

Last year, the St Louis Cardinals went 83-79 yet took the World Series. Their opponents in the final—the Detroit Tigers—were only three years removed from a historically bad 43-119 season. Major League Baseball (MLB) can be almost impossible to predict, which is why we're going to do it, and highlight some of the major storylines to watch in the 2007 season along the way.

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# SPRING TRAINING

With Opening Day on Monday, the *Gateway's* expert panel pitches itself into the swing of the baseball season

## DIVISION PREVIEWS

### National League East

Last year, the Mets finally found a way to top the Atlanta Braves and win the division—all it took was over \$150 million in team salary—and they're the favourites to win it again. New York came one win away from their first pennant in six years and are bringing back essentially the same group, but look out for 2006 NL MVP Ryan Howard and the Philadelphia Phillies. Manager Charlie Manuel has taken this team within one win of the post-season the last two years, and with Chase Utley and Jimmy Rollins up the middle, the Phils should contend again. The Florida Marlins were a breath of fresh air last season, but after NL Manager of the Year Joe Girardi was fired, this team doesn't look to be as competitive as last season. They still have the best crop of young talent in the bigs, though. And don't forget about the Washington Nationals and the Braves; though they're in rebuilding years and their pitching looks like the turf at Olympic Stadium—thin and patchy—they still have pride.

- 1) New York Mets
- 2) Philadelphia Phillies
- 3) Florida Marlins
- 4) Atlanta Braves
- 5) Washington Nationals

### American League East

As it was last year, a three-team race for first will emerge from this division with the Boston Red Sox, New York Yankees and Toronto Blue Jays all seeming to be legitimate contenders. After making a couple significant pick-ups in the off-season, the Jays should be able to improve upon the 87-75 showing they had in '06, giving the Yanks and the Sox an even greater run for their money. However, if Toronto's pitching staff can't stay healthy, either of the other two will have an easy ride to a playoff berth. Both teams have suspect pitching, but their batting lineups are the best two in baseball, with stars like Alex Rodriguez, Hideki Matsui, Bobby Abreu and Jason Giambi forming the heart of the Yankees. Boston counters with Manny Ramirez, David Ortiz and off-season acquisition JD Drew. Once again, the Baltimore Orioles and the Tampa Bay Rays will pose no threat for the division title and will likely finish below .500. Both teams are stocked with young talent, but not enough of it can pitch to turn them around.

- 1) New York Yankees
- 2) Toronto Blue Jays
- 3) Boston Red Sox
- 4) Tampa Bay Rays
- 5) Baltimore Orioles

### National League Central

The St Louis Cardinals have been to the World Series the last two years, and are the defending champs, so winning the weakest division in baseball should be a snap. They still have the best pitcher in the division, Chris Carpenter, and the best hitter in all of baseball, Albert Pujols, but need both to stay healthy. Right on their heels will be the Houston Astros and Chicago Cubs. The 'Stros have big bats in the outfield in Lance Berkman and Carlos Lee, but will need to hope Roger Clemens chooses them again this year to compete. The long-suffering Cubs, meanwhile, revamped their roster with big free-agent signings in Alfonso Soriano and Ted Lilly. The Cubs spent a lot of money this off-season, but it won't end their 88-year title drought. The Milwaukee Brewers don't have the pitching to contend, and neither do the Cincinnati Reds, though the latter could be a potential. Bringing up the rear are the hapless Pittsburgh Pirates.

- 1) St Louis Cardinals
- 2) Chicago Cubs
- 3) Cincinnati Reds
- 4) Houston Astros
- 5) Milwaukee Brewers
- 6) Pittsburgh Pirates

### American League Central

While top of this division could still be seen as a four-team race, the Minnesota Twins will be hard pressed to put up another division-winning record, with 2006 standout pitcher Francisco Liriano out of the lineup for the entire season. Thus, expect any of the Detroit Tigers, Chicago White Sox or Cleveland Indians to take it. The Tigers—coming off of a World Series appearance, and now with the bat of Gary Sheffield in their lineup—seem to be an early favourite; although, one can never count out the batters in the middle of Chicago's lineup, like Jim Thome, Paul Konerko and Jermaine Dye, providing the solid hitting that the Chi-Sox will need to contend. Cleveland boasts a solid rotation, but it's less talented than the Sox's and Tigers' staffs. The Indians do have the best hitter in the division, as DH Travis Hafner is coming off a ridiculous season that saw him put up 42 homers in an injury-shortened season. The hapless Kansas City Royals won't improve their standing this year pitted against four of the toughest teams in baseball.

- 1) Detroit Tigers
- 2) Chicago White Sox
- 3) Minnesota Twins
- 4) Cleveland Indians
- 5) Kansas City Royals

### National League West

The only saving grace of the division might be the Los Angeles Dodgers, possessing the best rotation in the division with the trio of Derek Lowe, Jason Schmidt and Brad Penny, who're a better combination than any five-man group any other team can boast.

At the other end of the spectrum lie the Colorado Rockies. With a popgun offence that looks better than it is thanks to Coors Field—and wasn't even that impressive at home last season—and a rotation that, while improved, is still mostly young and untested, the Rockies are destined to be bottom-feeders once again. The Arizona Diamondbacks will be hot on their heels in the race for the bottom though as they'll struggle with youth and general inconsistency.

The rest of the division will be a jumble as the others teams fight their own problems. For the San Francisco Giants dealing with the Barry Bonds show and old age will keep them from challenging LA. Only the San Diego Padres have a chance, but they need their hitting to catch up to their pitching if they want a pennant this year.

- 1) LA Dodgers
- 2) San Diego Padres
- 3) San Francisco Giants
- 4) Arizona Diamondbacks
- 5) Colorado Rockies

### American League West

The American League West reads like one big question mark; there isn't a sure thing in the division. Reigning champs Oakland have lost ace Barry Zito and comeback player of the year Frank Thomas to free agency and haven't added anybody to compensate. The Texas Rangers still think that offence wins championships over pitching, even though that strategy hasn't paid off in a decade. The hitters they do have are in decline, and Mark Teixeira, Hank Blalock and Michael Young will need to return to 2005 form for the Rangers to have any hope of contention. The Anaheim Angels think that Shea Hillenbrand will solve their hitting woes—he won't. And the Seattle Mariners, well, if they stay healthy, and Richie Sexson and Adrian Beltre return to form, they could surprise, but blue-chipper Felix Hernandez needs to breakout. Overall, there doesn't seem to be a World Series contender in the bunch and more "what ifs" than "should bes."

- 1) Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim
- 2) Oakland A's
- 3) Texas Rangers
- 4) Seattle Mariners