range and speed. His bat, though, has been slower to come along with eight career long balls in two years to go with a solid .348 on-base percentage. But at 23, I believe Tabata has a bright future ahead.

Finally, there is Pedro Alvarez. The former number two overall pick hasn't exactly lived up to his \$6 million signing bonus he earned on draft day. His rookie campaign was a success with 16

“There are a lot of things we did right and did well this year compared to last year. It's definitely not where we want to be but we are headed in the right direction.

--Andrew McCutchen, CF

homers and an OK-at-best .326 OBP, but he was so bad in his sophomore year that he was sent down to AAA-Indianapolis in June after missing time with a quad injury. Strikeouts remained a big problem with him, and his bat disappeared with a .191/.272/.289 line. Of course, he tore up AAA, showing that he has nothing left to prove in the minors—he just needs to show he belongs in the majors.

Alvarez's third season will be a crucial one for his development. As a rule of thumb, I

never consider a major leaguer a bust before they've played four seasons, but if Alvarez doesn't right his ship in his third go-around in The Show, I would worry that he's just another Brandon Wood.

But the Pirates still have to fill out a lineup every day—just like any other normal team. There may not be a good reason to play the Bash Bros., Pt. II in Barmes and Barajas, but Pittsburgh really doesn't have any other options. They have no legitimate catching prospects above AA, and Chase

A Reason for Hope

Hey, the Pirates aren't so dreadful anymore. Now, they're merely uninspiring. They've got a handful of young players in the lineup fans can cling to with three spectacular youngsters on the way in Gerrit Cole, Josh Bell, and Jameson Taillon. For now, they'll remain at the bottom of the division, but before long—and by that I mean in three years, at least—we could see them competing for shot to maybe have a chance at trying for a Wild Card. And that's more than they could say at any point in far too long.

The Fatal Flaw

The fatal flaw for the organization as a whole is a lack of quality pitching. In the majors, they have an average starter in Jeff Karstens, fifth starter disguised as a #2 starter (Kevin Correia), two stop-gaps in A.J. Burnett and Erik Bedard, and two young pitchers with less potential for success than a Bud Light billboard in Salt Lake City (James McDonald and Charlie Morton). They have two potential aces in Cole and Taillon, but the rest of their young pitchers look like more future McDonalds and Mortons.



RF Jose Tabata

NL Central — 5. Pittsburgh Pirates

d'Arnaud looks more like a career backup than a young Honus Wagner to me.

In a similar fashion, the Pirates rotation is not only built to lose now, it's built to lose in the future. Jeff Karstens has turned himself into a quality #3 or #4 starter, but he's no way to anchor a rotation—unless you're looking to win the International League AAA championship.

Pittsburgh has plenty of help on the way from Gerrit Cole, Jameson Taillon, and even Luis Heredia, but there are no other keepers in this rotation. A.J. Burnett is a stop-gap rental, while James McDonald, Charlie Morton, and Kevin Correia look like they're headed to the bullpen in the next few years.

The bullpen is the lone bright spot for pitching in Steel City. Joel Hanrahan and Evan Meek may only be All-Stars because of MLB's strange rule

that every team needs to have an All-Star, even with home field advantage for the World Series on the line, but that doesn't change their combined 2.21 ERA in 2011. But if I were Huntington, I would ship off the duo for the biggest return I could. Relievers are so volatile, and closers are easy to find (just look at Hanrahan).

Year 20 into rebuilding, Pittsburgh has clearly made progress: they are no longer last in the NL Central. However, the Astros are switching leagues next season, so it looks like Pittsburgh is headed back to the cellar in 2013. That is, unless they can turn this team around. But even if all the minor league talent (improbably) pans out, Pittsburgh isn't escaping the basement for a while. This team is just too flawed down to its core.

GRADE: 81



Spotlight – Andrew McCutchen

Between disappointing former top-prospects (Pedro Alvarez, that's you) and washed-up vets (cough cough Rod Barajas), the Pirates are (predictably) short on talent. Again. They only have one above-average hitter: Andrew McCutchen. But he's not just an above-average hitter, he's a rising superstar. Luckily the Pirates were able to extend his contract, so for \$51.5 million, he'll be keeping Pittsburgh's ship afloat for the next six years. This move showed that the Buccos are willing to spend a little more to stay competitive.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Josh Bell – OF	Gerrit Cole	RHP	Three great pitches, no holes in his game. Should reach majors soon as a true ace.	A
When the Pirates grabbed Bell at the top of the 2nd round, few expected Pittsburgh to sign him, seeing as he sent out a letter telling teams he'd be playing at Texas next year. But at the 11 th hour (and 59 th minute), the Pirates got a deal done for \$5 million. If he hadn't signed, he would have been a Top-5 pick in 2013. He's an elite athlete who switch-hits with plus plus power potential, a great bat, and solid speed. I think he's a future multi-time All-Star, comparable to Mike Stanton.	Jameson Taillon	RHP	Pirates pitch him conservatively, but he has the same upside as Cole. Needs polish.	A-
	Josh Bell	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	A-
	Starling Marte	OF	Ace defender with plus speed, solid bat, and developing power. Discipline is bad.	B+
	Robbie Grossman	OF	Disciplined with solid speed and average power. All tools are good, none are great.	B
	Luis Heredia	RHP	Enormous upside, but he's only 17. Solid 3-pitch mix, stamina. Control needs work.	B
	Tony Sanchez	C	Offense took a step back in AA, power is not developing at all. Excellent defender.	B-
	Kyle McPherson	RHP	Old for a prospect (24), but pitched well thanks to elite control. Needs to work down.	B-
	Alex Dickerson	1B	Nice raw power and plate discipline, but needs better numbers to stick at first base.	C+
	Stetson Allie	RHP	Fantastic fastball, plus slider, but everything else is highly questionable. Future closer.	C+

NL Central — 6. Houston Astros



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Jordan Schafer						CF	275
.242	.309	.315	46	2	13	22	0.7
Jose Altuve						2B	350
.276	.297	.357	26	2	12	7	0.3
J.D. Martinez						LF	179
.274	.319	.423	29	6	35	0	1.5
Carlos Lee						1B	217
.275	.342	.446	66	18	94	4	3.2
Brian Bogusevic						RF	98
.287	.348	.457	22	4	15	4	2.4
Jed Lowrie						SS	277
.242	.303	.382	40	6	36	1	0.3
Chris Johnson						3B	349
.251	.291	.378	32	7	42	2	-0.8
Jason Castro						C	245
.289	.404	.316	6	0	4	0	--*
Jack Cust						OF	121
.213	.344	.329	19	3	23	0	-0.1
Jimmy Paredes						3B	273
.286	.320	.393	16	2	18	5	0.4
Matt Downs						IF	305
.276	.347	.518	29	10	41	0	1.4
Brett Wallace						1B/3B	255
.259	.334	.369	37	5	29	1	-0.2
Chris Snyder						C	144
.271	.376	.396	13	3	17	0	0.5

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Wandy Rodriguez						LHP	31
11-11	3.49	4.15	1.31	191.0	166		1.5
Bud Norris						RHP	94
6-11	3.77	4.02	1.33	186.0	176		1.8
Henry Sosa						RHP	98
3-5	5.23	4.77	1.44	53.1	38		0.1
J.A. Happ						LHP	131
6-15	5.35	4.69	1.54	156.1	134		0.3
Jordan Lyles						RHP	99
2-8	5.36	4.53	1.41	94.0	67		0.3
Brett Myers						RHP	77*
7-14	4.46	4.26	1.31	216.0	160		1.5
Brandon Lyon						RHP	48
3-3	11.48	7.15	2.40	13.1	6		-0.7
Wilton Lopez						RHP	62
2-6	2.79	3.43	1.27	71.0	56		0.5

*Starting Pitcher Player Rater

To be honest, I'm not quite sure which direction the Astros are headed in. They're clearly not trying to compete, but after trading off Michael Bourn, Hunter Pence, Roy Oswalt, and Lance Berkman, all they have to show is a struggling J.A. Happ, Jordan Schafer, Jimmy Paredes, and a handful of prospects. That's no king's ransom, let alone a prince's ransom. They traded their entire young hitting core, yet they didn't get any of the Braves' Big Four pitching prospects or Domonic Brown from Philadelphia.

Even with no clear direction the organization is heading, I'll give the Astros this: they realize that the team they've put together is really, really bad. They're not dropping a couple million dollars on the Jonny Gomes of the world—players who are just average and have no future with the team. Instead, Houston has opted to go with a complete youth movement. With the exception of 35-year-old Carlos Lee, the entire lineup is 27 or younger, and three of their starters are 29 or under along with

21-year old Jordan Lyles and 25-year-old Kyle Weiland waiting in the wings.

And to be fair, new GM Jeff Lunhow is the last person to blame for this debacle of a team. Ed Wade apparently did not plan well at all for the future of the team, which is evidenced by the absolute lack of talent throughout the minor leagues and, oh yeah, in the majors. To put it simply, it looks like the AAA Round Rock lineup accidentally took the wrong turn on I-10 and ended up at Minute Maid Park.

Jordan Schafer. J.D. Martinez. Brian Bogusevic. Fernando Martinez. Jack Cust. The Astros outfield isn't just bad, it's made up of cast-offs from the Mets, Mariners, and Braves. Again, I give Houston all the credit in the world for not shelling out a few extra million dollars so they could tread water with Austin Kearns, Rick Ankiel, and Scott Hairston, but at the same time I don't see any of the outfielders on roster making a lasting difference with Houston other than perhaps J.D. Martinez.

