

Around the Horn

The New Jays

It looks like GM JP Ricciardi has finally shed his *Moneyball* roots and decided that spending is the way to win. Besides giving franchise player Vernon Wells the biggest contract in team history, Ricciardi did what no other GM dared—give Frank Thomas a raise. The Big Hurt is coming off a huge year that saw him slug 39 homers and earn the Comeback Player of the Year award. Still, with his history of injuries and the turf at Rogers Centre, Thomas will have a tough time duplicating last season. Ricciardi also signed an aging John Thomson and injury-plagued Mets cast off Victor Zambrano to shore up the rotation, veteran defensive whiz Royce Clayton to fill the gap Russ Adams couldn't at short, and Sal Fasano to backup Gregg Zaun behind the dish. All in all, the acquisitions don't inspire much confidence and the hopes of the Jays reaching the post-season for the first time in 14 years remain faint.

The surly home run king

After an up-and-down 2006 season that started with a slump and turned into four solid months of sub-par performance, Barry Bonds has opted to forgo retirement and sign a one-year, \$15.8 million contract with the San Francisco Giants.

While the 42-year-old is surely out of his prime, this season has him only 21 home runs shy of Hank Aaron's career record of 755. Bonds has previously stated that he doesn't care about breaking the record, but amidst last years accusations of steroid use and getting over knee surgery from 2005, it's hard to believe that he isn't back to take a final run at it.

Will Bonds break Hank Aaron's 31-year-old record? Probably. But it will be more interesting to see how the media and league handles it. After all, MLB refused to acknowledge the Large-Headed One when he passed Babe Ruth for second all-time, and Bonds has always been truculent with the media. He once berated a reporter in a press conference saying, "Next question, because it was stupid."

Where is the Rocket aimed?

There's only one man in baseball that can say he'll play only half a year and still have teams clawing at one another to win his services: Roger Clemens. This year, there are a handful of teams vying for the opportunity to land the future Hall of Famer for a mid-season run—probably because he posted a 2.30 ERA at age 44 last season. Though Clemens hasn't decided if he will return or for which team, the chances of a late May or early June Rocket launch is highly probable. The most likely destinations are the Red Sox, Rangers, Astros and Yankees. Of these four, the Yankees will likely make the biggest push. With the departure of Randy Johnson, the acquisition of Andy Pettite, an almost guaranteed playoff spot and enough money to bring Cy Young back from the dead, the Yankees seem to be in the best position to make a deal. That is, if Roger likes striking out major leaguers more than coaching and playing golf.

Top free agents, but at what cost?

MLB is notorious for big money free agent signings. This off-season was no different, with a wealth of free agents getting signed for ridiculous amounts of money. But with eight other players on the field, spending over \$100 million on one player may not always be the wisest course of action.

The Houston Astros picked up left fielder Carlos Lee for \$100 million over six years. After losing the World Series in 2005 and not making the playoffs last season, the Astros could use all the help they can get this season. With a 2006 batting average of .322 and an OBP of .389, signing Lee could definitely pay off.

The Chicago Cubs have declined in the NL Central each season since 2003, when they won the division and came within five outs of the World Series. Simply put, signing centre fielder Alfonso Soriano to an eight-year \$136 million contract won't solve the problems the team faces. Soriano's 2006 numbers aren't even that great. The money they're throwing around would be better used to trim the ivy in Wrigley's outfield.

The San Francisco Giants signed left-hander Barry Zito for seven years at \$126 million. Zito, who's a strong believer in Zen, is going to have difficult finding time to meditate with all the problems in San Fran. Aside from Zito, the Giants have a pretty mediocre pitching roster.

Adding Zito to the mix is definitely a good move, but for the Giants to have success, the rest of the bullpen is going to have to step it up in '07.

The LA Dodgers had strong 2006 season but were swept by the New York Mets in the first round of the playoffs. With an already well-rounded team, the acquisition of pitcher Jason Schmidt for \$47 million over three years seems like one of the most logical pickups this year. Schmidt has solid career numbers and, if he can get his velocity up—it's been lacking in the pre-season—the Dodgers could be a strong contender this year.

