

NL CENTRAL

Dave Sheinin's analysis, with 2007 records

1

Chicago Cubs
85-77 (.525)

2

Milwaukee Brewers
83-79 (.512)

3

St. Louis Cardinals
78-84 (.481)

4

Houston Astros
73-89 (.451)

5

Cincinnati Reds
72-90 (.444)

6

Pittsburgh Pirates
68-94 (.420)



[1] CHICAGO CUBS



BY JONATHAN DANIEL — GETTY IMAGES

A World Series title would be welcome relief for the Wrigley faithful.

In Chicago, All Signs Are Pointing to Change

This season marks the 100th anniversary since the Cubs' last World Series title. That's a lot of cold, bleak, Midwestern winters.

Two things upon which Northsiders could always depend have been Wrigley Field and futility. Both are in jeopardy: The naming rights could go up for sale, and the Cubbies are a legitimate title threat.

They return nearly everyone of consequence from last year's division championship team, and in Kosuke Fukudome, their Japanese import, they added exactly what they needed — a potent, left-handed bat to offset their heavily right-handed lineup and help take advantage of Wrigley's decidedly hitter-friendly confines.

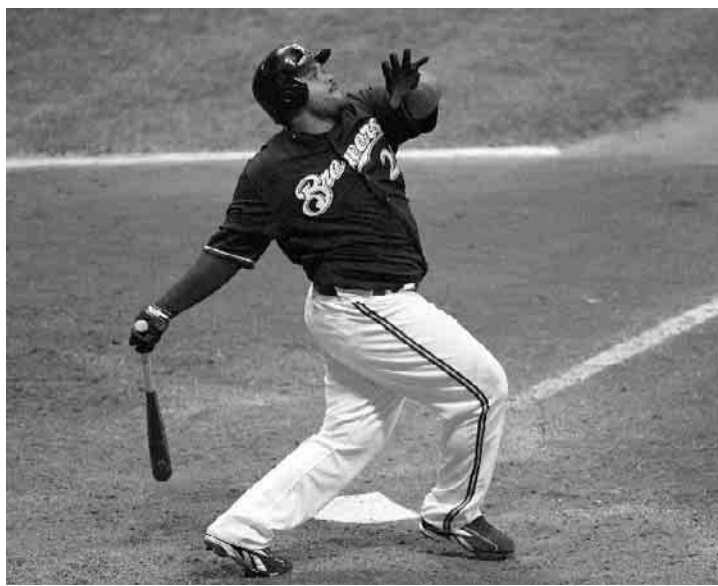
The other major story line this spring has been at closer, where Wood, the former phenom starter whose career nearly was wrecked by arm injuries, has been reinvented as a ninth-inning specialist.

Just imagine: As the Cubs clinch their first World Series title in a hundred years, it is Wood who throws the final pitch.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
SS Ryan Theriot .266	RHP Carlos Zambrano 3.95		
LF Alfonso Soriano .299	LHP Ted Lilly 3.83	Wins/Losses	44-37 41-40
1B Derrek Lee .317	LHP Rich Hill 3.92	Batting Avg.	.278 .265
3B Aramis Ramirez .310	RHP R. Dempster 4.73	Home Runs	84 67
RF K. Fukudome n/a	RHP Jason Marquis 4.60	ERA	4.19 3.88
2B Mark DeRosa .293	Closer		
CF Felix Pie .215	RHP Kerry Wood 3.33		
C Geovany Soto .389			



[2] MILWAUKEE BREWERS



BY JONATHAN DANIEL — GETTY IMAGES

Prince Fielder, who hit 50 home runs in 2007, carries the offensive weight.

Some Experience To Go With Winning

Everything was going just fine for the Brewers last season — they got off to the majors' best start and led the division by a comfortable margin deep into June — until someone must have checked the standings and noted, "Oh, my God! We're in first place!" And the Brewers imploded.

Some of their veterans acknowledged that their youngish team simply wasn't ready to win. Perhaps they are now — but can they? Their big offseason acquisitions were Cameron and Gagné, but the former is out until the end of April while serving a suspension for amphetamines and the latter is a downgrade from the man he is replacing, Francisco Cordero.