NL Central — 6. Houston Astros

It's going to be a long and drawn out process to fix a team in a hole as deep as the Astros, but I think they are at least getting on the right track. In a league full of bright minds, it's important to think outside the box, and that's at least what Houston tried to do this winter. With a rather large amount of overhaul in the front office, Houston had some major reworking to do. And with an open position at scouting director, the Astros interviewed ESPN Insider and former Blue Jays exec Keith Law for the position.

It was a bit of a risky move; Law hadn't been in a front office

in six years, but I believe it could have really helped put this team back on track. An excellent baseball mind—both in the scouting realm and statistical side—Law would have given the Astros a leg up over most scouting teams across the league.

Of course, the deal was never closed, whether because Law was looking for a better offer, didn't have his heart in the new job, or wasn't actually offered the position. But the point here is that under new leadership—specifically with former owner Drayton McLane out of the picture there is actually a snowball's

A Reason for Hope

The good news is that after this season, the Astros can't finish in sixth place ever again. In fact, they'll even have a solid shot at consistently finish in 3rd place, since they'll be sharing the AL West with the Seattle Mariners and Oakland Athletics. They're certainly no world-beaters, and they have a tough road of rebuilding back to competitiveness, but at the very least, they don't have to fight through lots of mediocrity to the top, they get to beat out listless teams.

The Fatal Flaw

Sure, the 'Stros can beat up on the "offensively challenged" A's and M's, but they're not going to be able to escape the Wrath of Albert Pujols. The Angels and Rangers are heads above any team in the NL Central. It'll take much more than just smart spending and collecting tons of young talent to win in the AL—let alone the AL West—they'll need to spend bigger and trade better than ever before to compete with big markets in New York, Boston, Dallas, and Los Angeles.

“Hard times? Shoot, I’ve been through worse than this. Once you go through it once, you know how to handle it a second time. Hopefully it doesn’t happen to often.

--Brett Myers, RP

chance in Houston of this team turning around.

But for now, this team is poorly constructed and set to lose triple-digit games for the second year in a row. Their pitching is bad, and they did nothing to address it this off-season. Their offense is even worse, and, likewise, they didn't attempt to fix it. That is, unless you count bringing in Jack Cust as a pinch hitter a major move. But there isn't a point to spending money to improve a 60-win team up to 64

wins. That money would be better spent elsewhere.

As the Rays have proved over the past four years, the best way to build a team is from the bottom up: spending lots of money on scouting and player development, since homegrown players are cheap, under team control, and just as good as many vets. Since the arbitration clocks of former top-prospects Jordan Lyles and Brett Wallace have already started to tick, they need to get as much playing time as



SP Wandy Rodriguez

NL Central — 6. Houston Astros

possible, even if it's at the cost of benching their \$100 million man Carlos Lee. Once you've made a mistake of overpaying a player, you cannot compound your problem by playing him over a more promising, potentially better backup. That's how you lose money and games.

I implore the Astros to trade off any player over the age of thirty on the roster. Because by the time this team is remotely competitive, those players will be past their peak and primed to hit the open market. That means everyone from Brandon Lyon to Wandy Rodriguez needs to go. They may not get a lot in return for any of those players, even the once-highly sought after Wandy Rodriguez, but the more young players the Astros can accumulate, the better chance they have of hitting the jackpot on one.

This season is going to be beyond unbearable to watch for Astros fans. Aside from starts made by Bud Norris and Lyles, there really isn't much to look forward to. But as the upper-tier prospects like Jarred Cosart, Jonathan Singleton, George Springer, and even Delino DeShields start matriculating into Houston, there will be reason for optimism in town.

And if all else fails, the Astros fans can root for their team to really bottom out. They've landed the number one pick for June's First Year Player Draft, and they can root for Houston to pull a Nationals and that pick two years in a row. The only problem is that there's no Stephen Strasburg or Bryce Harper coming to Houston any time soon. Just Fernando Martinez and Jordan Schafer. 🍷
GRADE: 75



Spotlight – Jason Castro

After being drafted 10th overall in 2008, Castro reached the majors just two years later. His numbers weren't fantastic (he posted a .205/.286/.287 line), but he showed good plate discipline and played solid defense. The hope was that he could take "the leap" in his second year to become a much better overall player—but he tore his ACL in spring training of 2011 and missed the entire season. While it's still early in his career, this season will be a good look into what his promising future will hold.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Delino DeShields, Jr. – 2B The Astros' system is filled with high-upside hitters, and DeShields's potential matches anyone else's. The former first-rounder has blazing speed, a solid power ceiling, and great athleticism, although his numbers didn't show that in his first minor league season. But you can give DeShields a mulligan this time around since he's only 19 and played through injuries that year. He's got great athleticism, high potential offensively, and a great pedigree—his father was an 11-year player.	Jonathan Singleton	1B	Great bat, huge untapped raw power. Too aggressive at the plate, defense is average.	B+
	George Springer	OF	Potential five-tool player if he can hit for average. High ceiling, high risk, even at 22.	B+
	Jarred Cosart	RHP	Plus velocity, fastball, and curve. There are concerns about health and command.	B+
	Jonathan Villar	SS	Ace defender with plus speed, very toolsy. Bat hasn't come along, but remains young.	B
	Delino DeShields, Jr.	2B	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Paul Clemens	RHP	Solid stuff, but ceiling isn't too high. Could be a mid-rotation starter or just a reliever.	B-
	Domingo Santana	OF	Raw with huge power, but big contact and discipline issues. 6'5" frame hurts defense.	B-
	Brett Oberholtzer	LHP	Stuff isn't overwhelming, but he misses bats. Innings eater, back-of-the-rotation guy.	B-
	Telvin Nash	1B	Monumental power, plus bat and patience, but big strikeouts, defense are problems.	B-
	Mike Foltyniewicz	RHP	Great velocity with big frame, but three off-speeds need work. Big risk-reward guy.	C+



NL West

Chad Billingsley

Courtesy of sbnation.com

NL West

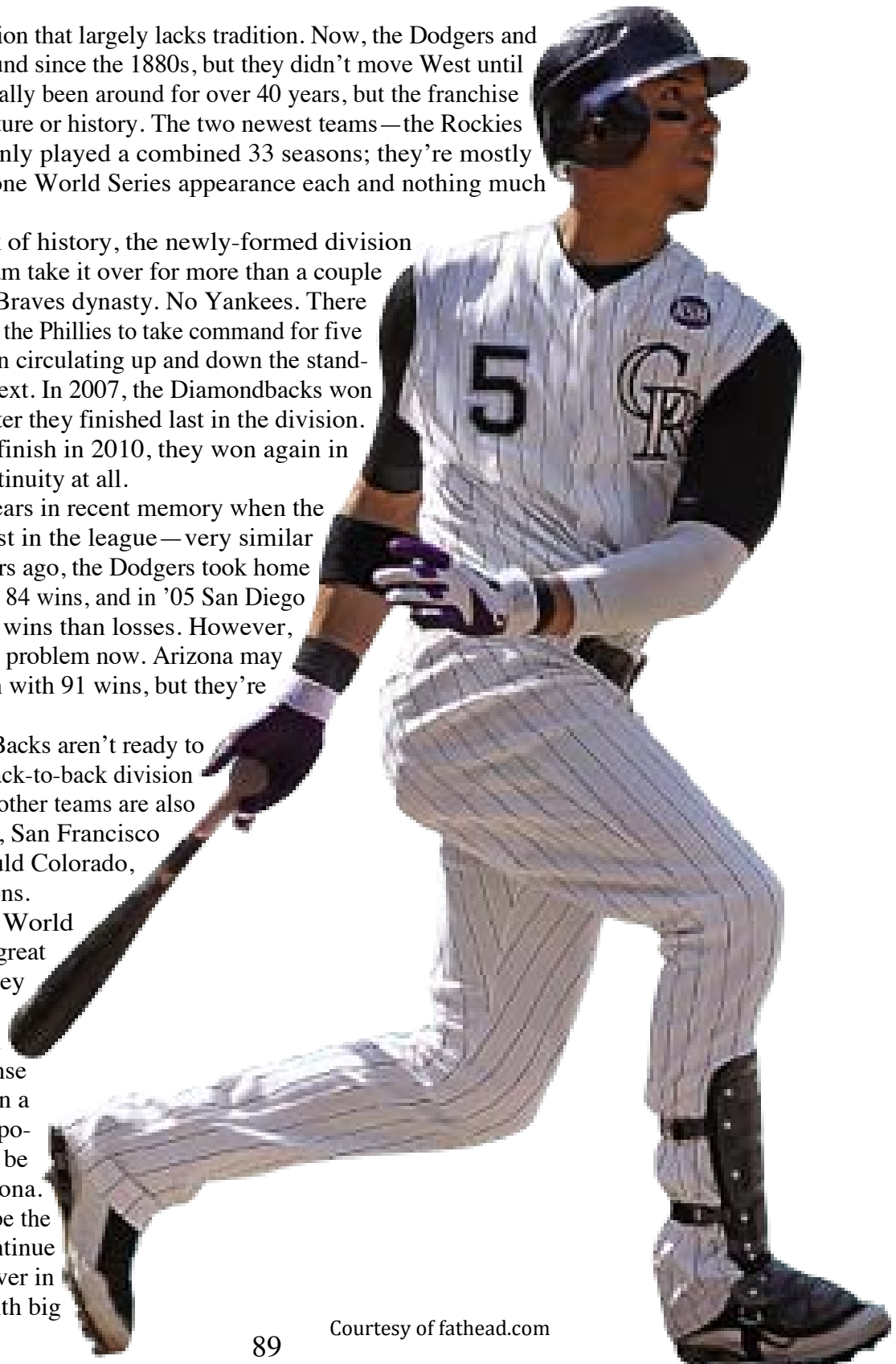
The NL West is a division that largely lacks tradition. Now, the Dodgers and Giants have been around since the 1880s, but they didn't move West until 1958. The Padres have actually been around for over 40 years, but the franchise is devoid of any strong culture or history. The two newest teams—the Rockies and the D-Backs—have only played a combined 33 seasons; they're mostly known as the teams with one World Series appearance each and nothing much more to show.

