

## 2008 MLB Season Preview & Predictions: BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

### AMERICAN LEAGUE EAST:

The logo for the Boston Red Sox, featuring the word "BOSTON" in a stylized, red, blocky font with a white outline and a small trademark symbol.

**1. Boston Red Sox:** Coming off their second World Series title in four seasons, the Boston Red Sox have made fans in Beantown very proud after suffering for 86 years without a Championship. What Boston continues to have going for them is the most lethal combination hitting back-to-back in any lineup in baseball with David 'Big Papi' Ortiz and Manny Ramirez. Both are RBI machines, home runs threats at any given time and have proven to come through in the clutch. Some pitching questions arise with this team, especially given the health situation of Curt Schilling and Tim Wakefield starting to get up there in age. As long as they have 2003 World Series MVP and 2007 ALCS MVP Josh Beckett on their side, they should be in fine shape. Outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury and second baseman Dustin Pedroia are future All-Stars in the batting order, while the bullpen is in good hands with Hideki Okajima and Jonathan Papelbon, a duo that combined to strikeout 147 compared to 32 issued walks.

The logo for the New York Yankees, featuring the words "NEW YORK" in a blue, serif font with a white outline, arched over the word "YANKEES" which is partially visible below.

**2. New York Yankees:** It's been eight years since the Bronx Bombers last brought home a World Championship to the Big Apple, and in the final year at the current Yankee Stadium, they'd like nothing better than to answer the Red Sox' title with one of their own. Alex Rodriguez – coming off a 54-homer campaign – and shortstop Derek Jeter form the best left side of the infield in baseball. New Manager Joe Girardi has to like the veterans surrounding those two as well as the state of the bullpen with young phenom Joba Chamberlain and Mariano Rivera, arguably the greatest closer the game has ever seen. One of the reasons the Yanks have failed to return to the World Series since Florida beat them in six games in 2003 is their pitching staff, which has slipped a bit of late. In order to advance far, they have to get sharp outings from Chien-Ming Wang, Andy Pettitte, Mike Mussina, Phil Hughes and Ian Kennedy come August, September and beyond.

The logo for the Toronto Blue Jays, featuring the word "Toronto" in a blue, cursive script font with a white outline.

**3. Toronto Blue Jays:** Stuck in the same division as the Red Sox and Yankees, the Blue Jays have won 80 or more games in four of the past five seasons, yet it hasn't been good enough for them to crack the postseason party. Three players – Frank Thomas, Matt Stairs and Alex Rios – hit 21+ homers last season. That doesn't include outfielder Vernon Wells, who had smacked 20 or more homers in five straight seasons until having a down year in 2007. Toronto also added solid veteran infielders David Eckstein and Scott Rolen from St. Louis, both of whom are sound with the glove and .300 caliber hitters. Roy Halladay remains a Cy Young candidate when healthy, but what could tell if this the year the Jays break through and really make a run at Boston and New York is whether or not A.J. Burnett and B.J. Ryan stay injury free.



**4. Tampa Bay Rays:** No longer the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and only called the Rays, this club has only won 70 games once in the franchise's history and that came in 2004 when they lost 91 games. Compared to their 1998 expansion buddies, the Arizona Diamondbacks, who have won a World Series and been to the playoffs four times, Tampa has a lot of catching up to do. After left-handed ace Scott Kazmir, the team's pitching really is a mess as they ranked dead last in the AL in ERA, wins, saves and opponents' batting average. Their bullpen, although hopeful of improving with new closer Troy Percival, wasn't any better, posting a 6.16 ERA. It'll be up to their speed, keyed by exciting outfielders Carl Crawford and B.J. Upton as well as newly acquired infielder Jason Barlett, to carry them. Those three combined for 95 stolen bases in 2007.



