



NATIONALS

Barry Svrluga's analysis and projected batting order

1
CF
Ryan Church

2
2B
Jose Vidro

3
1B
Nick Johnson

4
RF
Jose Guillen

5
LF
Alfonso Soriano

6
3B
Ryan Zimmerman

7
C
Brian Schneider

8
SS
Royce Clayton

9
P
Starting Pitcher

LF ALFONSO SORIANO Backup: Marlon Byrd

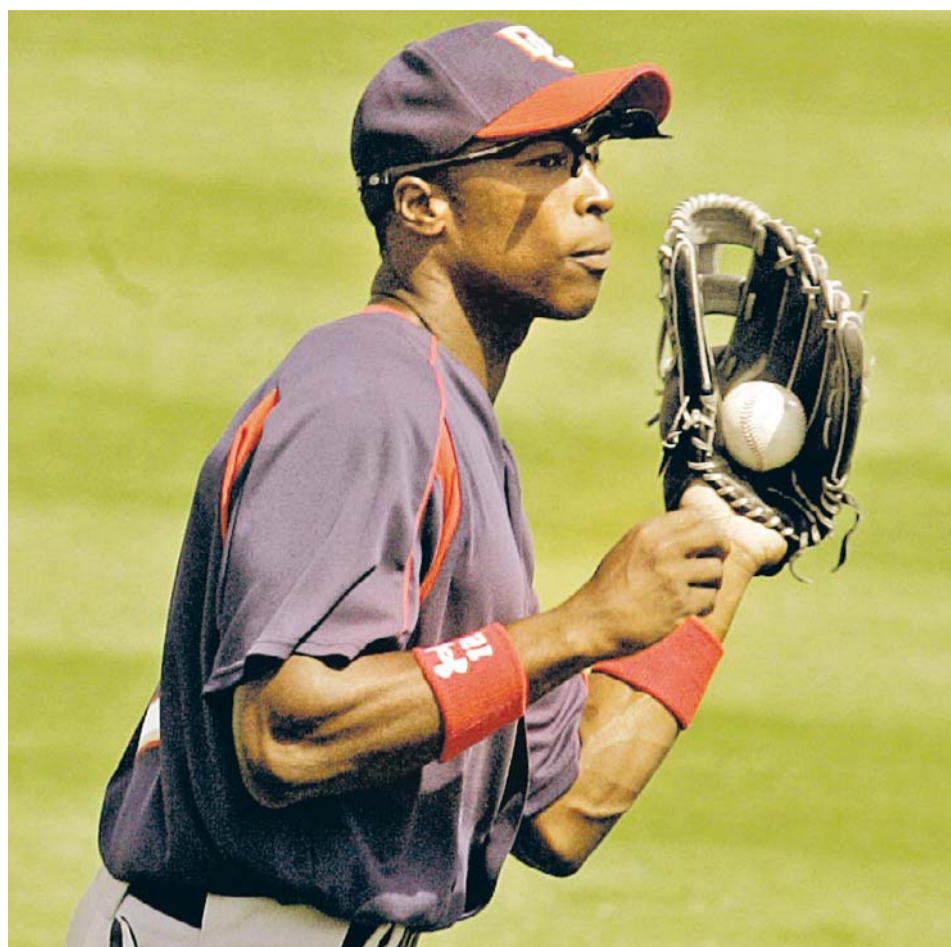
VITALS
Number: 12
Age: 30
Height: 6-1
Weight: 180
Bats: Right
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 156
At-bats: 637
Runs: 102
Hits: 171
Homers: 36
RBI: 104
Walks: 33
Strikeouts: 125
Average: .268
OBP: .309
Slugging: .512

'06 SALARY
\$10 million

WHY HE IS IMPORTANT

How Soriano adjusts to switching from second base to left field — a move he didn't want to make — will go a long way toward determining how well the Nationals play this season.