And with that lack of history, the newly-formed division has yet to have any one team take it over for more than a couple of years. There's been no Braves dynasty. No Yankees. There hasn't even been a team like the Phillies to take command for five years. Teams have just been circulating up and down the standings from one year to the next. In 2007, the Diamondbacks won the West, and two years later they finished last in the division. After another last-placed finish in 2010, they won again in 2011. There's been no continuity at all.

There have been years in recent memory when the division has been the worst in the league—very similar to the NFC West. Four years ago, the Dodgers took home the division crown with just 84 wins, and in '05 San Diego won it with just two more wins than losses. However, that shouldn't be much of a problem now. Arizona may have only won the division with 91 wins, but they're very young and improved.

And even if the D-Backs aren't ready to be the fourth team to win back-to-back division titles since the 1994 strike, other teams are also on the prowl. Specifically, San Francisco could be dangerous, as could Colorado, but for very different reasons.

San Fran won the World Series two years ago with great pitching—pitching that they still have now. Colorado, however, is a strong team because of their great offense and deep young pitching. In a way, the two are nearly opposites, but they should each be great competition for Arizona. And hey, who knows, maybe the Dodgers or Padres will continue the tradition of large turnover in the divisional standings with big surprise seasons.



NL West — 1. Arizona Diamondbacks



Lineup						Pos	PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR
Stephen Drew						SS	102
.252	.317	.396	44	5	45	4	1.9
Aaron Hill						2B	302
.246	.299	.356	61	8	61	21	0.8
Justin Upton						RF	19
.289	.369	.529	105	31	88	21	6.4
Miguel Montero						C	74
.282	.351	.469	65	18	86	1	4.3
Chris Young						CF	41
.236	.331	.420	89	20	71	22	4.6
Jason Kubel						LF	158
.292	.357	.427	55	8	46	15	2.8
Paul Goldschmidt						1B	108
.250	.333	.474	28	8	26	4	0.6
Ryan Roberts						3B	185
.249	.341	.427	86	19	65	18	3.6
Gerardo Parra						OF	160
.292	.357	.427	55	8	46	15	2.8
Willie Bloomquist						Util	367
.266	.317	.340	44	4	26	20	0.3
John McDonald						SS/2B	374
.229	.269	.308	21	2	22	2	0.6
Lyle Overbay						1B	253
.234	.310	.360	43	9	47	2	-0.6
Henry Blanco						C	224
.250	.330	.540	12	8	12	0	1.2

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Ian Kennedy						RHP	36
21-4	2.88	3.22	1.09	222.0	198	5.0	
Trevor Cahill						RHP	124
12-14	4.16	4.10	1.43	207.2	147	2.5	
Daniel Hudson						RHP	41
16-12	3.49	3.28	1.20	222.0	169	4.9	
Joe Saunders						LHP	130
12-13	3.69	4.78	1.31	212.0	108	1.0	
Josh Collmenter						RHP	29
10-10	3.38	3.80	1.07	154.1	100	2.2	
J.J. Putz						RHP	19
2-2	2.17	2.54	0.91	58.0	61	1.7	
Brad Ziegler						RHP	57
3-2	2.16	2.55	1.23	58.1	44	1.2	
David Hernandez						RHP	84
5-3	3.38	2.94	1.14	69.1	77	1.3	

I'm not sure if there's a division filled with more turmoil than the NL West. Last year, the Diamondbacks went from worst to first, while the Padres went from a game out of the playoffs to last place in the division. Since the divisions were realigned in 1993, no team has won the division three times in a row—only three times has a team even won the division twice in a row. But the D-Backs are looking to change that, and they have good reason to think they the start of a Western dynasty. That's because their team remains extremely young, and they've made improvements this off-season to stay young and talented.

Last season, Arizona shocked the baseball world by winning their division with the best defense in the league, a very good offense and strong young pitching. GM Kevin Towers took over and started to clean house by sending east defensive butchers and strikeout machines Mark Reynolds and Adam LaRoche. At the time, I was very much opposed to trading Reynolds

because teams often over-estimate the harm of strikeouts (which is just as bad as a groundout), and he had the best power on the team. But that move proved to be prudent as Ryan Roberts took over with half the strikeouts, plus defense, and a very good bat. The team didn't even end up missing Reynolds' power, as they finished 6th in the league in isolated power.

The other signature to a Towers-run team is a great bullpen. During his tenure in San Diego, he saw many an average reliever develop into an All-Star (see: Bell, Heath). During his first year, he took steps to fix Arizona's week 'pen. In 2010, the team had by far the worst bullpen in the league, which finished at -2.1 WAR. The next worst team was Seattle with -0.4 WAR. They even gave up over a full run more than the 29th ranked team by ERA—the Cubbies—with a 5.74 mark. You could say they improved last year, as they became one of the 10 best bullpens with newly acquired J.J. Putz, David Hernandez, Brad Ziegler, and more.

What's great about Arizona is

NL West — 1. Arizona Diamondbacks

that the key parts of the team are very young, even though they aren't quite at the talent level of the Rangers, Yankees, or Phillies. Justin Upton is 24. Chris Young and Miguel Montero are 28. Stephen Drew is 29. Each of their young studs has plenty of room to improve, particularly Upton, who should be entering the superstar realm sooner rather than later.

The young pitching, though, is what especially surprised me. Its success really puts the D-Backs in the driver's seat of the division. Ian Kennedy and Daniel Hudson both went from promising pitchers on their

second team to budding stars. They pitched exactly the same innings (222) with nearly identical WARs (5.0 and 4.9)—and they're only 27 and 24 years old with four to five years of team control before they hit free agency, respectively.

But unlike the 2010 NL West champion San Francisco Giants, the Diamondbacks didn't stand pat this winter. They upgraded their rotation in a big way. They acquired 24-year old sinkerballer Trevor Cahill for pitching prospect Jarrod Parker. There's a solid chance that Parker will eventually be better than

“That's the type of mentality we're going to take as long as we're here. We're looking forward to next season.”

--Justin Upton, RF

Cahill, but the Diamondbacks are ready to compete now, and Cahill will do a better job of helping out the club for the next few years than Parker will. Plus, they have three more fantastic pitching prospects in Trevor Bauer, Archie Bradley, and Tyler Skaggs.

While the pitching staff improved because of a big pickup and the natural progression of young pitchers, the offense got better largely by getting healthy. What I mean by that is the D-Backs had to play Willie Bloomquist and John McDonald way more than any team should be comfortable

with, since Stephen Drew missed the last two plus months of the year with a broken ankle. Drew should be back for most of the season now, contributing exponentially more than either of those journeymen could hope to.

Another big boost to the offense should come from an entire year of Aaron Hill. Thanks to a change of scenery and a new beginning after being picked up from Toronto, the man saw his hitting line improve from .225/.270/.313 to .315/.386/.492. In just 142 at bats, he produced 1.6 WAR, played above average

A Reason for Hope

This is essentially the same squad as last season, just with Jason Kubel and Trevor Cahill, along with full seasons from Aaron Hill, Stephen Drew, and Paul Goldschmidt. And while they got better, no other team in the NL West improved much. More importantly, though, if and when they make the playoffs, they have a great 1-2-3 punch for starting pitchers in Ian Kennedy, Cahill, and Daniel Hudson. They may not be household names like the Phillies' starters, but they put up similar numbers.

The Fatal Flaw

Young players can be so volatile, and many of the players on this team are young. Before last season, nobody thought of Kennedy and Hudson as potential aces, and we've seen the ups and downs of Justin Upton, Chris Young, Aaron Hill, and Stephen Drew. While their team is chock full of talent, there's nobody you can point to and say that they, for sure, will put up All-Star numbers. Ultimately, they're probably still talented enough to run away with the division, but there's cause for concern.



C Miguel Montero

NL West — 1. Arizona Diamondbacks

defense, and saw his 2009 game—which earned him a spot at the All-Star game—return.

One last move the team made this off-season was a bit puzzling. They gave Jason Kubel \$15 million to play left field—where they already had a very good player. Twenty-four-year-old Gerardo Parra was just coming into his own as an elite defensive outfielder, complete with budding power, solid speed, and a rapidly improving bat. He even put up 1.7 more WAR than Kubel last year. But now he's being relegated to the bench, where he'll toil away as an alternate, when he should be starting somewhere—maybe somewhere other than Arizona.

When you peruse this roster, it'll look very similar to the team that was so successful in 2011. However, this young team should improve even more, plus they added on a top-

of-the-rotation pitcher and power bat. If you liked this team last year, the 2012 reincarnation will be impossible to dislike. And if you doubted the team's success last year—as I, admittedly, did—it's hard not to root for them now.