**5. Baltimore Orioles:** Losing is something the Orioles have become accustomed to lately, not only playing in a division with the Yankees, Red Sox and Blue Jays, but also being unable to hang onto a marquee player since Cal Ripken's retirement seven years ago. Baltimore has had ten consecutive losing seasons, and it doesn't look like things will get much better with shortstop Miguel Tejada, a former AL MVP, departing for Houston, and ace pitcher Erik Bedard leaving for Seattle. The O's lost exactly one-third of their games by a single run, which means they're failing to get timely hits and having the bullpen deliver. There were no real significant off-season additions, and in a division where scoring runs is vital for success, they lack enough quality hitters after the top three guys – Brian Roberts, Melvin Mora and Nick Markakis – in the lineup.

#### AMERICAN LEAGUE CENTRAL:



**1. Detroit Tigers:** Two years removed from being swept by the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series, Jim Leyland's Detroit Tigers are looking to get back to the Fall Classic thanks to some key off-season moves. Not only did the Tigers add All-Star caliber starting pitcher Dontrelle Willis, but they also acquired a premier slugger from Florida as Miguel Cabrera inked an eight-year, \$152.5 million dollar contract. Injuries to solid relievers Joel Zumaya and Fernando Rodney could present problems for Detroit, but other than that, they have the quality starting pitchers and a dangerous lineup to contend deep into October for a Championship.



**2. Cleveland Indians:** I could see them starting out of the gate slow and getting off to a 37-39 start or somewhere thereabouts. They do have two top-flight starting pitchers in C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona that were nearly enough for

the Tribe to capture the AL pennant last October. Whether or not they repeat as AL Central Champs could hinge on the bullpen, anchored by steady setup man Rafael Betancourt. Everyone else in the pen is a question mark. Offensively, they have some exciting players – Grady Sizemore, Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez, Casey Blake and Johnny Peralta – that form a solid nucleus.



**3. Kansas City Royals:** Believe it or not, the Royals aren't as bad as they appear to be or have been. Kansas City has three starters in Gil Meche, Brian Bannister and Zack Greinke that, if they click early, could put them in position to more than 70 games for the first time since 2003. In fact, that was the Royals' last winning season when they won 83 games. For a team that placed 11<sup>th</sup> or worse in the American League in seven key offensive statistical categories, the Royals need someone like young third baseman Alex Gordon or right fielder Mark Teahen to step up and drive in over 100 runs. Each had 60RBI last season. Furthermore, the bullpen must get com consistency, which may come from 23-year-old developing closer Joakim Soria.



**4. Minnesota Twins:** Losing star center fielder and Cy Young candidate Johan Santana puts Minnesota potentially in a re-building phase under successful Manager Ron Gardenhire, who has guided the Twins to four Central Division titles over the past six seasons. How strong their pitching is will likely depend on the health and effectiveness of Francisco Liriano, a 24-year-old right-hander that went 12-3 with a miniscule 2.16ERA two years ago. As far as the bats go, seldom ever produce a whole lot of runs, but they have capable power hitters in 2006 AL MVP Justin Morneau, Michael Cuddyer and 2006 ML Batting Champ Joe Mauer that combined for 86 doubles last season. Joe Nathan gives them a reliable closer, and defensively the Twins are often outstanding in the field.



**5. Chicago White Sox:** Is Manager Ozzie Guillen perhaps on the hot seat? That's a question some in Chicago are asking about a White Sox team that won a World Series in 2005, missed the playoffs despite 90 wins two years ago, but really floundered last season as they struggled, posting a 72-90 record. The 2007 campaign was so bad that it was their worst record since going 69-92 in 1989. There's quite a bit of age on this team, including the likes of Orlando Cabrera, Jermaine Dye and Jim Thome in the lineup. Jose Contreras, who was so instrumental during the team's '05 postseason run, must bounce back from his 17-loss campaign of a year ago for them to be more competitive this season. Their x-factor should be third baseman Joe Crede.

