

THE NATIONALS

Barry Svrluga's analysis and projected batting order

1

Cristian Guzmán
SS

2

Lastings Milledge
CF

3

Ryan Zimmerman
3B

4

Nick Johnson
1B

5

Austin Kearns
RF

6

Elijah Dukes
LF

7

Paul Lo Duca
C

8

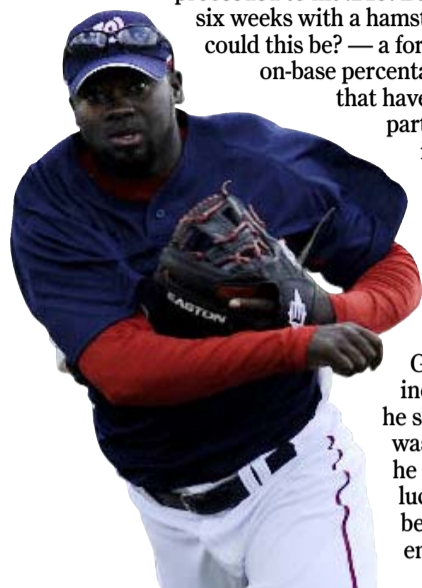
Ronnie Belliard
2B

9

Starting Pitcher
P

[SS] Cristian Guzmán Backup: Felipe López

For seven weeks in 2007, Guzmán's contract — ridiculed for so long — seemed like a bargain. GM Jim Bowden signed Guzmán before the 2005 season for four years and \$16.8 million. Guzmán, infamously, proceeded to hit .219. But last spring, after he missed six weeks with a hamstring injury, Guzmán was — could this be? — a force. He hit .328 with an on-base percentage of .380, improvements that have been attributed, at least in part, to Lasik eye surgery that improved Guzmán's vision. But last June 24, Guzmán tore ligaments in his left thumb while making a tag. The injury kept him out until September, when he appeared only nominally in three games. Now, Guzmán has any number of incentives: to prove that what he showed for those seven weeks wasn't a fluke, and to prove that he is worthy of another lucrative contract when he becomes a free agent at the end of the season.



2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 46	Doubles: 6	Walks: 15	Number: 15	Height: 6-0
At-bats: 174	Triples: 6	Strikeouts: 21	Age: 30	Weight: 195
Runs: 31	Homers: 2	OBP: .380	Experience: 9 years	Bats: S
Hits: 57	RBI: 14	Slugging: .466	Salary: \$4.2 million	Throws: R
Average: .328	Steals: 2	Errors: 8		

[2B] Ronnie Belliard Backup: Felipe López

After helping the St. Louis Cardinals win the 2006 World Series, Belliard found himself without a job and signed with the Nats for \$750,000. When shortstop Cristian Guzmán was injured on Opening Day, Belliard became the starting second baseman, appearing in 147 games, hitting .290 and signing a two-year extension. Because last year's starter, Felipe López, struggled to a .308 on-base percentage, Nationals officials were adamant that Belliard would be the starter headed into spring training. Though the competition went to spring's final days, Belliard did nothing to lose the job. "What an approach," GM Jim Bowden said. "What a work ethic." And though Belliard can be an agitator for opponents, he is adored within the clubhouse. "He's one of the favorite teammates I've ever had," right fielder Austin Kearns said.

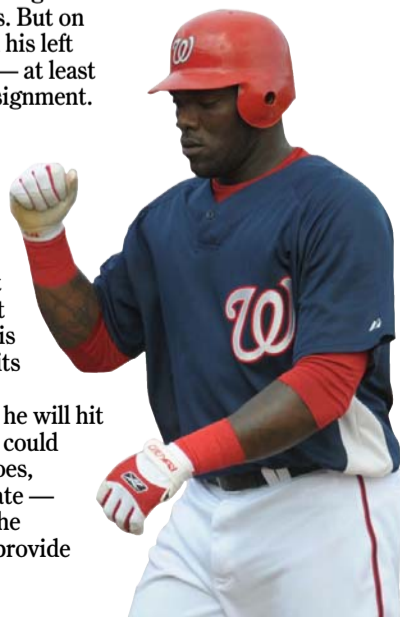


2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 147	Doubles: 35	Walks: 34	Number: 10	Height: 5-8
At-bats: 511	Triples: 1	Strikeouts: 72	Age: 32	Weight: 195
Runs: 57	Homers: 11	OBP: .332	Experience: 8 years	Bats: R
Hits: 148	RBI: 58	Slugging: .427	162 days	Throws: R
Average: .290	Steals: 3	Errors: 7	Salary: \$1.6 million	

[LF] Elijah Dukes

Backups: Wily Mo Peña (on disabled list), Rob Mackowiak

When the Nationals came to spring training, Wily Mo Peña was slated to, finally, be given a starting job and get 500 at-bats. But on March 12, Peña badly strained his left oblique muscle, giving Dukes — at least temporarily — the starting assignment. The tale of Dukes's turbulent past has been oft-told. This spring, though, he has concentrated on the new beginning he was granted with his December trade from Tampa Bay. His physical talent is undeniable. "I found out that what they say about his talent is true," Manny Acta said. "He hits the ball hard — very hard." Though the Nats don't believe he will hit for much of an average, Dukes could hit for significant power. He does, however, strike out at a high rate — once every 4.1 at-bats. Only if he maintains a level head will he provide the Nats a boost.



