



NL CENTRAL

Dave Sheinin's analysis, with 2006 records

1
ST. LOUIS
CARDINALS
83-78 (.516)

2
HOUSTON
ASTROS
82-80 (.506)

3
CINCINNATI
REDS
80-82 (.494)

4
MILWAUKEE
BREWERS
75-87 (.463)

5
PITTSBURGH
PIRATES
67-95 (.414)

6
CHICAGO
CUBS
66-96 (.407)



[1] CHICAGO CUBS



BY MORRY GASH — ASSOCIATED PRESS

Fans in Washington know the kind of pop Alfonso Soriano can provide.

Cubs Bring Most Muscle To a Weak Division

We don't feel good about projecting this team, which lost 96 games a year ago, in first place. In fact, it makes us downright queasy. They're still the Cubs, after all. If anything can go wrong, it will. And they're already on the bad side of karma by virtue of placing advertising on the ivy at Wrigley Field.

And whaddya know: \$300 million just doesn't go as far as it used to, eh? Somehow, despite spending all that money this winter on free agents and new manager Lou Piniella, they still wind up with suspect roles — such as Alfonso Soriano playing center field, and Jason Marquis (6.02 ERA last year) in the No. 3 starter spot.

But that said, this offense is going to put up big numbers, and Carlos Zambrano could have a monster year. We're thinking 87 wins will take this weak division (heck, that's four more than the Cardinals won last year), and the Cubs will be the ones who get there.

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
CF	Alfonso Soriano .277	RHP	Carlos Zambrano 3.41	Other Draft	
2B	Mark DeRosa .296	LHP	Ted Lilly 4.31	Free agent	
1B	Derrek Lee .286	RHP	Jason Marquis 6.02	Trade Minors	
3B	Aramis Ramirez .291	LHP	Rich Hill 4.17	Top prospects	
LF	Cliff Floyd .244	RHP	Wade Miller 4.57	OF Felix Pie	
C	Michael Barrett .307	Closer		LHP Donald Veal	
RF	Jacque Jones .285	RHP	Ryan Dempster 4.80	RHP Jeff Samardzija	
SS	Cesar Izturis .245				



[2] ST. LOUIS CARDINALS



BY MARC SEROTA — GETTY IMAGES

Chris Carpenter is a legitimate ace, but that won't be enough in St. Louis.

After Title, It's Been Worse Than One Could Imagine

We're still trying to figure out how this team won the World Series after slipping into the postseason with 83 wins, one great pitcher (Chris Carpenter) and one great hitter (Albert Pujols). Or maybe we just imagined that whole thing. Yeah, that's the ticket. In fact, let's embellish the story and say David Eckstein was the World Series MVP. Hilarious.

Unfortunately, not much has gone right since October. Jeff Suppan and Jeff Weaver walked away via free agency, and the Cardinals weakened their bullpen by moving Adam Wainwright and Braden Looper into the rotation. Then, it was announced that lineup stalwarts Jim Edmonds and Juan Encarnacion would begin the year on the disabled list.

Any team with Carpenter and Pujols is going to be formidable, but we can't help but think the defending champion is going to get passed by at least one of its Central Division rivals this year.

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
SS	David Eckstein .292	RHP	Chris Carpenter 3.09	Other (0) Draft	
LF	Chris Duncan .293	RHP	Adam Wainwright 3.12	Free agent	
1B	Albert Pujols .331	RHP	Kip Wells 6.50	Trade Minors	
3B	Scott Rolen .296	RHP	Anthony Reyes 5.06	Top prospects	
RF	Scott Spiezio .272	RHP	Braden Looper 3.56	OF Colby Rasmus	
CF	Preston Wilson .263	Closer		LHP Jaime Garcia	
C	Yadier Molina .216	RHP	Jason Isringhausen 3.55	RHP Chris Perez	
2B	Adam Kennedy .273				



[3] CINCINNATI REDS



BY JONATHAN NEWTON — THE WASHINGTON POST

Josh Hamilton has shown the form that once made him a top prospect.

Better Times Figure to Be Adding Up in Cincinnati

It's easy to forget this team contended until the final days of the season and almost finished with a winning record for the first time in six years. But they haven't forgotten in Cincinnati, where folks see this division (correctly) as very winnable, and the Reds (somewhat correctly) as a team that can win it.

The best thing to happen to the Reds took place on Ken Griffey Jr.'s yacht, when he busted his hand wrestling with his kids. That gave the front office the opening it needed to move him from center field to right, which should improve the team's defense. Keep an eye, as well, on Josh Hamilton, the formerly troubled top prospect whom the Reds snatched up in the Rule 5 draft. He crushed the ball all spring.

Still, if the Reds make a run, it will be because of pitching, led by Bronson Arroyo, Aaron Harang and a now-healthy Eric Milton. Decent team + weak division = potential contender.

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
CF	Ryan Freel .271	RHP	Bronson Arroyo 3.29	Other Draft	
1B	Scott Hatteberg .289	RHP	Aaron Harang 3.76	Free agent	
RF	Ken Griffey Jr. .252	LHP	Eric Milton 5.19	Trade Minors (0)	
3B	Edwin Encarnacion .276	RHP	Kyle Lohse 5.83	Top prospects	
LF	Adam Dunn .234	RHP	Elizardo Ramirez 5.37	RHP Homer Bailey	
C	David Ross .255	Closer		OF Jay Bruce	
2B	Brandon Phillips .276	RHP	David Weathers 3.54	1B Joey Votto	
SS	Alex Gonzalez .255				



[4] MILWAUKEE BREWERS



BY MATT YORK — ASSOCIATED PRESS

The health of starter Ben Sheets still remains a question in Milwaukee.