### **AMERICAN LEAGUE WEST:**



**1. Seattle Mariners:** All the pieces are finally in place again for the Mariners to be a postseason threat. This is best roster since the 1990's when they had Alex Rodriguez, Ken Griffey Jr. and Randy Johnson or maybe even the squad that won 116 regular season games before losing to the Yankees in the 2001 ALCS. As long as Erik Bedard, an addition from the Orioles in the spring, stays healthy they have a nice starting pitching staff to go with the likes of potential 15-game winner Felix Hernandez, lefty Jarrod Washburn and veteran right-handers Miguel Batista and Carlos Silva. J.J. Putz (6-1, 1.38ERA, 82-13K/BB ratio) is the best closer most people don't know about, and Ichiro continues to produce at the top of the batting order, aiming for his eighth straight 200-plus hit season in 2008. The key to the M's season in my opinion are Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson; those two need to have All-Star caliber seasons for Seattle's World Series dreams to become a reality.



**2. Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim:** Bringing in center fielder Torii Hunter (seven Gold Glove Awards in a row) from Minnesota to team with Vladimir Guerrero and Garret Anderson in the middle of the Angels' lineup gives fans every reason to believe that this franchise can make its fifth playoff appearance in seven years. However, once they get there if they're able to, in order to avoid an early exit, rest of their bats – particularly Howie Kendrick, Casey Kotchman and Gary Matthews Jr. – are going to need to produce. Leadoff man Chone Figgins often doesn't get the credit he deserves as he provides a great deal of versatility and speed. Closer Francisco Rodriguez (a.k.a. K-Rod) and setup man Scott Shields do a superb job of getting the final six outs of ballgames. Starters Kelvim Escobar and John Lackey have their work cut out for them if they are going to match last year's performance, when they combined to go 37-16.



**3. Oakland Athletics:** Given the fact the A's lack a player on their roster that stole more than 12 bases last year and also do not have someone that hit more than Jack Cust's team-high 26 homers, it comes as no surprise that they ranked second to last in the American League in batting average and dead last in stolen bases. Those two areas are why it'll be hard for Oakland to avoid a second straight losing season, which would be difficult for the team's fans to swallow considering this team finished above .500 eight years in a row prior to the 2007 campaign. Losing Nick Swisher, the team's top slugger, hurts since the offense isn't that potent to begin with, but what hurts even more in my opinion is the loss of Dan Haren. That's because when they unloaded the big three of Barry Zito, Mark Mulder and Tim Hudson years ago, Billy Beane had a plan to bring in youngsters that can adequately fill their shoes. With pitcher Rich Harden, third baseman Eric Chavez and shortstop Bobby Crosby all injury prone, it's hard to envision this being a playoff contending club.



**4. Texas Rangers:** Until the Colorado Rockies reached the World Series last fall, it was easy to call the Rangers the American League version of the Rocks. After all, they're an offensive-minded club that plays in a hitter friendly ballpark, yet they always seem to hover just below .500 because of their inability to keep opponents from scoring a bunch of runs. An injured Hank Blalock and the loss of Mark Teixeira to Atlanta midway through last season hurt them, too, especially considering they didn't acquire a front-line starting pitcher. Kevin Millwood and Vicente Padilla clearly aren't the answers as those two went a combined 16-24 a season ago, each with ERA's over 5.00. It looks like it'll be a longer summer for Manager Ron Washington.

#### NATIONAL LEAGUE EAST:



**1. New York Mets:** Blowing a seven-game division lead with 17 to go and losing six consecutive times at home in September, the Mets unquestionably had one of the worst collapses in baseball history. To try and help their passionate fans forget about it, they made another off-season splash by adding an ace pitcher to their rotation in Johan Santana, a difference maker that seems primed to go 18-6 and win a Cy Young Award. From 2003-06, Santana went an impressive 67-22 with the Twins, helping them reach the playoffs three times. A healthy and productive Pedro Martinez as the #2 starter is going to be key as will a bounce back year from first baseman Carlos Delgado. The bullpen, anchored by closer Billy Wagner, will have quite a bit of pressure on it to hold leads. Jose Reyes, David Wright and Carlos Beltran all put up big-time numbers, but this team has to do a better job of hitting the clutch (i.e. producing with runners in scoring position).