The real key could be the continued growth of their fine, young hitters. Braun, last year's NL rookie of the year, gets a full season and a much-needed move from third base, where he was a butcher last year. A good-looking team. But the Cubs look better.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
2B Rickie Weeks .235	RHP Ben Sheets 3.82	Wins/Losses	51-30 32-49
SS J.J. Hardy .277	RHP Jeff Suppan 4.62	Batting Avg.	.268 .256
LF Ryan Braun .324	RHP Carlos Villanueva 3.94	Home Runs	121 110
1B Prince Fielder .288	LHP Manny Parra 3.76	ERA	4.01 4.83
RF Corey Hart .295	RHP Dave Bush 5.12		
CF Mike Cameron .242	Closer		
3B Bill Hall .254	RHP Eric Gagné 3.81		
C Jason Kendall .242			



[3] HOUSTON ASTROS



BY TRAVIS LINDQUIST — GETTY IMAGES

Roy Oswalt has delivered time and again for Houston with 112 career wins.

Fast Forwarding To a New Approach

Minute Maid Park has a reputation as a hitter's haven, but it has actually favored pitchers slightly over the past few years — which dovetails nicely with the Astros' shift away from the bash-and-mash model from the heyday of the Killer B's to a more speed-oriented approach, highlighted by newcomers Bourn and Matsui atop the lineup.

Still, Tejada was the centerpiece of Houston's offseason, filling not only the need for a middle-of-the-lineup bat, but also the Steroids Guy/Perjury Target hole vacated by Roger Clemens. (Okay, that was a cheap shot. Anyone think the editors will leave that in?) His rapidly declining range at shortstop, however, could be a big problem.

With the retirements of Jeff Bagwell and Craig Biggio, the new face of this franchise soon will be the talented but clumsy Pence (he ran through a sliding glass door this spring), who last year became the first rookie in 50 years to lead his league in hitting at the all-star break.

It basically goes like this: Cubs, Brewers and a four-way tie for last.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
CF Michael Bourn .277	RHP Roy Oswalt 3.18	Wins/Losses	42-39 31-50
2B Kaz Matsui .288	LHP W. Rodriguez 4.58	Batting Avg.	.266 .254
SS Miguel Tejada .296	RHP Brandon Backe 3.77	Home Runs	83 84
1B Lance Berkman .278	RHP W. Williams 5.27	ERA	4.05 5.36
LF Carlos Lee .303	RHP Chris Sampson 4.59		
RF Hunter Pence .322	Closer		
3B Ty Wigginton .284	RHP José Valverde 2.66		
C J.R. Towles .375			



[4] ST. LOUIS CARDINALS



BY DOUG BENC — GETTY IMAGES

If Albert Pujols's elbow acts up, St. Louis could be in for a serious slide.

More Than an Arm's Distance From Serious Contention

What happened? The Cardinals used to be a perennial contender. Now, they look like they're a Pujols elbow tweak from embarrassment.

As usual, you can blame injuries to pitchers. The Cardinals will be without ace Chris Carpenter (elbow) until at least July, and top lefty Mark Mulder (shoulder) until June. And with Joel Piñero (shoulder) and Matt Clement (shoulder) also ailing, suddenly a late-spring scrap-heap signee like Lohse becomes a No. 3 starter. Even in a slight pitcher's park like the new Busch Stadium, that ain't good.

But if the Cardinals somehow manage to hang around until Mulder and Carpenter get healthy, their whole outlook would change. And at some point, whether it's April or September, the Cardinals will unveil phenom center fielder Colby Rasmus, who could also lend a spark.

Pujols, meantime, acknowledges the constant pain in his elbow, but insists he can play through it. Wonder if that would change if the Cardinals are 20 games back in June.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
SS César Izturis .258	RHP Adam Wainwright 3.70	Wins/Losses	43-38 35-46
CF Rick Ankiel .285	RHP Braden Looper 4.94	Batting Avg.	.283 .265
1B Albert Pujols .327	RHP Kyle Lohse 4.62	Home Runs	62 79
LF Chris Duncan .259	RHP Todd Wellemeyer 4.54	ERA	4.13 5.19
3B Troy Glaus .262	RHP Anthony Reyes 6.04		
C Yadier Molina .275	Closer		
RF Skip Schumaker .333	RHP J. Irsinghausen 2.48		
2B Adam Kennedy .219			



[5] CINCINNATI REDS



BY ROBERT LABERGE — GETTY IMAGES

Manager Dusty Baker left an ESPN studio chair for the Cincinnati bench.

Second-Guessing Already Has Begun

The Reds must have thought they were ready to win, because they did some uncharacteristic spending this offseason, bringing in Manager Dusty Baker and blowing up the closers market with a four-year, \$46 million deal for Cordero.