The controversy surrounded left field, but Soriano is in Washington for one reason: his bat. In his four all-star seasons, from 2002 to 2005, Soriano hit more homers (141) than any second baseman and drove in the second-most runs (388). Those numbers actually stack up well against left fielders over that period. Manny Ramirez has hit 158 homers in that span, and Soriano would be third — behind Ramirez and Carlos Lee — in RBI. There are two keys: Whether the mental adjustment to left affects his offense, and whether he can hit at spacious RFK Stadium. Much has been made of Soriano's home-road splits from last season because they were so striking — .315 average, .355 on-base percentage and .656 slugging percentage at Texas's Ameriquest Field. Those dropped to .224, .265 and .374, respectively, on the road.

1B NICK JOHNSON Backup: Matthew LeCroy

VITALS
Number: 24
Age: 27
Height: 6-3
Weight: 225
Bats: Left
Throws: Left

2005
Games: 131
At-bats: 453
Runs: 66
Hits: 131
Homers: 15
RBI: 74
Walks: 80
Strikeouts: 87
Average: .289
OBP: .408
Slugging: .479

'06 SALARY
\$3.2 million

WHY HE IS IMPORTANT

Last year, Nats fans saw a healthy Johnson for the first three months until a bruised heel cost him a month. This year, Johnson wants to show he can stay healthy for a full season.



He has the ability, and he always has. Now, he has the security, a three-year, \$16.5 million extension that could keep him in Washington through 2009. All he needs is now is good health. The problem: He has never had it. Whether Johnson finally goes through a season without a trip to the disabled list will go a long way toward determining how effective the Nationals' offense will be. "I'm not going to change the way I play," Johnson said, and that's good, because the Nationals like the way he hustles, and the fact that he had a .408 on-base percentage last year. His defense, particularly his ability to scoop balls out of the dirt, could save the infield between 10 and 15 errors. Offensively, his potential is to hit better than .300 with 20 homers and 100 RBI, and last year, he learned to pull the ball more. Yet he has never had more than last season's 453 at-bats.

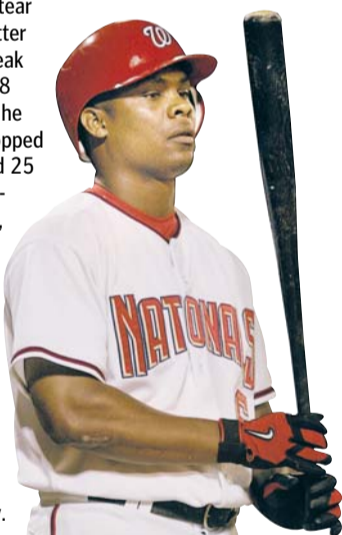
RF JOSE GUILLEN Backup: Michael Tucker

VITALS
Number: 6
Age: 29
Height: 5-11
Weight: 195
Bats: Right
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 148
At-bats: 551
Runs: 81
Hits: 156
Homers: 24
RBI: 76
Walks: 31
Strikeouts: 102
Average: .283
OBP: .338
Slugging: .479

'06 SALARY
\$4 million

No National played in more games than Guillen last season, yet no one went through the series of physical problems he did, either. He played with a bad shoulder that required surgery after the season, and was generally banged up throughout the year. The wear-and-tear showed. He was a much better player before the all-star break — when he hit .310 with 18 homers and 51 RBI — than he was afterward, when he dropped to .246 with six homers and 25 RBI. The key to Guillen's season, then, will be his health, and he left spring training still working his way back from that shoulder surgery, as well as a wrist injury that cost him two weeks. He badly wants a long-term contract to stay in Washington, and the best way to do that — he is a free agent at the end of 2006 — is to produce early.