**2. Philadelphia Phillies:** Helped by the Mets' collapse, the Phillies from a slow start to win their first NL East crown since 1993 when they lost to the Toronto Blue Jays in a classic seven-game World Series. Although they were swept by the Colorado Rockies in the first round, this team has a lot of promise as long as their pitching doesn't disappoint them. Amazingly, this team has three MVP candidates all in their infield with first baseman Ryan Howard, second baseman Chase Utley and shortstop Jimmy Rollins. Howard won the award two years ago, Rollins took it home last season, so maybe Utley is due to win it in 2008. Geoff Jenkins was brought in from Milwaukee to further strengthen an already very good lineup, and Pat Burrell is in a contract year, following a 30-home run campaign from 2007. The big question for me is even if ace Cole Hamels (15-5, 3.39ERA) gets great support from fellow starters Adam Eaton, Jamie Moyer and Brett Myers, does Brad Lidge still have the makeup to get it done as a closer at the big league level? Many of us have our doubts since his meltdown in 2005 and '06.



**3. Atlanta Braves:** Don't be surprised to see the Atlanta Braves, a few years removed from their run of 14 straight division titles, get back to the top of the NL East. Atlanta showed signs of being a playoff threat, especially once they picked up All-Star caliber first baseman Mark Teixeira from Texas. Those who think Chipper Jones is declining fast should take a closer look at his numbers (.337BA, 29HR, 102), which indicate otherwise. Despite losing center fielder Andruw Jones to the Dodgers, the Braves feel they will be fine with Mark Kotsay. Throw in catcher Brian McCann and outfielder Jeff Francoeur and that's about 200RBI. John Smoltz still gets the job done, and along with Tim Hudson, they have a pair of starters that together won 30 games. Lefties Tom Glavine and Mike Hampton are question marks due to age and past injuries respectively.



**4. Washington Nationals:** As the National open up a new stadium, the team would like to do so with a renewed sense of optimism that they can seriously compete for a playoff spot at some point in the next few years. Headlining this group is third baseman Ryan Zimmerman, whose work with the bat and glove make it rather clear that he's going to be a perennial All-Star in the big leagues. More support in the lineup would help, though. Nick Johnson, Austin Kearns, Willy Mo Pena and Paul Lo Duca are hot/cold usually, and it's uncertain just how good Lastings Milledge will be. Manny Acta's Nats have a pretty underrated bullpen, featuring live arms such as Jon Rauch and Luis Ayala bridging the gap to closer Chad Cordero. Finding an ace that they can build the rotation around ought to be the main priority in the next couple years.



**5. Florida Marlins:** It's hard to find many bright spots for a few that has annually has one of the lowest payrolls and attendance figures in baseball, yet has two World Series titles since 1997, something only the Boston Red Sox and New York Yankees can say. Okay, there's one real positive since this team spends a whole lot less than those two juggernauts. Florida will find it a tough go of things in 2008 as they lost their prized offensive player in Miguel Cabrera and Dontrelle Willis, their best pitcher. Both are now in Detroit. There are some pretty decent hitters in the Marlins' lineup, five of which hit 17 or more home runs. Shortstop Hanley Ramirez (.332BA, 29HR, 81RBI, 51SB) would be talked about as one of the elite players in baseball if he played for a better team. What will be the Marlins' downfall once again is their starting pitching, which finished last in the NL when it came to their starters' ERA (5.58).

#### NATIONAL LEAGUE CENTRAL:



**1. Chicago Cubs:** Lou Piniella's first season as Manager of the Cubs wasn't too bad as it resulted in a division title, but an opening round playoff

flameout where they were swept by the Arizona Diamondbacks. Looking to get back to the postseason this year, the Cubs will turn to their bats once again to heat up and carry them there, particularly the likes of Alfonso Soriano, Derrek Lee and Aramis Ramirez. Those three combined to swat 81 homers and drive in 259 runs. Whether the rest of the batting order produces remains to be seen at this point, although it is worth noting one interesting addition to keep an eye on for Chicago and that is Japanese import Kosuke Fukudome. Once again the pitching staff is anchored by the glue and guts of this team, fiery right-hander Carlos Zambrano. Southpaw Ted Lilly hopes to have another 15-win season. In the bullpen, Carlos Marmol throws great heat and may become the closer if Kerry Wood and others fail to deliver when their opportunity is presented.