Brewers May Not Be Ready To Deliver on Promise

Folks have been saying for several years now to watch out for the Brewers — they're going to surprise people. First of all, it wouldn't be a surprise if so many people were predicting it, would it? And besides, we didn't buy it then, and we still don't.

There's plenty to like here. The Brew Crew has amassed a nice collection of young position players, including Richie Weeks, Prince Fielder, Corey Hart and J.J. Hardy. Bill Hall became a star last year at shortstop, and this year moves to center field. And the addition of veteran Jeff Suppan added depth and experience to a pretty good starting rotation.

But there still are too many questions here to feel good about their chances — from ace Ben Sheets's health, to an offense that finished next-to-last in runs scored last season and did not improve appreciably this winter.

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
2B	Richie Weeks .279	RHP	Ben Sheets 3.82	Other Draft	
3B	Craig Counsell .255	RHP	Jeff Suppan 4.12	Free agent	
1B	Prince Fielder .271	RHP	Chris Capuano 4.03	Trade Minors	
CF	Bill Hall .270	RHP	Dave Bush 4.41	Top prospects	
LF	Geoff Jenkins .271	RHP	Claudio Vargas 4.83	RHP Yovani Gallardo	
C	Johnny Estrada .302	Closer		3B Ryan Braun	
RF	Corey Hart .283	RHP	Francisco Cordero 3.70	RHP Will Inman	
SS	J.J. Hardy .242				



[5] HOUSTON ASTROS



BY DOUG BENC — GETTY IMAGES

New outfielder Carlos Lee will make more noise with his bat than his glove.

Astros Need Strong Start To Avoid Rocket's Flight

What a strange feeling of limbo it must be to see Roger Clemens messing around your minor league camp — his son, Koby, is an Astros farmhand — all the while knowing you're held hostage by The Rocket's procrastination over whether to play another season.

May is the latest projection for a decision by the seven-time Cy Young winner, which means the Astros had better hold together for that long. Clemens almost certainly will play again this year, but it won't be for a loser. If the Astros stink, he'll peddle his wares to the Yankees and Red Sox.

Problem is, this does not seem like a very good team, not with Andy Pettitte gone, and with \$100 million man Carlos Lee looking more like a DH than a left fielder, and with too many holes in both the lineup and pitching staff.

Clemens could change things, but he'd change things even more in the AL East.

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
2B	Craig Biggio .246	RHP	Roy Oswalt 2.98	Other Draft	
CF	Chris Burke .276	RHP	Jason Jennings 3.78	Free agent	
1B	Lance Berkman .315	RHP	Woody Williams 3.65	Trade Minors	
LF	Carlos Lee .300	LHP	Wandy Rodriguez 5.64	Top prospects	
3B	Morgan Ensberg .235	RHP	Chris Sampson 2.12	OF Hunter Pence	
RF	Luke Scott .336	Closer		LHP Troy Patton	
SS	Adam Everett .239	RHP	Brad Lidge 5.28	RHP Matt Albers	
C	Brad Ausmus .230				



[6] PITTSBURGH PIRATES



BY JAMIE SQUIRE — GETTY IMAGES

Jason Bay and the Pirates are unlikely to make any moves in the division.

Once Again, the Pirates Are Sentenced to Mediocrity

Blech. This Pirates team is so mediocre, so uninteresting, so destined for last place, we don't know if we can squeeze another sentence out of it for this capsule we're being paid to write.

But here's one. And here's another! See how easy that is?

If we absolutely have to say something pertinent, we might point out this is not a terrible team. It went 37-35 after the all-star break last year, and has some fine young players in Jason Bay, Freddy Sanchez, Ian Snell and Zach Duke. Getting Adam LaRoche from Atlanta was a nice coup, though it cost the Pirates their closer, Mike Gonzalez.

But the Pirates haven't had a winning season since 1992, and that streak will continue this year.

That's still not long enough?

Well, here's another line! Hey — two sentences in one line! Make that three!

BATTING ORDER		ROTATION		FARM SYSTEM	
CF	Chris Duffy .255	LHP	Zach Duke 4.47	Other Draft	
SS	Jack Wilson .273	RHP	Ian Snell 4.74	FA	
3B	Freddy Sanchez .344	LHP	Paul Maholm 4.76	Trade Minors	
LF	Jason Bay .286	RHP	Tony Armas 5.03	Top prospects	
1B	Adam LaRoche .285	LHP	Tom Gorzelanny 3.79	OF A. McCutchen	
RF	Xavier Nady .280	Closer		C Neil Walker	
C	Ronny Paulino .310	RHP	Salomon Torres 3.28	RHP Brad Lincoln	
2B	Jose Castillo .253				

FARM SYSTEM KEY

Data compiled using the 40-man rosters at the beginning of spring training:



Draft: Acquired via amateur draft



Minors: Signed to a minor league contract as an undrafted free agent



Trade: Acquired via trade



Free Agent: Acquired via free agency



Other: Acquired via waivers, the Rule 5 draft or purchased outright for cash