

The Blue Jays finished fourth in the AL East despite an impressive record of 86-76. After firing manager John Gibbons and replacing him with blast from the past Cito Gaston (who led the Jays to the World Series in 1992 and '93), the Jays played some inspired ball the rest of the way, compiling a 51-37 record. The leader of the team was and still is ace Roy Halladay, who won 20 games for the first time since his Cy Young award year in 2003. What do the '09 Jays have in store? David Buona tells us in his latest Look Around The AL.



2008 Recap:

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2009 Outlook:

The 2008 Blue Jays led baseball with a team ERA of 3.49, but injuries have decimated the rotation already and the hurlers will be hard pressed to match that success in '09. The lineup isn't exactly formidable, and features two green Jays in Adam Lind and Travis Snider, two players with tremendous upside but must be looked at with realistic current expectations. Overall, they'll be competitive but I would be shocked if they bettered their '08 record.

Hello: C Michael Barrett, LHP Brian Burres, RHP Matt Clement, 1B Kevin Millar

Goodbye: SS David Eckstein, OF Brad Wilkerson, C Greg Zaun

If the Blue Jays Were an 80's Movie They'd Be:

Rocky III. Hopefully AARP member Cito Gaston doesn't pull a Mickey and get pushed around too badly that he ends up sprawled on a trainers table following a heart attack, but Cito's Jays might really get "Clubber-ed" quite a bit in '09. The three teams that finished in front of them last year will probably be there again this season, and no amount of Apollo Creed training can change that.

The 2009 Projected Lineup:

SS Marco Scutaro / Johnny McDonald
2B Aaron Hill
RF Alex Rios
CF Vernon Wells
DH Adam Lind
3B Scott Rolen
1B Lyle Overbay
LF Travis Snider
C Rod Barajas / Michael Barrett

The Jays finished right in the middle of the league in batting, ranking 15th while hitting at a .264 pace. Alex Rios emerged as the Bluebirds best offensive threat, batting .291 with 91 runs, 79 RBIs, 15 HR, and 32 steals, and Vernon Wells rebounded from an atrocious '07 to hit .300 with 20 HR in only 108 games. A stint on the D.L. may again await Wells this season, since he's already out for a month with a pulled hammy, the same thing that cost his 54 games last season.

Two other much injured players from '08 will be expected to produce more in '09, as second and third basemen Aaron Hill and Scott Rolen hope to play in more than the 170 games they combined for last year. Former slugger Rolen only hit 11 balls out of the yard last year, and the oft-concussed Hill looks to be healthy and would like to get back to his '07 numbers when he clubbed 17 dingers and hit .291.

Shortstop and the lead-off spot are definitely question marks, with the scrappy Marco Scutaro expected to see the bulk of the time at both spots. Scutaro is a grinder, but like his backup and ex-Indian Johnny Mac, he should be a bench player. He's a career .261 hitter and his best year on the base paths was last year, where he had a sarcastically robust 7 steals.

Youngsters Adam Lind and Travis Snider looked to be relied on heavily this year, which may be a good thing for Toronto fans. Last year Lind batted .282 with 9 homers in 326 at bats, and former 1st rounder (2006) Snider batted .301 during his sparse 73 at bats debut.

Catcher Rod Barajas was great defensively last year, leading all AL catchers with a throw-out rate of 34.4% last year, and former Cub and Padre Michael Barrett was signed to a minor league contract with full expectations that he will make the club. As for first baseman Lyle Overbay, he 15 home runs. As a first baseman. 'Nuff said.

The 2009 Projected Rotation and Closer:

RHP Roy Halladay

RHP Jessie Litsch

LHP David Purcey

RHP Casey Janssen

RHP Matt Clement / Scott Richmond

LHP B.J. Ryan

Injuries in '08 have crushed the depth of the '09 rotation, with Dustin McGowan out until possibly August with a frayed labrum and Shawn Marcum going under the knife for Tommy John surgery after blowing out his elbow. He'll most likely be out all season.

Luckily for the Bluebirds Roy Halladay remains a healthy workhorse. Last year he earned 20 wins while pitching 246 innings and striking out 206. His ERA sparkled at 2.78, 2nd best in the AL after Cliff Lee, and he had the most starts in the A.L. than went at least 7 innings with 23. He had more complete games himself (9) than every team in baseball except for the Brewers (12) and the Tribe (9).

The rest of the rotation is mix of retreads and unproven youth. Jessie Litsch is the most experienced of the bunch, but he was sent down to Syracuse for a little while during the season due to ineffectiveness. Last year his numbers told a better overall story, ending with 13 wins and a 3.58 ERA. David Purcey was the Jays #1 in 2004, but he took his lumps last season. In 65 innings last season he won 3 games and ended with a 5.54 ERA. Casey Jansen was phenomenal in relief in 2007 (2.35 ERA) but missed all of '08 following shoulder surgery and hasn't started a game in two years. The final starter should be Matt Clement if he can finally come back from his 2006 torn labrum, but if he can't do it Scott Richmond, who had 5 late season starts last year, should get the nod.

The bullpen of the Blue Jays may be among the best in baseball, but keeping runs off the board probably won't be the team's main problem, it's scoring them. The bullpen's 2.94 ERA was the best in either league. Relievers Scott Downs, Brandon League, Jesse Carlson, Brian Wolfe, Brian Tallett, and closer B.J. Ryan all pitched over 22 innings last season and all had sub-3.00 ERAs. Also, former closer and set-up man Jeremy Accardo will return from a forearm strain that derailed his 2008 season.

Closer Ryan bounced back well from 2007 Tommy John surgery. Last year he recorded 32 saves while compiling a 2.95 ERA, and averaged a strike out in each of his 58 innings. As a credit to Gaston, not one of Ryan's appearances lasted more than three outs. His well preserved arm can be counted on again in '09.

So Magic Eight Ball, does the talented but overmatched Blue Jays have a chance in the stacked A.L. East? "Very doubtful."