**2. Milwaukee Brewers:** Going 83-79 a year ago, the Brewers nearly made the playoffs for the first time since 1982, but stumbled to the finish line, particularly during the months of July and August when they went 20-34. The Cubs rallied to win the NL Central and really did most of their work in July when they made up 6.5 games in the standings. There are plenty of impact guys – Rickie Weeks, J.J. Hardy, MVP candidate Prince Fielder (50HR, 119RBI) and reigning NL Rookie of the Year Ryan Braun (34HR) – throughout their batting order that scoring runs shouldn't really be a problem. Starting pitchers Ben Sheets, who's always an injury concern, and Jeff Suppan won 12 games apiece last year. If those two can win about 15 each, plus get a better season than the 5-12 mark posted by Chris Capuano, say a .500 record or better instead, then getting to the postseason becomes a distinct possibility. How the bullpen does with Eric Gagne, Guillermo Mota, Salomon Torres and Derrick Turnbow could decide their fate in the end.



**3. Cincinnati Reds:** The Cincinnati Reds are the second oldest team in Major League Baseball, trailing only the Houston Astros. With age comes a higher risk of injuries and that really rings true with one of the team's featured players, Ken Griffey Jr. New Manager Dusty Baker knows that a healthy Griffey, who enters the season seven home runs shy of 600 for his career, is essential for a playoff run. Also important will be getting a bounce back year from Bronson Arroyo. Last season Arroyo went 9-15 with an ERA of 4.23, but the season before that he was really good, especially in the first half. A big year from Arroyo to team with Aaron Harang (16-6, 3.73ERA, 218K) at the top of the rotation would considerably help the Reds' chances of enjoying their first winning season since 2000. New closer Francisco Cordero offers more stability to the bullpen, and the offense has some decent power when you realize that Griffey, Brandon Phillips and Adam Dunn combined to hit 100 home runs last year.



**4. Houston Astros:** Stepping in for Phil Garner as Manager, Cecil Cooper inherits an Astros team that has seen its win total decline each season since posting 92 victories in 2004. Houston doesn't have as strong of a pitching staff as it once

did, but in order to keep the one star hurler they have – Roy Oswalt – others must step forward in a big way. The Astros got rid of as many as 14 players and brought in about ten or 11 new guys that will hold down significant roles. Among them are shortstop Miguel Tejada, second baseman Kaz Matsui, reliever Oscar Villarreal and new closer Jose Valverde. Such a roster overhaul is hard to expect a great turnaround from considering they lost about as many important parts as they gained. Unless Carlos Lee and Lance Berkman go from 30+ homers apiece to 40+ each, look for them to stay around .500 all year long.



**5. St. Louis Cardinals:** Following up a World Series Championship in 2006, the 2007 version of the Cardinals didn't get or make nearly as many breaks along the way. Their 78-84 record marked the club's first losing season since 1999. Under Tony La Russa's watch, they've made the playoffs seven times in 13 seasons. La Russa has the hitter to lead them there in the great Albert Pujols, regarded by many as the most dangerous slugger in the National League. Also, Adam Wainwright appears to be headed in the right direction in his development as a top guy in the rotation. The problem? St. Louis' pitching really is a mystery when you get to the #3, #4 and #5 starters. Parting ways with fan favorites such as Jim Edmonds, Scott Rolen and David Eckstein didn't sit well with a lot of people either.



**6. Pittsburgh Pirates:** Unless they are able to shock the baseball world and win 81 or more games this year after losing 90+ in each of the past four seasons, the Pirates will have the dubious distinction of suffering through 16 straight losing seasons. If that happens, and there's a strong chance it will, then it'll be a new Major League record. Outfielder Jason Bay went cold at the end of last year and the Pirates are desperately hoping he can get off to a fast start for a lineup that didn't rank any higher than tenth in the NL in any major statistical category. Xavier Nady and Adam LaRoche are probably the only two hitters that are capable of smacking 30 home runs, and Nady could get dealt before the summer ends. Matt Capps seems to be the solution to their previous closer problems, but they are still searching for answers in the rotation.