2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 52	Doubles: 3	Walks: 33	Number: 34	Height: 6-2
At-bats: 184	Triples: 2	Strikeouts: 44	Age: 23	Weight: 250
Runs: 27	Homers: 10	OBP: .318	Experience: 83 days	Bats: R
Hits: 35	RBI: 21	Slugging: .391	Salary: \$395,000	Throws: R
Average: .190	Steals: 2	Errors: 0		

IMPACT PLAYER



BY RICKY CARIOTTI — THE WASHINGTON POST

[3B] Ryan Zimmerman Backup: Aaron Boone

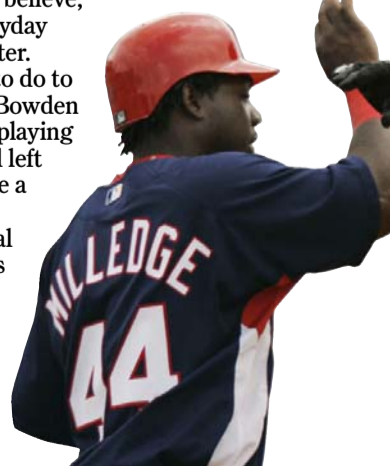
In 2006, when he narrowly lost out to Florida shortstop Hanley Ramírez for the National League's rookie of the year award, Zimmerman hit .287 with an on-base percentage of .351 and a slugging percentage of .471, driving in 110 runs. Last year, when he was one of seven players to appear in all 162 of his team's games, he went .266/.330/.458 with 91 RBI. Off year? If so, then Zimmerman may develop into what the Nationals hope he will be. Three years after he was drafted, the Nationals have no player in their system as full of polish or potential. Should he progress — say, 30 homers, 100 RBI, a .290 average — then he will become the first major test for the ownership group of the Lerner family, because Zimmerman, 23, has not yet agreed to a long-term contract, and he is eligible for arbitration at the end of the season. Even with room for improvement offensively, Zimmerman's main area of concern might be defense. Supremely talented, only Milwaukee's Ryan Braun committed more errors at third base than Zimmerman's 23. "I need to eliminate the stupid errors," he said. If he does, he could win his first Gold Glove.

2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 162	Doubles: 43	Walks: 61	Number: 11	Height: 6-2
At-bats: 653	Triples: 5	Strikeouts: 125	Age: 23	Weight: 210
Runs: 99	Homers: 24	OBP: .330	Experience: 2 years	Bats: R
Hits: 174	RBI: 91	Slugging: .458	32 days	Throws: R
Average: .266	Steals: 4	Errors: 23	Salary: \$465,000	

[CF] Lastings Milledge

Backup: Willie Harris

He may not be a superior defender, and he may never steal 30 bases — which is one of his goals. But the Nationals traded two of their regulars — catcher Brian Schneider and outfielder Ryan Church — to the New York Mets for a reason. Washington wanted to improve its offense, and Milledge has the potential to be a dynamic hitter. In 115 games with the Mets between 2006 and '07, the 22-year-old hit .257 with 11 homers and 51 RBI. But the Nationals believe, given the chance to be an everyday player, Milledge should be better. Asked what Milledge needed to do to realize his potential, GM Jim Bowden said, "Just play." Perhaps just playing will help Milledge, who played left and right in New York, become a better center fielder. "I feel better being back to my natural position," he said. Even if he is a substandard defender, Milledge should give the Nationals something they have never had — stability in center.

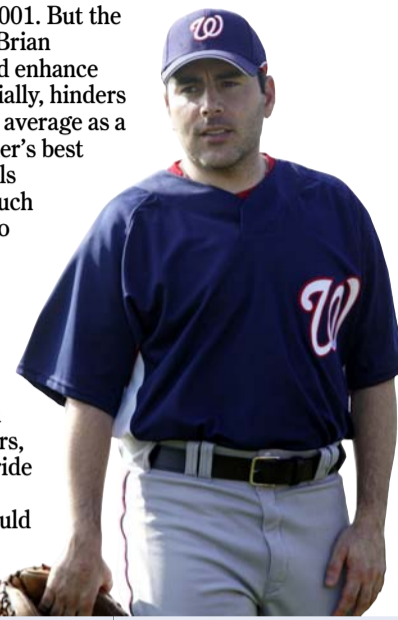


2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 59	Doubles: 9	Walks: 13	Number: 44	Height: 6-0
At-bats: 184	Triples: 1	Strikeouts: 42	Age: 22	Weight: 205
Runs: 27	Homers: 7	OBP: .341	Experience: 2 years	Bats: R
Hits: 50	RBI: 29	Slugging: .446	Salary: \$402,500	Throws: R
Average: .272	Steals: 3	Errors: 2		