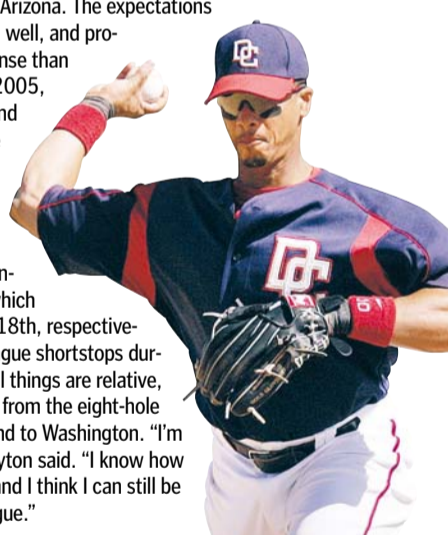
SS ROYCE CLAYTON Backup: Damian Jackson

VITALS
Number: 10
Age: 36
Height: 6-0
Weight: 200
Bats: Right
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 143
At-bats: 522
Runs: 59
Hits: 141
Homers: 2
RBI: 44
Walks: 38
Strikeouts: 105
Average: .270
OBP: .320
Slugging: .351

'06 SALARY
\$1 million

The Nationals signed Clayton, a 15-year veteran, to protect against an injury — or another season-long slump — from Cristian Guzman. Now, with Guzman potentially out for the year with a shoulder injury, Clayton could match the 143 games he played last year for Arizona. The expectations will be simple: Field well, and provide a bit more offense than Guzman's hideous 2005, when he hit .219 and had a .260 on-base percentage. In the six seasons since he turned 30, Clayton has hit .256 with a .313 on-base percentage, which rank just 24th and 18th, respectively, among major league shortstops during that time. Yet all things are relative, and those numbers from the eight-hole would sound just fine to Washington. "I'm a professional," Clayton said. "I know how to play this game, and I think I can still be a starter in this league."



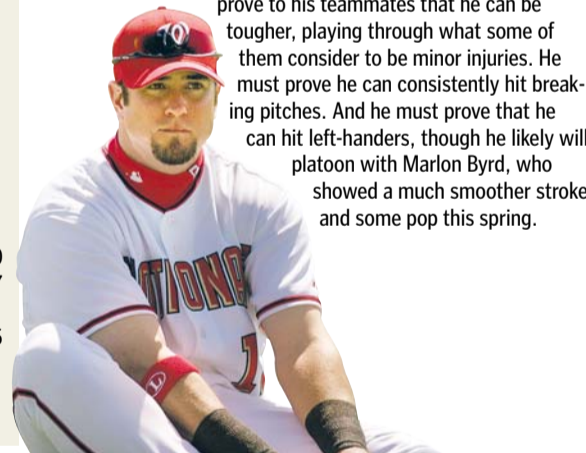
CF RYAN CHURCH Backup: Marlon Byrd

VITALS
Number: 19
Age: 27
Height: 6-1
Weight: 190
Bats: Left
Throws: Left

2005
Games: 102
At-bats: 268
Runs: 41
Hits: 77
Homers: 9
RBI: 42
Walks: 24
Strikeouts: 70
Average: .287
OBP: .353
Slugging: .466

'06 SALARY
\$350,000

Church was on his way to a rookie-of-the-year-type campaign last season until he ran into the left field wall in Pittsburgh making a game-ending catch on June 22. At that point, he was hitting .325 with a .381 on-base percentage and a .544 slugging percentage. After he returned midway through July, he hit .231 with an OBP of .315 and a .352 slugging percentage. So in his second full big league season, he has much to prove. He must prove to his teammates that he can be tougher, playing through what some of them consider to be minor injuries. He must prove he can consistently hit breaking pitches. And he must prove that he can hit left-handers, though he likely will platoon with Marlon Byrd, who showed a much smoother stroke and some pop this spring.



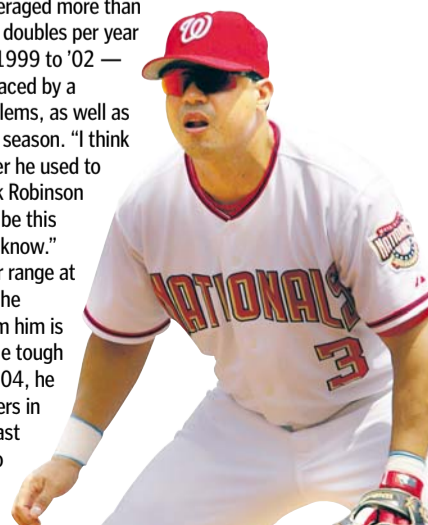
2B JOSE VIDRO Backup: Marlon Anderson

VITALS
Number: 3
Age: 31
Height: 5-11
Weight: 195
Bats: Switch
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 87
At-bats: 309
Runs: 38
Hits: 85
Homers: 7
RBI: 32
Walks: 31
Strikeouts: 30
Average: .275
OBP: .339
Slugging: .424