#### NATIONAL LEAGUE WEST:



**1. Arizona Diamondbacks:** In the rotation, the trio of 2006 Cy Young Award winner Brandon Webb, off-season acquisition Dan Haren and young up and comer Micah Owings are about as formidable as it gets. The D-Backs aren't great offensively, but they've got a lot of good young talent with Justin Upton, Mark Reynolds, Stephen Drew, Conor Jackson and Chris Young – who quietly hit 32 home runs last year. Arizona's closer situation is a bit dicey as Brandon Lyon looks to be the guy in the ninth inning in replacing Jose Valverde, now a member of the Astros. Fellow relievers Chad

Qualls and Juan Cruz could get save chances as well. Another division crown and deep postseason run for Bob Melvin and company is definitely not out of the question.

## Los Angeles

**2. Los Angeles Dodgers:** Joe Torre, the former Skipper of the New York Yankees, is now the new Manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, a franchise thirsty for their first World Series trip in twenty years. In order for the Dodgers to be more competitive than last year's 82-80 finish, they've got to improve on their 34-38 record against fellow NL West members. Torre has a lot of young talent to groom, primarily guys like Andre Ethier, James Loney and offensive-minded catcher Russell Martin. At the top, Juan Pierre (64SB) continues to be a pest on the base pads for opponents, and Rafel Furcal can be a run scorer too as long as he doesn't get bothered by injuries. Adding Andruw Jones not only adds a much-needed power threat to the heart of the order, but gives them a Gold Glove winning center fielder. Brad Penny, Derek Lowe and Chad Billingsley make up an above average front-ended of the rotation.

## COLORADO

**3. Colorado Rockies:** It was a great September and October for the Colorado Rockies, who reached the World Series for the first time ever in franchise history last season. Although they were swept by the Boston Red Sox in that Fall Classic, the run they had at the end of the season was quite amazing as they won 17 of 18 games to get there. Doing that again seems extremely far fetched, but another playoff berth might be well within reach. Outfielder Matt Holliday has ascended into an MVP candidate, taking over as the team's top hitter for first baseman Todd Helton, who remains steady and someone they can depend on for a .300-plus batting average and around 100RBI. Willy Taveras gives them speed (33SB), Troy Tulowitzki is the best fielder in the game that didn't win a Gold Glove last year and Brad Hawpe and Garrett Atkins can hit 30+ homers each. If you ask me though, someone other than Jeff Francis (17-9) has to step up in the rotation to get back in the playoffs.

## SAN DIEGO

**4. San Diego Padres:** In a division that has become more reliant on top-tier starting pitching than super sluggers, Manager Bud Black has the luxury of having two of the top starting pitchers in the National League – Cy Young Award winner Jake Peavy and Chris Young – as well as the game's all-time saves leader in Trevor Hoffman. When it comes to producing runs, this team manufactures them more than anything. Other than first baseman Adrian Gonzalez (30HR, 100RBI) and occasionally Khalil Greene, they don't have power threats that opposing pitchers have to worry about. They do have some older guys whose better days are behind them in Jim Edmonds, Robert Fick, Brian Giles, Greg Maddux and even Hoffman, who could surrender the closer's role to superb setup man Heath Bell by season's end.



**5. San Francisco Giants:** Gone is Barry Bonds, baseball's all-time career home run king who spent the past 15 seasons with the San Francisco Giants. The only real significant free agent acquisition that they made was bringing in outfielder Aaron Rowand, a tough-minded, hard-nosed player who'll help. However, Rowand and a young starting rotation headlined by Tim Lincecum won't be enough to make the Giants a playoff threat in the competitive, improving NL West. This team desperately needs more power in their batting order, so expect a fourth consecutive losing season.

### **2008 Postseason Picks:**

**AL Wild Card – NY Yankees**

**NL Wild Card – Philadelphia Phillies**

**ALCS: Seattle def. Boston**

**NLCS: Arizona def. NY Mets**

**World Series: Arizona def. Seattle**