

David Buona's look around the American League continues this morning as he puts the hated Boston Red Sox under the microscope. The Bosox have won two World Series and played in four ALCS over the last five years, and are loaded for bear once again this season. Their potent offense features reigning MVP Dustin Pedroia, Kevin Youkilis, and David "Big Papi" Ortiz and the team acquired John Smoltz, Brad Penny, and Takashi Saito this off-season to bolster their rotation and bullpen.



2008 Recap:

Last year the Red Sox Nation took away a record that was near and dear to the Tribe faithful, eclipsing our record for most consecutive sell outs, which now stands at 469 and counting (we were at 455). Driven by manager Terry Francona, the Sox have been something to behold over the last few years, winning two World Series and appearing in 4 A.L. championship series during his tenure. The combination of Tito's kid and GM Theo Epstein over the last five years have created a Red Sox hitting machine that has scored more runs in baseball than anyone else (5,352) and last year the teams ERA of 4.01 placed them fourth in the American League. The combination of slugging and hurling gave the Bo Sox 95 wins, but the surprising Rays had two more wins and won the A.L. East crown.

2009 Outlook:

The Red Sox are a lot like Pamela Anderson ... stacked. They've added several highly talented free agents who are coming off of injuries that could pan out in

very big ways. Brad Penny, John Smoltz, and Takashi Saito are all coming off of elbow boo boos, but Penny and Smoltz don't necessarily have to be counted upon as starters because of the Red Sox's extreme starting pitching depth (Wakefield, Clay Buchholz, Justin Masterson are all going to be in the bullpen). Saito will set up closer John Papelbon if his elbow can stay hinged, and hitters Rocco Baldelli and Josh Bard should provide insurance to an already potent returning lineup of hitters.

Hello: OF Rocco Baldelli, C Josh Bard, RHP Takashi Saito, RHP John Smoltz, RHP Brad Penny, RHP Junichi Tazawa

Goodbye: RHP David Aardsma, RHP Paul Byrd, 1B Sean Casey, 2B Alex Cora, OF Coco Crisp, RHP Mike Timlin, RHP Bartolo Colon,

If the Red Sox Were an 80's Movie They'd Be:

Back to the Future. If the Flux Capacitor in the DeLorean is completely fueled up with trash (or plutonium, apparently it doesn't matter which), not even Biff or some Libyan terrorists could keep these grizzled veterans of the post season from a return to glory years of 2004 and 2007.

The 2009 Projected Lineup:

CF Jacoby Ellsbury
2B Dustin Pedroia
DH David Ortiz
1B Kevin Youkilis
LF Jason Bay
RF J.D. Drew / Rocco Baldelli
3B Mike Lowell
C Jason Varitek / Josh Bard

SS Jed Lowrie / Julio Lugo

Last year the Red Sox batted .280 as a team, and shockingly enough several players had down years that could easily raise that number up a few points. Speedy leadoff hitter Jacoby Ellsbury has .300 potential with his ability to lay down the bunt and a short compact swing, so his .280 average from last year might be his jump off point. "The Captain" Jason Varitek barely hit his weight, going .220 for the season, 43 points off from his career mark. Even David "Bag Papi" Ortiz, whose wrist annoyed him all season, saw his average dip to .264, a 68 point drop from 2007. Mike "One-Nut" Lowell also so his average plunge 50 points from his 2007 campaign. So what's it all mean? It might be a rough year for opposing pitchers.

Even if J.D. Drew gets hurt (he will... he's only had over 500 at bats once in his 11 year career), the Red Hose should be just fine. Mark Kotsay is due back in May following back surgery and Rocco "They Used to Say I'd Be the Next DiMaggio" Baldelli was signed via free agency to pick up any slack and ease the burden on Ellsbury and Bay.

The middle of the order will be beast-like with David Ortiz being followed by Kevin Youkilis (.312 average, 29 HRs, 115 RBI) and ex-Bucco Jason Bay, who took a liking to the American League by responding with 9 HRs and 37 RBI in only 184 at bats. But preceding them all is Dustin Pedroia, who has already achieved Red Sox legend status by winning the AL Rookie of the Year Award in 2007 and the MVP Award last season, to go along with a shiny Gold Glove.

The only chinks in the armor, if you could even call them that, are the 8 and 9 holes in the line-up, with the aforementioned Varitek and shortstop Jed Lowrie bringing up the rear. Lowrie only batted .258 as a rookie last season, but he's a clutch hitter, driving in 46 despite only 260 at bats. Julio Lugo's contract (\$9 million) may take away some at bats from him, but Lowrie should still net 450 or so ABs.

The 2009 Projected Rotation and Closer:

RHP Josh Beckett

RHP Daisuke Matsuzaka

LHP John Lester

RHP Brad Penny

RHP Tim Wakefield / John Smoltz

RHP Jonathan Papelbon

Josh Beckett leads a battle-tested, experienced staff that is 8 or 9 quality starters deep. Injury problems are aplenty here though, with the previously cancer stricken Jon Lester probably the safest health bet of the bunch. Lester was phenomenal last year, notching a no-hitter, 16 wins, and a sparkling 3.21 ERA. Dice K was wildly successful too last year, which is also a good description of his style of pitching. He won 18 games and lost only 3 while striking out 154 in 167 innings, but he did issue the free pass an astounding 94 times. If you play fantasy baseball with WHIP (walks + hits per inning) as a category, well you just lost that one each week.

The bullpen of the Red Sox is even more daunting to opposing batters. Righties Justin Masterson, Clay Buchholz, Manny Delcarmen, and rubber-armed knuckler Tim Wakefield (he'll be in the rotation until Smoltz is ready come June) are all experienced and with the exception of Delcarmen, are former major league starters who can eat up innings. Japanese import Junichi Tazawa is built like former Red Sox pitcher Pedro Martinez and has the four pitches to match, but he's a kid at 22 and will undoubtedly spend a huge chunk of 2009, if not all of it, in the minors. Specialist Hideki Okajima continued his mastery of left hand batters last year, striking out nearly a batter per inning while setting up for Lord of Dance himself, Jonathan Papelbon.

The hurling Papelbon is the epitome of what a closer should be. He's gritty, has

electric stuff, shows moxie, and has an enormous ego that won't let him fail. Last year he saved 41 games and won 5 more, while allowing less than one base runner per inning and striking out more than one.

So Magic Eight Ball, will the Red Sox overcome the Evil Empire and the upstart Rays to represent the AL East in the playoffs? "Signs point to yes."