Do they see something we don't? We see a pitching staff ill-equipped to deal with the Great American Ball Park, among the unfriendliest parks for pitchers in all of baseball. Indeed, the Reds gave up the most earned runs in the NL last year.

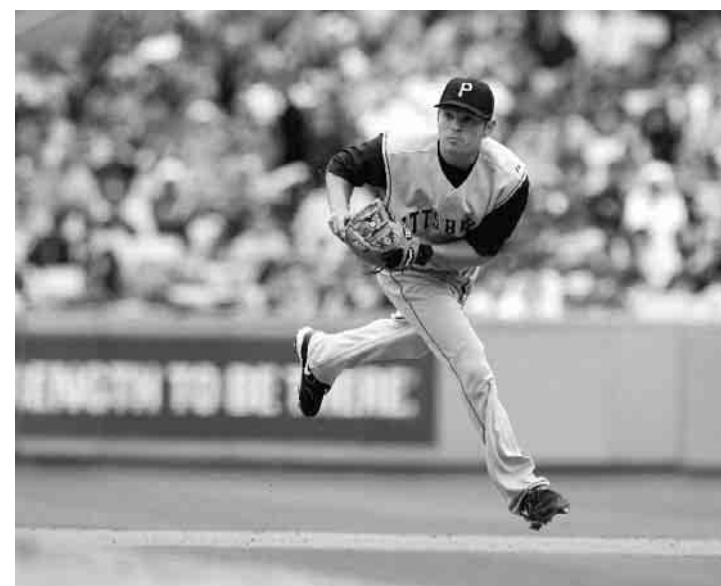
The Reds had better hope that Arroyo reverts to his 2006 form (14-11, 3.29 ERA) after a miserable 2007 (9-15, 4.23), that prospect Homer Bailey makes the jump to the majors soon and that Cueto, the talk of Florida this spring, is the real thing.

Otherwise, Baker may be left wondering why he left his cushy ESPN gig for this mess, and Cordero may take up quilting in the Reds' bullpen to pass all that idle time between save opportunities.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
CF Ryan Freel .245	RHP Aaron Harang 3.73	Wins/Losses	39-42 33-48
2B Brandon Phillips .288	RHP Bronson Arroyo 4.23	Batting Avg.	.265 .269
RF Ken Griffey Jr. .277	RHP Josh Fogg 4.94	Home Runs	117 87
LF Adam Dunn .264	RHP Matt Belisle 5.32	ERA	4.94 4.97
3B E. Encarnación .289	RHP Johnny Cueto N/A		
1B Joey Votto .321	Closer		
C David Ross .203	RHP F. Cordero 2.98		
SS Alex González .272			



[6] PITTSBURGH PIRATES



BY JEFF GROSS — GETTY IMAGES

Freddie Sanchez provides some hope that the Pirates can pick up their game.

Inch-by-Inch, It's Been A Mediocre Stretch

Okay, folks, here's the deal: We need to fill precisely 4.22 column-inches of type with information about the faceless, tasteless Pirates, and as usual we're not sure we can do it.

But guess what? We're already at .95 inches, and we're just getting started! Wait — make that 1.19 inches!

The problem, as we see it, is that the Pirates are not bad enough to be interesting — they're merely mediocre. While they have suffered 15 straight losing seasons, none has involved more than 100 losses.

But now it gets a little interesting — because should they finish below .500 again (and let's be honest, how can they not?), they will tie the Phillies of 1933-48 for the most consecutive losing seasons.

(By the way, that's 3.53 inches, and we haven't even had to mention new manager John Russell, Capps's promise as a closer or the vast potential of the Snell-Gorzelanny duo.)

There: 4.22 inches. Piece of cake.

BATTING ORDER	STARTING ROTATION	HOME AND ROAD PERFORMANCE (2007)	
		Home	Road
CF Nate McLouth .258	RHP Ian Snell 3.76	Wins/Losses	37-44 31-50
2B Freddie Sanchez .304	LHP Tom Gorzelanny 3.88	Batting Avg.	.272 .254
1B Adam LaRoche .272	RHP Matt Morris 6.10	Home Runs	65 83
LF Jason Bay .247	LHP Paul Maholm 5.02	ERA	4.55 5.33
RF Xavier Nady .278	LHP Zach Duke 5.53		
3B Jose Bautista .254	Closer		
C Ronny Paulino .263	RHP Matt Capps 2.28		
SS Jack Wilson .296			