

It's Cardinals vs Mets tonight, and then the rest of the league gets things started tomorrow. Baseball season is back. And with that, Jarad Regano wraps up his division by division preview of the American League with a look at the AL West ... which is really a division where any one of the four teams can win it.



4. Oakland Athletics

2006 Finish: 1st Place (93-69)

Key Additions: Mike Piazza, Shannon Stewart

Key Losses: Frank Thomas, Barry Zito, Jay Payton

Outlook: The A's moneyball approach has kept the A's in contention for a long time, but I expect that trend to come to a screeching halt this summer. Oakland was unable to make a proactive move with Barry Zito as they did with Mark Mulder and Tim Hudson, and lost the valuable lefty in free agency for nothing. Zito's exit leaves a gaping hole in the starting rotation, with the lineup even older and more injury prone. Adding Mike Piazza and the aging Shannon Stewart to a lineup that includes Milton "81 on, 81 off" Bradley is a crowded disabled list waiting to happen. Billy Beane is one of the top GM's in the game, but payroll should catch up to him this year.

What They Will Need To Contend: Health will be the big question mark, and that may begin with Rich Harden. If he can remain healthy and continue to establish himself as a legitimate ace, he will keep Oakland in every game.

3. Seattle Mariners

2006 Finish: 4th Place (78-84)

Key Additions: Jose Vidro, Jose Guillen, Horacio Ramirez, Jeff Weaver, Miguel Batista

Key Losses: Gil Meche, Rafael Soriano, Joel Piniero

Outlook: Manager Mike Hargrove and GM Bill Bavasi are on borrowed time, but the Mariners may be an interesting story in the depleted AL West. The M's added proven vets Jose Guillen and Jose Vidro to complement improving prospects like Kenji Johjima and Jose Lopez. Ichiro will be playing for a new contract, and may be even more lethal than ever. The pitching staff should be improved, albeit unspectacularly.

What They'll Need To Contend: More than any other team in the American League, the Mariners need a fast start. That will give management some sense of stability that they right now do not have. If they do get out of the gates quick, I really believe they could hang around in a very weak division.

2. Texas Rangers

2006 Finish: 3rd Place (80-82)

Key Additions: Kenny Lofton, Brandon McCarthy, Sammy Sosa, Eric Gagne

Key Losses: Gary Matthews, Jr., Carlos Lee

Outlook: The Rangers are still targeting their philosophy at punishing teams with their offense. This year, though, they did make an attempt to upgrade what happens on the mound. In an unusual trade, they acquired ready to start youngster Brandon McCarthy from the White Sox. He will immediately upgrade the rotation, and if cohorts Kevin Millwood and Vincente Padilla can stay healthy, it may actually be a presentable one. The Rangers also outbid several clubs and acquired Eric Gagne. If durable, he and Akinori Otsuka can be a very lethal duo in the back of the Ranger bullpen.

What They Will Need To Contend: The aforementioned health of their pitching staff, along with the reclamation of Sammy Sosa. It looks like the tarnished veteran has gone from spring invitee to a spot dead smack in the middle of the powerful Texas lineup. Any type of return to form could pay huge dividends for the Rangers post season chances.

1. Los Angeles Angels

2006 Finish: 2nd Place (89-73)

Key Additions: Gary Matthews, Jr., Shea Hillenbrand

Key Losses: Adam Kennedy, Darin Erstad

Outlook: Sure, they did very little. Yeah, they did not come up with the middle of the order stick they promised their fans. But the Los Angeles Angels should still be the team to beat in 2007 in the American League West. Jared Weaver has a year under his belt. He, Bartolo Colon, and John Lackey make for a powerful front end to the rotation. In addition, the Angels will have a lock down bullpen that will not allow for many late inning collapses. While the big stick was never acquired (most notably Miguel Tejada's name was mentioned, among others), Shea Hillenbrand and Gary Matthews, Jr. should be an upgrade. The Angels are also finally turning the second base duties over to hitting machine Howie Kendrick, with numerous other prospects waiting in the wings.

What They Will Need To Contend: The team has taken a lot of heat, even from its owner, about not being willing to deal from its deep farm system to acquire missing pieces. I envision management doing just that this July, making the Angels a force not only in the West but primed for an October run.