

All of the sudden, baseball season is just nine days away. We've spent all kinds of keystrokes here on The Blurbs analyzing the Indians. But what about their competition in the AL? Jarad Regano's going to break down the rest of the Junior Circuit for us, and starts it all off by looking at the AL East. The Red Sox reloaded, led by the pricy signing of Daisuke Matsuzaka (pictured). The Yankees are the Yankees. And the Blue Jays are a popular sleeper pick in the AL ...



#### **5. Tampa Bay Devils Rays**

2006 Finish: 5th Place (61-101)

Key Acquisitions: Akinori Iwanura

Key Losses: Damon Hollins

**Outlook:** Tampa Bay has been pegged as an up and coming franchise just on the outskirts of battling its way up the terrain of the AL East standings. Despite an abundance of minor league talent (and impact talent at that), the team remains too young to seriously threaten leaving their position in the basement of the division. Starting pitching remains the biggest question mark, with Scott Kazmir anchoring an otherwise forgettable group. The lineup will be exciting with plenty of speed at the top with Rocco Baldelli and Carl Crawford, and the potential for big RBI years for Jorge Cantu and Jonny Gomes.

**What They Will Need to Contend:** Contention for the D-Rays in the AL East is about as plausible as a unanimous exit strategy for Iraq. However, to be presentable, Tampa will need a long shot of many of their young players blossoming all at the same time. The '07 lineup will be even younger than last year's version, with Ben Zobrist replacing Julio Lugo and B.J. Upton manning the hot corner.

#### **4. Baltimore Orioles**

2006 Finish: 4th Place (70-92)

Key Additions: Danys Baez, Aubrey Huff, Corey Bradford, Jaime Walker, Jaret Wright

Key Losses: LaTroy Hawkins

Outlook: The Orioles have been marred in what is now a decade of losing baseball. Owner Peter Angelos continues to throw good money after bad, only to find the same results in the spend-happy AL East. While the money and lengths are debatable, you have to commend the team for trying to improve the bullpen. Adding Baez, Walker, Bradford, and Williamson should be a substantial improvement. How some of those contracts look in a few years may be another question. The offense, while not stellar, should be serviceable to put up enough runs to win. The rotation, however, needs to improve. Daniel Cabrera needs to make the next step this year, and that will ultimately depend on his control. Furthermore, highly touted prospect Hayden Penn may be counted on heavily.

What They Will Need to Contend: Probably a complete rebuild. The on-the-fly changes have been unsuccessful, and a large trade with Miguel Tejada may be the first step in the right direction. The duct tape approach may work in the NL West, but certainly not the AL East.

### **3. Toronto Blue Jays**

2006 Finish: 2nd Place (87-75)

Key Additions: Frank Thomas, Victor Zambrano, John Thompson

Key Losses: Ted Lilly, Bengie Molina, Frank Catalanotto

Outlook: The Blue Jays have decided that if you can't beat them, spend with them. Last year's budget busting off-season additions of A.J. Burnett and B.J. Ryan were outdone by a lavish extension to outfielder Vernon Wells this winter. This came very shortly after it was presumed that Wells' time up north was running out. The addition of Frank Thomas completes a solid, but injury prone middle of the order for the Jays. Troy Glaus should be right next to Thomas in both the lineup and at some point during the year, hospital bed. Roy Halladay and A.J. Burnett, though, offer one of the most lethal 1-2 punches in the big leagues. The loss of Ted Lilly, though, in an overpriced deal with the Cubs, may hurt more than the Jays think.

What They Will Need to Contend: On paper, Toronto may be inching towards the Big Two. They will depend heavily on health, though, as many of their key players have had significant bouts with injuries in the past. A third starter stepping up would also help the Jays chances at getting back into playing in October.

### **2. New York Yankees**

2006 Finish: 2nd Place (97-65)

Key Additions: Andy Pettitte, Doug Mientkiewicz

Key Losses: Randy Johnson, Gary Sheffield, Craig Wilson, Jaret Wright

Outlook: Who are these guys, the Pittsburgh Pirates or the New York Yankees? In one of the craziest free agent markets in recent history, the Bronx bombers were more interested in selling off high priced veterans than handing out overpriced multi-year deals. The Yankees are making more of an effort to build their next wave of talent from within the organization. Step one was dealing off Gary Sheffield to the Tigers for youth, and followed that up by clearly stating that mega prospect Phillip Hughes will not be put on the block. Andy Pettitte will return to the Yanks rotation, and Dice-K runner-up Kei Igawa will fill it out. The lineup is stacked as usual, even without Sheffield's bat.

What They Will Need To Contend: With a \$200 million payroll, you are contending from Day One. While the commitment to youth strategy is admirable, it will be interesting to see how that holds true come mid-Summer if the Red Sox build a solid lead. I am sure GM Brian Cashman will hear a bug in his ear to make something happen if need be.

## **1. Boston Red Sox**

2006 Finish: 3rd Place (86-76)

Key Additions: J.D. Drew, Julio Lugo, Daisuke Matsuzaka

Key Losses: Mark Loretta, Alex Gonzalez

Outlook: It appears the Sox were not comfortable with their 3rd place finish in the division last year. Just an outsiders thought, as they spent more money to just talk with a player than some teams spend on an entire year's payroll. After inking Dice-K and moving Jonathan Papelbon into a starter's role, the rotation in Boston has a chance to be plain sick. Theo Epstein did not stop there though. The Sox upgraded at both shortstop and in the outfield, acquiring Julio Lugo and J.D. Drew. With a stacked offense elsewhere, Justin Pedroia should be able to ease his way into his second base role.

What They Will Need To Contend: The back end of the Red Sox bullpen may be the only real concern. Joel Pineiro will start the season as the unlikely closer. The starters will go deep into games though, and the Sox have deep pockets and other options to look for a stopper. The Red Sox probably bought their way to an AL East title this year.