The difference between teams like the Phillies and these Diamondbacks is that this team is talented, but vastly unproven. And the only way to remove that tag is by continuing to play well throughout the entire season. Justin Upton will need to continue at his 6.4 WAR season instead of dropping back to his 3.0-WAR 2010 production. It'll be exciting to see young guys like Paul Goldschmidt, Gerrit Cole, and Tyler Skaggs playing big roles, but ultimately this team's late-season success will come down to how well the veteran hitters step up to the challenge. ①

GRADE: 91



Spotlight – Ian Kennedy

In 2007, the Yankees had three star pitching prospects. One is now a failed reliever, one a shaky starter, and one a borderline ace. Of course, the first two are Joba Chamberlain and Phil Hughes, and the last one (Ian Kennedy) is the only one not in NYC. After never gaining traction in New York, Kennedy really took off in his second year in Arizona, tossing 222 innings with a 2.88 ERA. At the start of the season, I didn't see this dominance coming at all, so any sort of replication in 2012 would reinforce his future atop the rotation.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Archie Bradley – RHP The Diamondbacks second first round pick, Bradley was largely overshadowed by Bauer. But don't be fooled, Bradley could be the better starter when all is said and done. The two-sport star can finally focus purely on baseball and refine his stuff. If he can find a good third option after a killer fastball-curveball combo—perhaps a changeup—he could become one of the top pitching prospects in the game. With his athletic 6'4", 225 frame, the sky is the limit for Bradley.	Trevor Bauer	RHP	3 rd overall pick in 2011 with plus curve and mid-90s fastball. Workhorse, future ace.	A-
	Archie Bradley	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	A-
	Tyler Skaggs	LHP	Very young, very talented. He's durable, often hard to touch, and has a plus curve.	A-
	Matt Davidson	3B	Very good power, but average defender at best. Strikeouts remain a problem.	B
	Andrew Chafin	LHP	Could be top-of-the-rotation starter, but if changeup doesn't develop, he will close.	B
	A.J. Pollock	OF	Bat made a big improvement after missing 2010. Question is whether power will come.	B
	Patrick Corbin	LHP	3-pitch mix is average, but has command of all. Good stamina, just gets the job done.	B-
	Bobby Borchering	1B	Similar to Davidson, just with better power, less patience, and a worse glove.	B-
	Anthony Meo	RHP	Fastball has great life, slider has potential, but funky delivery may move him to the pen.	B-
	Adam Eaton	OF	An on-base machine (.456 lifetime) with plus speed and a whole lot of hustle, grit.	C+

NL West — 2. Colorado Rockies



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR	
Dexter Fowler						CF		119
.266	.363	.432	84	5	45	12	2.9	
Marco Scutaro						2B		97
.299	.358	.423	59	7	54	4	2.9	
Carlos Gonzalez						LF		31
.295	.363	.526	92	26	92	20	4.1	
Troy Tulowitzki						SS		13
.302	.372	.544	81	30	105	9	6.3	
Todd Helton						1B		46
.302	.385	.466	59	14	69	0	2.6	
Michael Cuddyer						RF		131
.284	.346	.459	70	20	70	11	3.1	
Ramon Hernandez						C		192
.282	.341	.446	28	12	36	0	2.0	
Casey Blake						3B		84
.252	.342	.371	32	4	26	1	1.1	
Tyler Colvin						OF		354
.150	.204	.306	17	6	20	0	-1.0	
Eric Young, Jr.						2B/OF		345
.247	.342	.298	34	0	10	27	-0.1	
Chris Nelson						2B/3B		321
.250	.280	.383	20	4	16	3	-0.6	
Jason Giambi						1B		53
.260	.355	.603	20	13	32	0	1.3	
Eliezer Alfonso						C		370
.267	.304	.320	2	1	9	0	0.1	

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Jorge de la Rosa						LHP	32
5-2	3.51	3.36	1.19	59.0	52	1.4	
Jhoulys Chacin						RHP	75
11-14	3.62	4.23	1.31	194.0	150	2.5	
Jeremy Guthrie						RHP	128
9-17	4.33	4.48	1.34	208.0	130	2.1	
Juan Nicasio						RHP	62
4-4	4.14	3.65	1.27	71.2	58	1.4	
Drew Pomeranz						RHP	NR
2-1	5.40	2.59	1.31	18.1	13	0.6	
Rafael Betancourt						RHP	14
2-0	2.89	2.53	0.87	62.1	73	1.6	
Matt Belisle						RHP	59
10-4	3.25	3.07	1.26	72.0	58	1.3	
Rex Brothers						RHP	42
1-2	2.88	2.88	1.30	40.2	59	0.8	

The Rockies were a complete disappointment last year. Despite having two of the best players at their respective positions—Carlos Gonzalez and Troy Tulowitzki—along with more veteran hitting and experienced pitching, they ended the year a shocking 16 games under .500. They had massive struggles defensively and really missed Jorge de la Rosa because of injuries and Ubaldo Jimenez because of poor pitching. Then, Colorado ended up trading Jimenez, which ultimately did the team in. But this winter, Colorado added to their depth of veteran hitting and young pitching to rejuvenate the team and put them right back in the thick of the NL West race.

One of the most curious off-season moves came in late January when the Red Sox sent Marco Scutaro to the Rockies for borderline-major leaguer Clayton Mortensen. Boston had already traded Jed Lowrie to Houston, so after the trade, they were now left with Mike Aviles and Nick Punto at short and \$6 million extra to spend. Unfortunately, they couldn't

get Roy Oswalt to come to Beantown, so they settled on signing Cody Ross, who is barely an upgrade over Ryan Sweeney and Ryan Kalish. The Rockies—the clear winners of a salary dump—now have a huge upgrade over a combination of Jonathan Herrera, Chris Nelson, and Eric Young, Jr., in Scutaro. At 36-years old, he's beyond his peak, but he'll bring consistency, a boost in defense, and a far superior bat to what they had last year in Mark Ellis.

But even before the pickup of Scutaro, Colorado's big addition this off-season was Michael Cuddyer. The former-Twin is replacing Seth Smith, who, after a career-best year in his first full season, was shipped to Oakland. While Cuddyer's hitting numbers may look eerily similar to Smith's (.284/.346/.459 compared to .284/.347/.483), Cuddyer has two things on Smith: consistency and defense. For starters, Cuddyer has a far superior track record with just over 2 WAR per season in the last six years versus 6.7 total WAR since

NL West — 2. Colorado Rockies

2007. Furthermore, Seth Smith hasn't had more than 400 plate appearances before this season, while Cuddyer has been consistently healthy and playing. And even though Cuddyer has been no more than an average defender his entire career, Smith proved to be below-average in the field over a full season, so the Rockies will get an additional boost in that department.

Cuddyer and Scutaro will solidify an offense that—for the most part—was trying to survive on potential over production. Tulo continued his excellent play with 6.3 WAR, 30 homers, and a .372

OBP, despite missing 19 games. CarGo also played well, but took a hit across the board statistically, most notably with a 2.4 WAR drop-off. But the young man is only 26, so I wouldn't worry about injuries, which limited him to 127 games. He's going to remain a superstar.

Yes, the Rockies also added Casey Blake and Ramon Hernandez, but those moves are more or less inconsequential. It's quite possible that before long both will be riding the pine with top prospects Nolan Arenado and Wilin Rosario starting in their places. But the real key to the lineup, in my opinion, is Dexter Fowler.

“We understand there could be changes that take place. You don't want it that way, but if we don't play well together, they have no other choice than to switch things up.

--Troy Tulowitzki, SS

A former top prospect himself, Fowler is entering his fourth full season in the majors. During that time, he's posted an impressive .358 OBP and striking power (.153 ISO) considering his 15 career homers. He's not quite a five-tool player, but he's flashed each of them, and he remains a great athlete. For the last few seasons, he's been remarkably thin at 6'4" 190. But this winter, he started a workout routine with Tulowitzki and Jason Giambi (presumably without Giambi's “quick fix muscle enhancing

techniques”) and added 13 pounds, while dropping 4% body fat. I believe that this year he'll take “the leap” and become one of the best center fielders in the game as his gap power grows into home run power.

But even more impressive than the solidifying offense Colorado added this off-season is the sheer amount of quality young pitching GM Dan O'Dowd brought in. They may not have a front-line guy like Ubaldo, but they have moments of brilliance (albeit followed by prolonged stretches of

A Reason for Hope

The Rockies have almost always been known as an offensive team. Partially that's because Coors Park is a notoriously hitter-friendly park and partially because they've built most of their teams around hitting. But now, they have a ton of young pitchers. Granted, outside of Drew Pomeranz, most don't have a huge upside, but among their group of seven young pitchers, a couple should be major contributors this year, and another should become a solid starter for the next few years.

The Fatal Flaw

Colorado just isn't at the same talent level as the best teams in the league. They don't have great pitching, and their lineup isn't good enough to blow away other teams. Basically, they're just above-average in all aspects of the game. That makes an above-average team, but above-average teams don't make the playoffs. The Rockies are too dependent on Troy Tulowitzki and Carlos Gonzalez on offense, and they don't have one pitcher they can depend upon to win the big game.



SS Troy Tulowitzki

NL West — 2. Colorado Rockies

wildness) from de la Rosa and a rising star in Jhoulys Chacin (proud owner of a 3.48 ERA in his first two seasons, despite half his starts being in Coors Field).

But after the first two rotation spots, the rest of the starters have been picked up in the last eight months. Most recently, the team traded Jason Hammel and Matt Lindstrom (an average starter and wild reliever, at best) for a very consistent pitcher, Jeremy Guthrie. Then, Colorado has the last two rotation spots saved for some combination of five new, young pitchers. My two favorites of the group came over last summer for Ubaldo Jimenez: Drew Pomeranz and Alex White, closely followed by Tyler Chatwood. Pomeranz, just 23, is ready to start a full season in the majors, and his upside is too enormous to ignore over a stop-gap pickup like Guillermo Moscoso or Josh Outman.

It's rare that a large group of young pitchers all pan out, but the Rockies' hope is that at least half of them will stick as long-term options. Chatwood's fly-ball style wouldn't seem to work, but maybe he'll make the proper adjustments to his game. Pomeranz has the upside of an ace, but he may end up just a lefty reliever this year (you never really know with Jim Tracy).