[C] Paul Lo Duca

Backup: Johnny Estrada (on disabled list); Jesús Flores

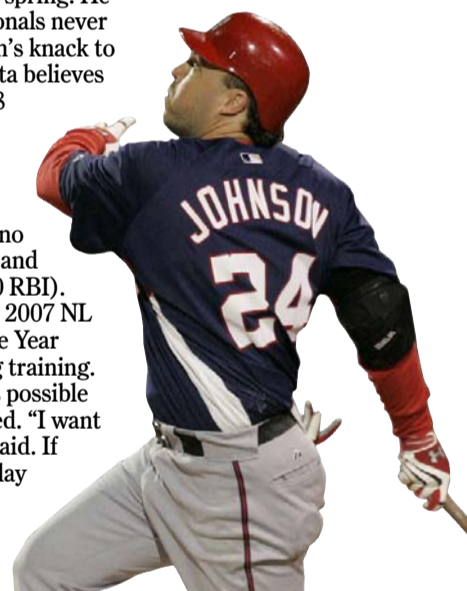
Last year, his batting average (.272) and on-base percentage (.311) were his lowest since he became a starter in 2001. But the Nationals are optimistic that Brian Schneider's replacement could enhance the offense even as he, potentially, hinders the defense. Lo Duca's lowest average as a starter is higher than Schneider's best (.268). In the view of Nationals officials, that could make it much more difficult for opponents to navigate the bottom of Washington's order. Hit him, say, seventh, and the Nationals could turn over the order much more frequently. From 2005 to '07, Schneider ranked third in the NL in throwing out runners, Lo Duca 12th. But he takes pride in handling a staff, and some Nats believe a few pitchers could be surprised by Lo Duca's willingness to get in faces.



2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 119	Doubles: 18	Walks: 24	Number: 16	Height: 5-10
At-bats: 445	Triples: 1	Strikeouts: 33	Age: 35	Weight: 205
Runs: 46	Homers: 9	OBP: .311	Experience: 8 years	Bats: R
Hits: 121	RBI: 54	Slugging: .378	42 days	Throws: R
Average: .272	Steals: 2	Errors: 9	Salary: \$5 million	

[1B] Nick Johnson Backup: Dmitri Young

His last regular season game came on Sept. 23, 2006. The next day, team orthopedist Ben Shaffer said Johnson — who broke his right femur in a collision with right fielder Austin Kearns — should be ready for the following spring. He wasn't. The 2007 Nationals never benefited from Johnson's knack to get on base. Manny Acta believes that because of his .428 on-base percentage, Johnson was the most dangerous player on a 2006 Nats team that included Alfonso Soriano (46 homers, 41 steals) and Ryan Zimmerman (110 RBI). Johnson outperformed 2007 NL Comeback Player of the Year Dmitri Young in spring training. But if he plays well, it's possible Johnson could be traded. "I want to play every day," he said. If healthy, he is an everyday player — in Washington or elsewhere.



2006 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 147	Doubles: 46	Walks: 110	Number: 24	Height: 6-3
At-bats: 500	Triples: 0	Strikeouts: 99	Age: 29	Weight: 225
Runs: 100	Homers: 23	OBP: .428	Experience: 7 years	Bats: L
Hits: 145	RBI: 77	Slugging: .520	41 days	Throws: L
Average: .290	Steals: 10	Errors: 15	Salary: \$5.5 million	

[RF] Austin Kearns Backup: Rob Mackowiak

Manny Acta said the way Kearns plays defense — going after balls hard, always throwing to the right base — gives him "peace of mind." But Kearns knows what would put his own mind at ease, and that's a better offensive season. Kearns's .411 slugging percentage in 2007 was the lowest of his career, and though his power numbers (16 homers, 74 RBI) could be partially attributed to RFK Stadium, others didn't struggle as much. Kearns hit 35 doubles, eight fewer than Ryan Church hit in 117 fewer at-bats. Thus, Kearns knows he must produce more to justify his \$5 million salary — not to mention the \$9 million he'll earn in 2009. For much of the spring, Kearns didn't look to be a power hitter — especially alongside the explosiveness of, say, Elijah Dukes and Wily Mo Peña. But the Nationals still believe he can hit 25-30 homers in a season, particularly in a smaller ballpark.



2007 STATISTICS			VITAL STATISTICS	
Games: 161	Doubles: 35	Walks: 71	Number: 25	Height: 6-4
At-bats: 587	Triples: 1	Strikeouts: 106	Age: 27	Weight: 225
Runs: 84	Homers: 16	OBP: .355	Experience: 5 years	Bats: R
Hits: 156	RBI: 74	Slugging: .411	145 days	Throws: R
Average: .266	Steals: 2	Errors: 2	Salary: \$5 million	