Konichiwa, Matsuzaka-san

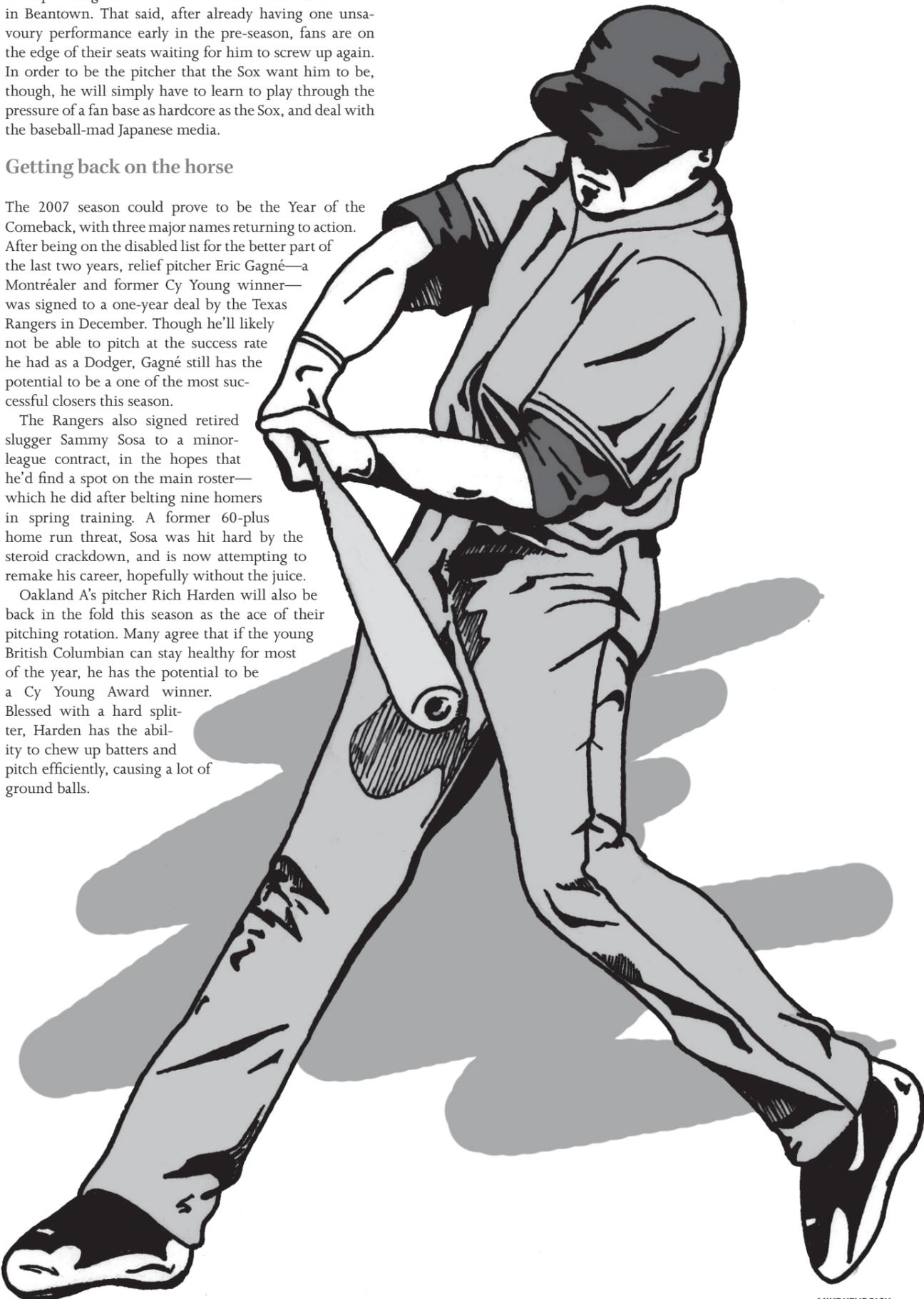
It's entirely possible that the city of Boston may explode before the end of the 2007 baseball season should Japanese-import Daisuke Matsuzaka fail to live up to the hype. Casuals and diehards alike will be watching impatiently to see whether "Dice-K"—who went 17–5 last year with the Seibu Lions, and cost Boston \$51 million just to attempt to negotiate a contract—can become the new ace in Beantown. That said, after already having one unsavoury performance early in the pre-season, fans are on the edge of their seats waiting for him to screw up again. In order to be the pitcher that the Sox want him to be, though, he will simply have to learn to play through the pressure of a fan base as hardcore as the Sox, and deal with the baseball-mad Japanese media.

Getting back on the horse

The 2007 season could prove to be the Year of the Comeback, with three major names returning to action. After being on the disabled list for the better part of the last two years, relief pitcher Eric Gagné—a Montréaler and former Cy Young winner—was signed to a one-year deal by the Texas Rangers in December. Though he'll likely not be able to pitch at the success rate he had as a Dodger, Gagné still has the potential to be a one of the most successful closers this season.

The Rangers also signed retired slugger Sammy Sosa to a minor-league contract, in the hopes that he'd find a spot on the main roster—which he did after belting nine homers in spring training. A former 60-plus home run threat, Sosa was hit hard by the steroid crackdown, and is now attempting to remake his career, hopefully without the juice.

Oakland A's pitcher Rich Harden will also be back in the fold this season as the ace of their pitching rotation. Many agree that if the young British Columbian can stay healthy for most of the year, he has the potential to be a Cy Young Award winner. Blessed with a hard splitter, Harden has the ability to chew up batters and pitch efficiently, causing a lot of ground balls.



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