Predicting the Rockies to go from just over seventy wins to nearly atop the division is a large leap of faith, but I believe in this team. After all, I did pick them to win the division last year. I think that with their additions, the Rockies will be stocked with enough talent to make a run at the division title for most of the season. However, they just don't have the pitching of Arizona or a nearly strong enough lineup; they'll fall a little short.

GRADE: 87



Spotlight – Drew Pomeranz

Losing Ubaldo Jimenez may be tough for Rockies fans to swallow, but when they see this guy, it'll all be okay. Pomeranz has nothing more to prove in the minors (1.78 ERA, 1.05 WHIP, 10.6 K/9), and at 23 years old, he's ready to spend a full year in the majors. Unfortunately, there's an army and a half of young pitchers fighting for the last two rotation spots (Pomeranz, Alex White, Juan Nicasio, Tyler Chatwood, Esmil Rogers, Guillermo Moscoso...), so he must step up his game to not get a one-way plane ticket to AAA Colorado Springs.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Tyler Matzek – LHP Matzek was one of the top prep arms of the 2009 draft and Colorado's top prospect last year, but a loss of control and velocity killed his season (6.22 ERA and 1.80 WHIP). He's only 20 and has the same stuff, so if he can rediscover his mechanics, he could return back to relevancy. I'm more optimistic about him than I am about Christian Friedrich, another lefty prep arm who went in the first round in 2008. Friedrich didn't rebound from a rough 2010; I'd like to see Matzek improve.	Nolan Arenado	3B	Great bat with high power ceiling, strong plate discipline. Plus arm, average range.	A-
	Chad Bettis	RHP	Proved he could stick as a starter, lots of strikeouts. Plus fastball, curveball, sinker.	B+
	Tim Wheeler	OF	Broke out with plus power, 20 steals. Old (24), but works hard, often too aggressive.	B+
	Wilin Rosario	C	Great defender with a plus arm to go with big power. Lacks discipline, poor contact.	B
	Trevor Story	SS	Good power for a middle infielder, plus speed, arm. Poor footwork, walks often.	B
	Tyler Anderson	LHP	Polished, average arsenal, throws strikes. Should move quickly, but lacks upside.	B-
	Kyle Parker	OF	Finally shifted focus away from football, has plus power, but hits too aggressively.	B-
	Justin Rutledge	SS	Great bat, slightly better than gap power, and solid speed. Likely will end up at 2B.	B-
	Tyler Matzek	LHP	See Prospect Spotlight	C+
	Will Swanner	C	Very good power; low contact rates, high strikeouts hurt. Athletic, average defender.	C+

NL West — 3. San Francisco Giants



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR	RBI	SB	WAR	
Angel Pagan						CF	221	
.262	.322	.372	68	7	56	32	0.9	
Melky Cabrera						LF	228	
.305	.339	.470	102	18	87	20	4.2	
Pablo Sandoval						3B	64	
.315	.357	.552	55	23	70	2	5.5	
Buster Posey						C	78	
.284	.368	.389	17	4	21	3	1.6	
Aubrey Huff						1B	216	
.246	.306	.370	45	12	59	5	-0.6	
Freddy Sanchez						2B	254	
.289	.332	.397	21	3	24	0	1.0	
Nate Schierholtz						RF	233	
.278	.326	.430	42	9	41	7	1.4	
Brandon Crawford						SS	284	
.204	.288	.296	22	3	21	1	0.5	
Brandon Belt						OF/1B	175	
.225	.306	.412	21	9	18	3	0.7	
Ryan Theriot						2B/SS	342	
.271	.321	.342	46	1	47	4	0.7	
Mike Fontenot						SS/3B	264	
.227	.304	.377	22	4	21	5	1.0	
Brett Pill						1B	200	
.300	.321	.560	7	2	9	0	0.5	
Eli Whiteside						C	347	
.197	.264	.310	14	4	17	2	0.1	

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K	WAR	
Tim Lincecum						RHP	7
13-14	2.74	3.17	1.21	217.0	220	4.4	
Matt Cain						RHP	15
12-11	2.88	2.91	1.08	221.2	179	5.2	
Madison Bumgarner						LHP	30
13-13	3.21	2.67	1.21	204.2	191	5.5	
Ryan Vogelsong						RHP	45
13-7	2.71	3.67	1.25	179.2	139	2.4	
Barry Zito						LHP	134
3-4	5.87	5.60	1.40	53.2	32	-0.4	
Brian Wilson						RHP	26
6-4	3.11	3.33	1.47	55.0	54	0.6	
Sergio Romo						RHP	1
3-1	1.50	0.96	0.71	48.0	70	2.2	
Javier Lopez						LHP	61
5-2	2.72	3.16	1.28	53.0	40	0.7	

When the Giants won it all in 2010, they produced the 6th most offensive WAR in the league. Looking back, there weren't any great hitters on the team, but Aubrey Huff and Andres Torres had career years, Buster Posey and Pat Burrell played great in limited time, and Cody Ross and Edgar Renteria came up huge in big situations. But in 2011, it was a totally different story. They were the 22nd best offense by WAR—but they scored the second-least runs in the league. A team 3.21 ERA is great, but it's only going to help so much when the team scores 3.5 runs per game. This off-season, though, GM Brian Sabeen didn't make any steps towards bringing the offense back to their World Series glory.

Coming into the off-season, it was a near-given that the Giants wouldn't turn one of the worst lineups ever into the 1927 Yankees. Although they desperately needed an offensively-adequate shortstop, they don't have the money for a Jose Reyes-type star, and they don't have

the prospects to deal for a great hitter like Hanley Ramirez. At least, they don't after trading star prospect Zach Wheeler for two months of Carlos Beltran.

But even with those caveats, the Giants did a terrible job of reconstructing the offense. Instead of paying big bucks for Reyes, Jimmy Rollins, or even Rafael Furcal, Sabeen went after Ryan Theriot. The problem is that Theriot isn't an upgrade over anyone on the team. If they were looking for a weak-offensive, average-defensive infielder, they've already got three on roster in Brandon Crawford, Mike Fontenot, and Emmanuel Burriss.

Beyond shortstop, the Giants also re-did the outfield—but it, too, did not ultimately help the club. Sabeen acquired two switch-hitting outfielders in two separate trades: Melky Cabrera for Jonathan Sanchez and Angel Pagan for Andres Torres. The team inherited a player who had a career season last year (Cabrera's 4.2 WAR was 2.5 higher than any other season of his)

NL West — 3. San Francisco Giants

and a player who had a career year two seasons ago (Pagan's 5.5 WAR was a 2.9 win improvement). Landing Cabrera is fine, but they had to give up Sanchez, a 29-year old with elite stuff and high upside, despite wild control.

But what's worse than trading a good deal of talent for two average players is the way they're managing top-flight hitting prospect Brandon Belt. The team called him up last May, but he spent most of the year just pinch hitting and getting spot starts. That doesn't help a young player develop at all. Young players need regular playing time, whether

that's in AA, AAA, or in the majors. But from all signals, 2012 may be similar to 2011 for Belt.

The offense won't be good—we know that. After all, the Giants are going to live by the strength of its pitching. Outside of Roy Halladay and Cliff Lee, there may not be a better 1-2 punch in the league than Tim Lincecum and Matt Cain. Yes, they haven't got quite the pedigree of the first pair, but they're younger with more potential to improve. And for all the talk of Tim Lincecum's health risk due to his torque-filled windup, he's pitched at least 210 innings and 32 starts in every year

"I'm not worried about the 2012 Giants, and the Giants shouldn't be worried about 2012 either."

--Brian Wilson, RP

after his rookie campaign. Even 22-year old Madison Bumgarner showed he could be durable, as he threw over 200 innings in his third pro season. The only question remaining with him, however, is whether his health will hold up over the next two years following a workload spike.

But as you start to move towards the back of the rotation, questions start to arise again. Ryan Vogelsong had a career renaissance of sorts as he made his glorious return to the majors after five seasons off. A man with a career 5.86 ERA, he cut that number more than in half with a 2.71 ERA season. His numbers started to fade in July, but

ultimately his season ended strongly. Last year, I was strong. Last year, I was not a big believer in him because of his lack of a track record, and I remain a bit cautious predicting another strong year.

Speaking of inconsistent pitchers, none will be more on-and-off than the fifth starter of the rotation. Throughout the season, this will likely switch between Barry Zito and young Eric Surkamp, but unfortunately, Zito will get more chances since he is owed 55-times the amount of money next year. That shouldn't be the way things work out, but it's the sad way baseball works. The team has already committed

A Reason for Hope

What else can I say, the Giants are filled with pitching. The top of their rotation is great, even the middle of the rotation is great, and their bullpen is (you got it) great. It's so great, in fact, that with a tinge of offense, they could ride that pitching to the playoffs. Unfortunately, they don't really have much of an offense. But if one or two hitters really break out—maybe Buster Posey and Brandon Belt—San Francisco could form a lineup worthy of the playoffs, which they didn't see last year.

The Fatal Flaw

As I've stated up and down the Giants' preview, they're completely devoid of offensive talent. They tried to address that this winter by adding Melky Cabrera and Angel Paga, but they are no upgrades. What's even more discouraging is that every other hitter not named Posey or Belt doesn't have much (if any) room to improve. We know Aubrey Huff is just a fill-in type, and Brandon Crawford will never be an average hitter. The lineup is bad, and likely will stay bad.



3B Pablo Sandoval

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in the rotation—there's nothing they can do about that. But the man with a 1.94 ERA over 148 innings of minor league ball last year (Surkamp) will ride the oak behind a man who has a 5.87 ERA—and hasn't had an ERA under 4.00 since 2006—all because he's owed less money.