'06 SALARY
\$7.5 million

On the outskirts of the dominant theme of the Nationals' spring training — whether Alfonso Soriano would move to the outfield — sat Vidro, a proud veteran trying to restore his reputation as one of the NL's premier offensive second basemen. The days when he hit .317 and averaged more than 17 homers and 43 doubles per year — as he did from 1999 to '02 — are long gone, replaced by a series of knee problems, as well as an ankle injury last season. "I think he can be the player he used to be," Manager Frank Robinson said. "Whether it'll be this year or not, I don't know." Vidro now has poor range at second. But what the Nationals need from him is the ability to get the tough hit. From 1997 to '04, he hit .301 with runners in scoring position. Last year, he dropped to .269. That can't happen again.



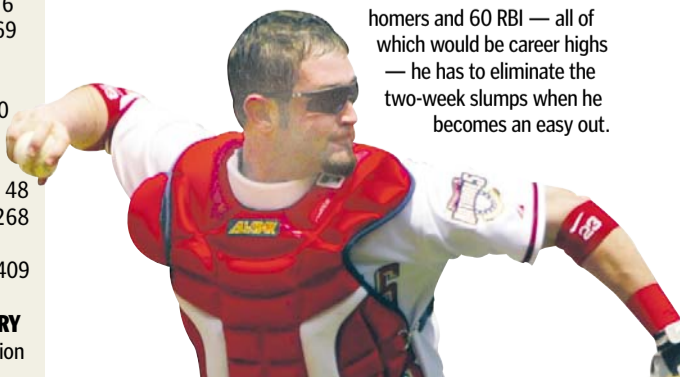
C BRIAN SCHNEIDER Backup: TBA

VITALS
Number: 23
Age: 29
Height: 6-1
Weight: 195
Bats: Left
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 116
At-bats: 369
Runs: 38
Hits: 99
Homers: 10
RBI: 44
Walks: 29
Strikeouts: 48
Average: .268
OBP: .330
Slugging: .409

'06 SALARY
\$2.7 million

The defensive spine of the Nationals, Schneider must handle a pitching staff that will determine whether this team has any chance at .500. Of NL catchers, only St. Louis's Yadier Molina threw out a better percentage of would-be base stealers than Schneider's 37.7. With a shaky backup situation, the Nats need Schneider to stay healthy. If he does, he'll surely appear in more than the 116 games in which he played last year. If that's the case, the Nationals need more consistent offense from Schneider. Throughout his career, Schneider has been far too streaky, and in order for him to hit .280 with 15 homers and 60 RBI — all of which would be career highs — he has to eliminate the two-week slumps when he becomes an easy out.



3B RYAN ZIMMERMAN Backup: Damian Jackson

VITALS
Number: 11
Age: 21
Height: 6-3
Weight: 220
Bats: Right
Throws: Right

2005
Games: 20
At-bats: 58
Runs: 6
Hits: 23
Homers: 0
RBI: 6
Walks: 3
Strikeouts: 12
Average: .397
OBP: .419
Slugging: .569

'06 SALARY
\$327,000

Here's a classic example of why the Nationals are the Nationals: They are taking a 21-year-old rookie not even a year out of college and sticking him in the infield for 150 games. With a system so thin, the Nationals not only can do it, they have to. The difference between Zimmerman and another rookie in his position is, in classic baseball terminology, "great makeup." No, not eye shadow. "I was impressed with how he carried himself last year," Manager Frank Robinson said. Zimmerman's calling card, for now, is his glove, which could be among the best in the league almost instantly — though he had a far from flawless spring. He won't come close to matching last year's offensive numbers from September, but if he avoids a prolonged slump, he should make a run at rookie of the year.