But even if the back of the rotation falters, the Giants still have one of the best bullpens in the game. It's hard to have a breakdown of San Fran's pitching without giving a shout out to Brian Wilson, and to be candid, I'm surprised I made it this far without mentioning his voluptuous beard. Even if he doesn't put up astronomically good numbers like he did in 2010, he's still incredibly intimidating. Plus the Giants have one of the most secretly effective set-up men in the game with Sergio Romo. And after Wilson and Romo the

Giants are still incredibly deep with Guillermo Moto and lefties Jeremy Affeldt and Javier Lopez.

In the end, this team is not very different from the team that missed the playoffs last year. In fact, I think the team is a little worse overall. I always like the phrase "you can't get better by staying the same," but you also can't get better by getting worse. The pitching staff won't be the same without Jonathan Sanchez. Cabrera and Pagan are no upgrades. And furthermore, the team will have to endure Brandon Crawford's anemic bat for an entire year. You're just not going to make the playoffs with only three average or better hitters in your lineup. The pitching will make this team good, but the hitting will hold it back enough to make them just average.

GRADE: 87



Spotlight - Tim Lincecum

Plain and simple, Tim Lincecum has been one of the most dominant pitchers in the league since his 2007 call-up. Since then, only Roy Halladay, CC Sabathia, Justin Verlander, and Dan Haren have produced more WAR during that time. But he's a free agent in two seasons and stands to make more than \$44 million through arbitration over the next two years. This man is irreplaceable, and they've got to lock him up before a) he becomes too expensive for their budget or b) he bolts because of a lack of effort on the Giants' behalf to retain him.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Jarrett Parker - OF Parker is one of my favorite prospects in the Giants' system, despite being fairly unknown. After signing at the deadline last year and not playing in the minors at all in 2010, Parker had a great pro debut. He showed off plus speed, good power, and a nice glove. Although he only hit .259, his .360 OBP more than made up for it. The main problem, however, was his 144 strikeouts, which illustrates problems with pitch recognition. With another similar year, he could be starting by mid-2013.	Gary Brown	OF	Blazing speed, great bat, excellent patience. Hasn't been challenged by Single-A pitching.	B+
	Joe Panik	SS	Can flat out hit, but only possesses gap power. Average arm may move him to 2B.	B
	Tommy Joseph	C	Aggressive power hitter with a strong arm behind the plate. Improving hitter.	B
	Heath Hembree	RHP	Great fastball, but slider, changeup lack precision. Limited upside since he relieves.	B
	Andrew Susac	C	Solid pull power, but gets on base. Better known for defensive prowess, strong arm.	B-
	Francisco Peguero	OF	Hits well for average but doesn't walk. Good speed and glove, but average power.	B-
	Eric Surkamp	LHP	Lacks great stuff, puts up good numbers with great control. Keeps pitches down.	B-
	Clayton Blackburn	RHP	Sleeper draft pick with plus velocity and plus control. Incredible numbers in debut.	B-
	Jarrett Parker	OF	See Prospect Spotlight	B-
	Kyle Crick	RHP	High risk, high reward prep arm with four potential plus pitches. Big frame, power arm.	C+

NL West — 4. Los Angeles Dodgers



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RBI	SB	WAR
Dee Gordon						SS		312
.304	.325	.362	34	0		11	24	0.6
Mark Ellis						2B		229
.248	.288	.346	55	7		41	14	1.3
Matt Kemp						CF		24
.324	.399	.486	115	39		126	40	8.7
Andre Ethier						RF		79
.292	.368	.421	67	11		62	0	2.9
Juan Rivera						LF		291
.258	.319	.382	46	11		74	5	0.7
James Loney						1B		153
.288	.339	.416	56	12		65	4	2.3
Juan Uribe						3B		272
.204	.264	.293	21	4		28	2	0.4
A.J. Ellis						C		100
.271	.392	.376	8	2		11	0	0.7
Tony Gwynn Jr.						OF		187
.256	.308	.353	37	2		22	22	1.6
Jerry Hairston Jr.						Util		225
.270	.344	.383	43	5		31	3	1.2
Adam Kennedy						2B		306
.234	.277	.355	36	7		38	8	0.1
Jerry Sands						1B/OF		166
.253	.338	.389	20	4		26	3	0.9
Matt Treanor						C		268
.214	.338	.291	24	3		22	2	0.7

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Clayton Kershaw						LHP	5
21-5	2.28	2.47	0.98	233.1	248		6.8
Chad Billingsley						RHP	64
11-11	4.21	3.83	1.45	188.0	152		2.1
Ted Lilly						LHP	20
12-14	3.97	4.21	1.16	192.2	158		1.3
Aaron Harang						RHP	102
14-7	3.64	4.17	1.37	170.2	124		0.6
Chris Capuano						RHP	80
11-12	4.55	4.04	1.35	186.0	168		1.6
Javy Guerra						RHP	44
2-2	2.31	4.44	1.18	46.2	38		0.4
Kenley Jansen						RHP	15
2-1	2.85	1.74	1.04	53.2	96		1.5
Matt Guerrier						RHP	82
4-3	4.07	3.43	1.27	66.1	50		0.4

What on Earth are the Dodgers doing? Are they unaware that they're tragically under-talented, or are they just refusing to be a non-contender in a major market? There are so many problems with LA that it's hard to know exactly where to start, but ultimately this entire mess emanates from the men upstairs: ownership and management.

For the second straight off-season, the Dodgers spent money like they were contenders, when really all along they were pretenders. The team spent nearly \$42 million on six players this off-season. That, alone, doesn't sound so bad, but the Dodgers didn't spend that dough on All-Stars, proven contributors, or even everyday regulars. No, they spent \$42 million on Chris Capuano, Aaron Harang, Mark Ellis, Juan Rivera, Jerry Hairston, Jr., and Adam Kennedy. Among those players, only Ellis has put up a WAR of at least 2.0 since 2009, and he couldn't even break a .290 OBP last year in Colorado. It's as if the team has a budget for multiple

players every winter—yet it's never big enough to land a star player.

The problem with the Dodgers continually bringing in overpriced veterans is that they don't actually improve the team for the long run. Sure, it's entirely feasible to keep adding 30-something year olds to short-term, medium-priced deals and stay afloat (they've finished with between 80 and 84 wins four of the past five years). But if teams want to grow towards actually, you know, winning in the playoffs, they need to develop from within by playing homegrown talent.

Not only did the Dodgers drop \$22 million on Chris Capuano and Aaron Harang to keep their pitching staff mediocre, they dropped \$22 million to keep one of their top pitching prospects out of the majors. Last year, Nate Eovaldi tore up AA with a 2.62 ERA over 103 innings, earning himself a call up to the majors in August. The 22-year old appeared in ten games, including six starts, with a very respectable 3.63 ERA. At times

NL West — 4. Los Angeles Dodgers

he struggled with his control (see his 23/20 K/BB ratio), but he showed that he has promise and is ready to compete in the majors.

However, with Capuano, Harang, and Ted Lilly owed big bucks over the next two years and Clayton Kershaw and Chad Billingsley under team control until at least 2015, there's no room in the rotation for Eovaldi. But it's not just Eovaldi; soon Allen Webster will be knocking on the Dodgers' door, closely followed by Garrett Gould and Chris Reed. At this rate, there may only be bullpen spots open for that group when they're ready to

help out the Dodgers. The damage caused by LA management isn't just the poor pitching coming their way at the hands of Harang and Capuano, it's also coming from the opportunity cost of Eovaldi and crew not getting time in the majors. Hey, at least they didn't pull a Mets and spend \$12 million on Frank Francisco so that they could have a "proven closer," thus stealing chances from Kenley Jansen, Javy Guerra, and Josh Lindblom.

The same general idea applies to the Dodgers on the hitting side of the ball. The great Juan Rivera will be receiving at

"If we can put the rest of the pieces together next year and have a solid year, and people play up to they level that they can, we're going to be a great team.

--James Loney, 1B

least 500 plate appearances this year, but ultimately, what's his value to the team? He won't be in Los Angeles in two years, and he's certainly not drumming up any fan support. Really, he's no more valuable than any outfielder coming off of the bench. In particular, he's hurting second-year player Jerry Sands.

Sands was the top hitting prospect in the Dodgers' system last year after ripping his way through two levels of minor league ball. He got an early call up

in April, but didn't exactly put up stellar numbers. He only hit .253/.338/.389 and was demoted in June, and Juan Rivera got more playing time. How did Rivera do? He hit an eerily similar, but still worse .258/.319/.382. At just 24, Sands toiled away in AAA, while Rivera kept being trotted out in left field, accomplishing nothing for the 2011 team or future teams.

And lastly, the Dodgers also spent \$15.5 million on 34-year old Mark Ellis, 35-year old Jerry Hairston Jr., and 36-year old

A Reason for Hope

As a whole, the Dodgers don't have many great players, but they do have two players who are potentially the best at their position in the league. Matt Kemp doesn't field well for a center fielder, but he still is by far the best in the game at that position. Clayton Kershaw just turned 24, but he's already become one of the best starters in the league and perhaps the best lefty in the game. If he can repeat—or closely resemble—his production from last year, he'll be the no-doubt best lefty in the game.

The Fatal Flaw

Well, the Dodgers don't know how to spend money properly, they're too dependent on over-the-hill players, they have too many quality back-up players and not enough starter-quality players, and they still haven't figured out who the new owner of the team is going to be. Does that count as one fatal flaw? If not, the one main problem for the Dodgers is that they should be rebuilding, but they aren't playing many of their young players. That's not a winning formula.




SS Dee Gordon

NL West — 4. Los Angeles Dodgers

Adam Kennedy. Since star prospect Dee Gordon was named a permanent starter last year, the Dodgers don't have an elite infield prospect, but they do have a promising young player in Ivan DeJesus, Jr. The team's 11th ranked prospect, DeJesus cleaned up in AAA last year, hitting .310/.389/.432, but like Eovaldi, there's no room for him in the majors. He's got nothing left to prove in the minors, but no team has room for five middle-infielders on their 25-man roster.

The Dodgers have needed change at the top of their food chain for at least three years now, so once the ownership issue clears up, it's time for Ned Coletti to be shown the door. He's had his moments of brilliance between trading for Andre Ethier and Manny Ramirez and drafting Matt Kemp and Clayton Kershaw, but recently he's done

more harm than good. He spends all kinds of money—and while the aggressiveness is appreciated, he's aiming for the wrong type of player entirely. You can't be spending tens of millions of dollars every off-season on role players; money should be spent to bring in difference-making free agents and to lock up young players.

Dodger fans and the media can get as riled up as they'd like over LA's strange spending patterns, but at the end of the day, this team will be just OK. They have a pretty solid lineup with pretty solid pitching—both carried by young stars and good sidekicks in Kemp and Ethier along with Kershaw and Billingsley—backed up by a pretty good defense. I don't like where this team is headed, but they'll get a pretty solid record. At .500 again. 

GRADE: 84



Spotlight – Andre Ethier

Andre Ethier is the second best hitter on the team—by far. Matt Kemp is in a league of his own, but outside the pair of young outfielders, the next best hitter may be the consistently overrated James Loney. Consequently, this team is not built to win soon. And with the ownership situation still in a mess, I have a hard time seeing the Dodgers competing in the next three years. With that in mind, I think it may be prudent to trade Ethier for a boatload of prospects to revamp the system and build towards the future.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Zach Lee – RHP	Zach Lee	RHP	See Prospect Spotlight	B+
When they drafted him in 2011, few people thought the Dodgers could match Zach Lee's high demands and persuade him and leave a dual baseball /football scholarship to LSU. But in one of my all-time favorite baseball moves, Owner Frank McCourt found the extra money to sign Lee for \$5.25 million, since he knew his ex-wife and part-owner Jamie would have to split the bill. Now, he's the club's top prospect with plus control and a great four-pitch mix as a future #1 or 2 starter.	Nate Eovaldi	RHP	High velocity with plus fastball and solid slider. Command could stand to improve.	B
	Garrett Gould	RHP	Pitched very well after innings spike. Plus curve, fastball, needs more consistency.	B
	Chris Reed	LHP	College closer converted to a starter. Plus three-pitch mix, durability will be key.	B
	Alfredo Silverio	OF	Older for a prospect (24), but put up solid power, speed. Needs to show patience.	B
	Allen Webster	RHP	Good stuff, but okay numbers. Needs to improve command or get more movement.	B-
	Joc Pederson	OF	Lacks a great tool, but hits well for average while maintaining solid power and speed.	B-
	Josh Lindblom	RHP	Live arm who found his calling as a late-inning reliever. Big strikeout numbers.	B-
	James Baldwin III	OF	Raw, very athletic with plus arm strength, speed. Lots of power, lots of misses, too.	B-
	Angel Sanchez	RHP	Tore through A-Ball at age 21. Features mid-90s fastball, average secondary stuff.	C+

NL West — 5. San Diego Padres



Lineup						Pos		PR
Avg	OBP	SLG	R	HR		RBI	SB	WAR
Cameron Maybin						CF		151
.264	.323	.393	82	9		40	40	4.7
Orlando Hudson						2B		227
.246	.329	.352	54	7		43	19	1.8
Chase Headley						3B		66
.289	.374	.399	43	4		44	13	2.7
Carlos Quentin						LF		169
.254	.340	.499	53	24		77	1	2.6
Yonder Alonso						1B		112
.330	.398	.545	9	5		15	0	0.6
Nick Hundley						C		111
.288	.347	.477	34	9		29	1	3.3
Will Venable						RF		135
.246	.310	.395	49	9		44	26	1.8
Jason Bartlett						SS		241
.245	.308	.307	61	2		40	23	1.8
Kyle Blanks						OF/1B		201
.229	.300	.406	21	7		26	2	1.1
Mark Kotsay						1B/OF		345
.270	.329	.373	18	3		31	3	0.2
Logan Forsythe						3B/2B		249
.213	.281	.287	12	0		12	3	0.4
Jesus Guzman						1B		116
.312	.369	.478	33	5		44	9	2.3
John Baker						C		359
.154	.267	.154	0	0		1	0	-0.1

Pitchers						L/R	PR
W-L	ERA	FIP	WHIP	Inn	K		WAR
Tim Stauffer						RHP	54
9-12	3.73	4.03	1.25	185.2	128		1.0
Clayton Richard						RHP	95
5-9	3.88	4.21	1.42	99.2	53		0.3
Edinson Volquez						RHP	127
5-7	5.71	5.29	1.57	108.2	104		-0.3
Cory Luebke						LHP	17
6-10	3.29	2.93	1.07	139.2	154		2.4
Dustin Moseley						RHP	122
3-10	3.30	3.99	1.28	120.0	64		0.7
Huston Street						RHP	70
1-4	3.86	3.88	1.22	58.1	55		0.5
Luke Gregerson						RHP	38
3-3	2.75	3.40	1.37	55.2	34		0.2
Andrew Cashner						RHP	81
0-0	1.69	3.87	0.66	10.2	8		0.1

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Well, maybe in the Padres' case, how the once promising have fallen. After leading the division for 122 games in 2010—including trailing the division lead for less than a fifth of the seasons—they blew a lead that grew to as large as 6.5 games at the end of August. The pattern that lost them a playoff spot the year before continued in 2011, and their record more than flipped from 90 wins and 72 losses to 91 losses and 71 wins. They nearly won the division with elite fielding and hitting (7th and 3rd, respectively, in the league) along with solid pitching (16th in the league). But in 2011, their hitting, fielding, and pitching all fell to 15th, 7th, and 25th, respectively. And to make matters worse, the moves they made this off-season didn't help the team return at all to their successful formula.

For the second off-season in a row, San Diego searched for a way to replace Adrian Gonzalez. Two Decembers ago, they sent their homegrown slugger to Boston for a

package of prospects, most notably including first baseman Anthony Rizzo. Rizzo mashed in AAA, putting up a crazy good .331/.404/.652 line, but when he got the call to PETCO Park, his bat shrunk, as he hit .141/.281/.242. Either because of impatience or because of large turnover in the front office (GM Jed Hoyer and Assistant GM Jason McLeod left for Chicago and Josh Byrnes was named GM), San Diego thought it was time for a change. They traded young ace Mat Latos for a package of elite prospects—most notably including first baseman Yonder Alonso. And just one month later, Rizzo was out the door; he was traded to Hoyer and McLeod in Chicago.

With the Latos trade, the Padres waved the white flag, signaling that they weren't trying to compete this season. It's rare that you see a team trade a 24-year old pitcher with such great stuff as Latos, but the Reds also gave the Padres an awful lot in return for the righty. The Padres already had one of the worst pitching staffs in the game last year, and now

NL West — 5. San Diego Padres

they swapped their best pitcher for Edinson Volquez. I wouldn't deem Volquez bad—he should see a boost in production in the comfy confines of PETCO—he's just wildly inconsistent and can't stay healthy.

We've already seen their pitching devolve this winter, and the defense took a hit, too. Last year San Diego played excellent D behind stellar work from Cameron Maybin, Will Venable, and an amalgam of other above-average fielders, but Byrnes actually hurt his defense this off-season. His big bat that he added, Carlos Quentin, is a notoriously bad fielder. Try -37.2 UZR over the

last three seasons bad. Additionally, while Alonso may put up better offensive numbers this year, his defense is a full step and a half behind Rizzo's. At best, Alonso is an average defender. Last year, Cincinnati tried him out in left field and even at third for a game, but ultimately they decided they couldn't have him and Joey Votto on the team since they were both first basemen at the core.

Lastly, the offense didn't exactly improve since last year, either. Sure, Yonder Alonso posted better numbers last year in the Great American Launching Pad, but I expect him to struggle a

“We're excited about having a new uniform and looking forward to getting out there and seeing if we can put them to good use.

--Will Venable, RF

bit in his first full pro season. Plus, his new home stadium will suppress his numbers. Also, it should be noted that Jesus Guzman, the real incumbent first baseman, quietly cobbled together a solid year. In slightly less than half a season, he showed a very good bat (.369 OBP) along with above-average power, defense, and speed. What's even more impressive about his season is that he actually put up better numbers in PETCO versus on the road (.346/.412/.551 vs. .286/.336/.421). But because Alonso's arbitration clock is ticking and Guzman is three years older with less promise, Guzman

won't get much of a shot to defend his throne at first base.

Ever since the Padres traded Adrian Gonzalez, their team hasn't been the same. Really, the team hasn't been the same since they traded Jake Peavy to the White Sox in 2009. They're going to struggle this year—it's not going to be pretty.

Their main problem is just a lack of pitching, which is extra surprising considering the ballpark they play half their games in. The two best pitchers they've had over the past two decades—Peavy and Latos—are gone, and all they've got to show

A Reason for Hope

The Padres team doesn't look great now, but they're young with great reinforcements on the way. Just on the major league team, Cameron Maybin, Yonder Alonso, Will Venable, and Chase Headley appear to be keepers, and they have five more great prospects on the way. Add on the seventh pick in this June's draft, and the Padres could have the deepest minor league system in the league. It'll take a few years for all of this talent to make an impact, but it'll be well worth the wait.

The Fatal Flaw

The easy answer is that the Padres are just short on talent right now, but a lack of consistent pitching is what's going to really hurt them. They'll get flashes of brilliance from Clayton Kershaw and perhaps Edinson Volquez, but there will be too many 5-inning, 5-run outings from their starters for them to contend. I'd like to see Joe Wieland, Robby Erlin, and perhaps Casey Kelly get starts in the middle of the season because they could use the development and won't be any worse than Dustin Moseley.




2B Orlando Hudson

NL West — 5. San Diego Padres

is a castoff (Volquez), a journeyman (Dustin Moseley), and a mostly disappointing former first-rounder (Tim Stauffer). They do have two promising pitchers in young lefties Clayton Richard—acquired three years ago for Peavy—and Cory Luebke, who had a very good year with standard statistics (3.29 ERA), but a fantastic year by sabermetric standards (2.93 FIP).

Now, all hope is not lost in San Diego. While they may be lacking talent at the major league level, they've got one of the five-best minor league systems in the game. They've got five good-to-elite hitters who will make an impact in the next two to three years (Alonso, Rymer Liriano, Yasmani Grandal, Jedd Gyorko, and Cory Spangenberg) along with a similar depth of young pitching. In terms of young hurlers, Joe

Wieland and Robbie Ross could help out San Diego as soon as this year, while Casey Kelly, Joe Ross, and Keyvius Sampson may have a bigger impact a few years after Wieland and Ross.

Now is not the time for San Diego; Josh Byrnes showed that early on this off-season by shipping Latos out of town. Their solid offense will look poor because of where they play most of their games (San Diego, San Francisco, and Los Angeles give up 17% less runs than all other stadiums), while their poor pitching will continue to look below-average. But soon, they'll be back on track with their influx of young talent. Plus, it's not as if the Diamondbacks have as tight a stranglehold on the division as the Rangers and Angels do on the AL West. The Padres will have their chance soon. 

GRADE: 79



Spotlight – Yonder Alonso

San Diego gave up on elite first base prospect Anthony Rizzo this winter, handing Yonder Alonso the keys to their car. While the Padres won't be playoff contenders this season, it'll be key to see how well Alonso adjusts to a full season in the majors. Last year, he tore up AAA with a .860 OPS before hitting even better in the majors with a .943 OPS. But now that he's switching to one of the most notorious pitching ballparks in the league, he probably won't see his numbers stay that high the whole year.

Prospect Spotlight	Top 10 Prospects	Pos.	Scouting Report	Grade
Austin Hedges – C	Rymer Liriano	OF	Incredible speed with a plus bat, patience. If his power sets in, could be a superstar.	B+
The 2011 draft featured an abnormally large amount of good catchers early on (Blake Swihart, Andrew Susac, Brett Austin, James McCann, etc.), but the Padres may have landed the second best in the group. Hedges is already a great defensive catcher with a solid offensive ceiling. Unfortunately for him, San Diego already has a stud catching prospect in Yasmani Grandal, so Hedges may just be a trading chip down the line like Grandal was this off-season for the Reds.	Yasmani Grandal	C	Great bat with developing power and plus on-base skills. Defense is still a question.	B+
	Casey Kelly	RHP	Numbers improved in 2 nd AA season. Only has a No. 2 ceiling; plus curveball, control.	B+
	Jedd Gyorko	3B	Puts up power numbers, great bat control, needs to cut down Ks. Average defender.	B
	Cory Spangenberg	2B	Won't hit much for power, but possesses plus speed, bat. May end up at 3B or OF.	B
	Austin Hedges	C	See Prospect Spotlight	B
	Joe Wieland	RHP	Medium ceiling, average stuff, but puts up great numbers thanks to plus plus control.	B
	Joe Ross	RHP	Prep arm with three solid pitches, higher ceiling than brother Tyson. Needs time.	B
	Robbie Erlin	LHP	Acquired with Wieland for Mike Adams. Very similar—superb control, OK stuff.	B
	Keyvius Sampson	RHP	Throws hard, gets a lot of strikeouts, but he needs a third pitch to stick as a starter.	B

2012 Baseball Preview — Player Rater

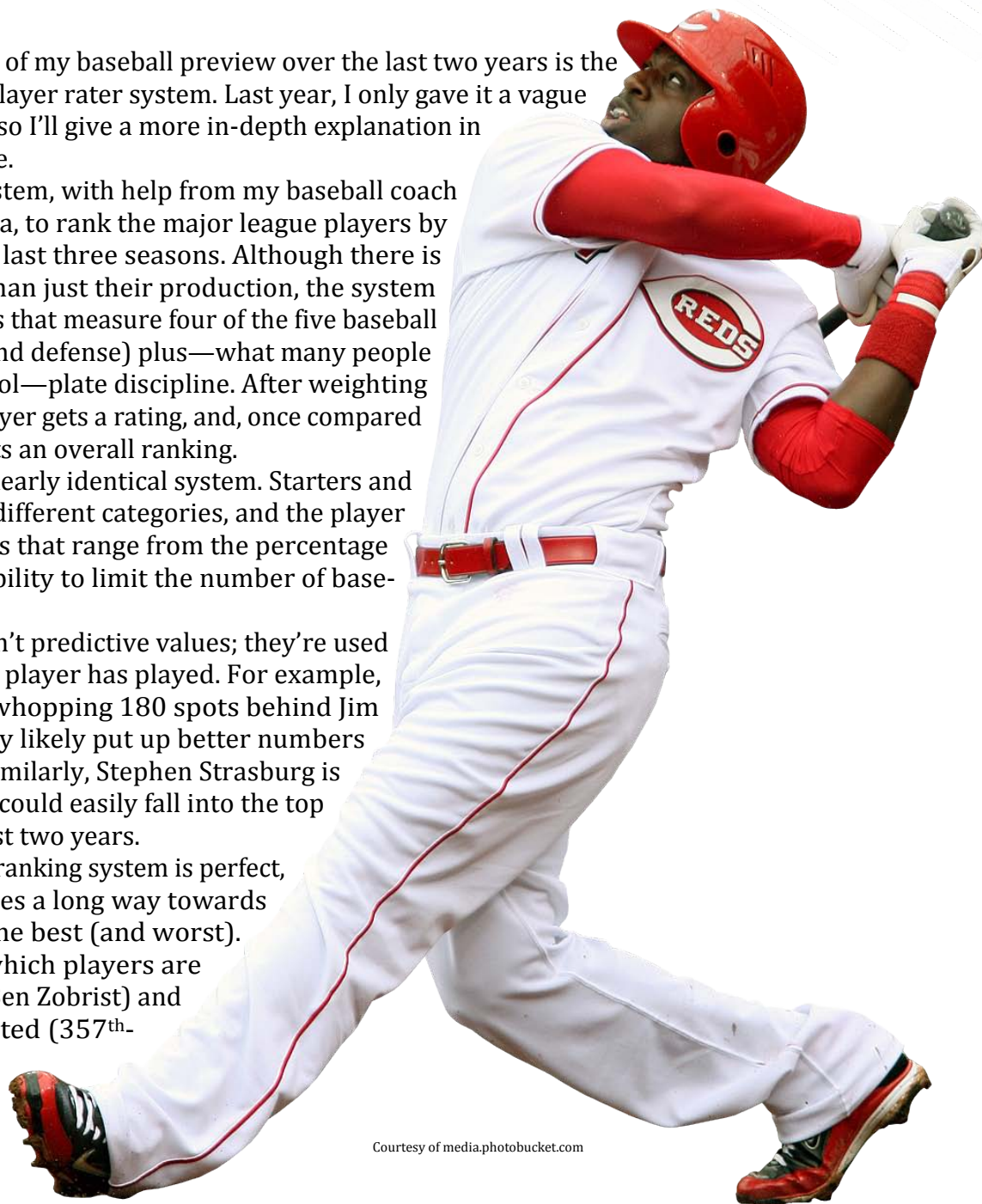
One of the newest parts of my baseball preview over the last two years is the implementation of a player rater system. Last year, I only gave it a vague one-sentence description, so I'll give a more in-depth explanation in its second year of existence.

I developed this system, with help from my baseball coach and math teacher Jeff Lucia, to rank the major league players by their production over the last three seasons. Although there is more to a player's value than just their production, the system takes into account statistics that measure four of the five baseball tools (bat, power, speed, and defense) plus—what many people consider to be the sixth tool—plate discipline. After weighting all of the numbers, each player gets a rating, and, once compared to all the other players, gets an overall ranking.

For pitchers, it's a nearly identical system. Starters and relievers are split up into different categories, and the player rater system uses statistics that range from the percentage of strikes thrown to the ability to limit the number of base-runners.

These rankings aren't predictive values; they're used to measure how well each player has played. For example, Eric Hosmer is ranked a whopping 180 spots behind Jim Thome, but Hosmer is very likely put up better numbers over the next two years. Similarly, Stephen Strasburg is "only" ranked 23rd, but he could easily fall into the top 10 if he was healthy the last two years.

While no statistical ranking system is perfect, I think that this system goes a long way towards show which players are the best (and worst). Also, the system shows which players are underrated (11th-ranked Ben Zobrist) and which players are overrated (357th-ranked Alex Rios).



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Statistics Glossary

AVG/OBP/SLG

This is the order in which basic hitting statistics are given.

FIP

A pitching statistic meant to imitate ERA that takes defense out of the equation by only factoring in stats that are controlled by the pitcher (strikeouts, walks, and home runs).

ISO

A hitting statistic that measures isolated power by subtracting slugging percentage from batting average.

UZR

A fielding statistic that measures runs saved (or lost) in the field.

WAR

A statistic that measures overall value by showing the number of wins added in comparison to a replacement-level player.