

2005 INSIDE THE FLY BY NIGHT

Welcome to another season of the FBN! I will be posting my annual preseason review one division at a time. First up will be the AL East.

In spite of Hazardville repeating last season a trend towards parity is becoming evident. There were only a few really bad teams last season. This is a marked change over years past where the league was loaded with 100 win and 100 loss teams. The trend towards parity continues this year, as there are only a hand full of what I would consider bad teams. And most of the teams that are clearly out of playoff contention are still solid offensively. For the most part what separates the haves from the have nots is pitching.

This parity I speak of makes projecting final standings and playoff teams a little tougher than it once was. Prior to last season I had predicted playoff teams correctly about 85% of the time. Last season I was 6 for 8 or 75%. I missed on the Klubbers.... don't know what I was thinking predicting them to make the playoffs. The other one was California, and I give myself some slack on that one since the Dreamers decided to rebuild during the season. I think had they not done that they would have contended. In any case I have been doing these newsletters since 1996 and have never had more than 2 wrong. So chances are if I say you are not making the playoffs, you ain't making the playoffs.

I start with the AL West.... for team details please click on this link:

Projected Finish- AL East

BATON ROUGE SILVER BULLETS

LOUISVILLE RIVER BANDITS

LAKE WOBEGON WHIPPETS

URPAIGN DRAGONS

MAINE YAKS

ILLINOIS PRAIRIE DOGS

It promises to be another competitive season in the AL East. Baton Rouge has some serious flaws.... namely Kenny Lofton (4e5) manning CF and a pretty weak bullpen. However, they clearly have one of the best starting rotations in the league, led by Schilling, Zambrano, Perez and Mussina. In addition, Sheffield and Thome still lead a kick ass offense. Therefore I am picking them to win the division in spite of their shortcomings.

I actually had the Whippets scoring the wild card spot but decided to make it Louisville instead. Very tough call. I know Tony is fishing for another starter. I am assuming that he comes up with something. Tony, don't let me down! ☺ You heard it here first, if Ponson pitches more than 150 innings it will cost the River Bandits a chance to repeat as

AL champs. With Pujols and Helton in the middle of the lineup it's a formidable run-scoring machine. In addition the pen is great with Foulke, Ryan and Cordero.

Lake Wobegon is much improved this year and will definitely hang in there for a playoff spot. Santana is a monster and Davis and Westbrook are very solid. The pen is also improved with the acquisition of Isringhausen and Guardado. The defense is a little shaky...mostly 3's with a couple of 4's sprinkled in. I like Jim's attention to detail and if the Whippets beat out the more talented Bandit's, I'll attribute it to that.

Urpaign has an interesting team. You have Pedro Martinez, Jim Edmonds and a ton of useful no-name guys like Carroll, Surhoff and Hatteberg. Problem is, I just can't see them doing really well with lefties Sabathia, Leiter and Redman eating up a lot of innings. Baton Rouge and Louisville crush lefties and should eat those guys for lunch.

Maine is another pretty good team. The acquisition of Radke solidifies the rotation, while Arod and Derrick Lee anchor an adequate if unspectacular offense...also a little too right handed for my taste. One thing the Yaks have going for them is the division's best defense. However, I think the bullpen will be their downfall. Madson is pretty good, but by no means a stud closer. The rest of the pen is very mediocre.

Illinois should be a lot better than they were last year, but until they prove they can win on the road I don't expect them to post a good record. Their best pitchers are Perez and Milton...both southpaws...who again will have to face some of the lefty crushers in this division. Perez should hold his own but Milton will get lit up. The pen is very crowded but should prove to be an asset when it's sorted out. Offensively a little weak against righties once you get beyond Ortiz and Guererro. All said, a very good 6th place team.

Good luck guys. NL East up next.

NL EAST

Projected Finish:

Hazardville Powerkegs

Allyn Street 89ERS

Poquonock Chiefs

Burlington Buccaneers

US Jarheads

Wall Street Barons

The Kegs and 89ERS have dominated this division in recent memory. Both have made the playoffs the last two years, per my projections. It really has been a no-brainer. However, those days may be coming to an end soon.... maybe even as soon as 2005. As you can see I am still projecting the Kegs and 89ERS to finish 1-2, but this year I do it with great reservation.

I have no concern with Hazardville. The two time champs are still the cream of this crop. Still very good rotation with Oswalt, Buerle, Lidle, Hudson and Washburn. Those guys seem to alternate annually in terms of who's best and who's worst. Oswalt is probably the best this year, Hudson is actually a bit down and I think Lidle is much improved over last year. The pen is not as good this year as it has been. Gagne is a mere mortal and the other guys are just ok. Offensively still very sound with Rolen, Tejada and Beltran leading the way...excellent defensive team. Clearly the best team in this division and the NL for that matter. However, I think they will have to be a little lucky to three-peat since they are not head and shoulders above the competition. A mild upset in the playoffs would be all it would take. Still a great accomplishment to have won twice with the opportunity to make it three.

The 89ERS are clearly not the team they were last two seasons when they averaged 98 wins and represented the NL East both years as the wild card. They still have a potent and deep offense led by a slew of good hitters like Berkman, Lowell, Durazo and Wilkerson. Defense has not been a strength but may actually be improved this year since Nefi Perez is slated to start at second in front of Soriano. The pen also continues to be a big asset with Wagner, Dotel and newbie Duchscherer sure to see tons of action. However, the off season by last year's workhorse Halliday and the decline of Ortiz and Nomo have left the rotation seriously wanting. Generally having a guy like Trachsel as your ace won't get you too far. So clearly the 89ERS can be had but I'm not sure anyone else is ready to take them down.

In not for their own rotation issues I would say the Chiefs would be ready to over take Allyn Street. However, no Chief pitched as much as 200 innings and Kerry Wood who missed part of the year while pitching just ok and Joe Kennedy appears to be the best of the bunch. Padilla is also ok but is only good for 127 innings. Then you are looking at luminaries like Fogg, Gobble and Cabrera. The Chiefs did improve their pen markedly vs. last year by acquiring Rivera and Kolb from the Parrotheads and Baez pitched well...but I don't think they are enough to overcome the starting pitching. Bud has done a wonderful job loading up on young position players with up and coming stars like Morneau, K. Green, Wright, and Cabrera. There is lots of quality and depth already and the Chiefs will mash this year with the best of them. They are even one of the leagues best defensive teams with 2's all over the place and even a 1 at 2B with Hudson. If they can get a top starter or two to go with Wood this could be a dominant team very soon. The future could even be pushed into 2005 but I'm not betting on it.

Another team that could definitely push Allyn Street this year is Burlington. The Bucs were not far away last season winning 90. Aside from Huff in the outfield they play solid defense. Even though Ordonez missed much of the season the development of guys like Victor Martinez and Ben Broussard along with the steady Huff and Monster Mora make for a very good offense. The strength of the team last year was it's starting pitching and it will be good again in spite of Vazquez getting Yankeeified. Without Vazquez at his best they have no ace, but they are solid 1-5. Last season's weakness was the bullpen, and in spite of draft day pickups Howry and Madritsch the pen is still a problem spot. I really think this team could be a stud reliever or two away from over taking the 89ERS.

The Jarheads probably have their best on-base team in my memory. A lot of that is from the 2004 draft where the Jarheads scored Overbay in round two and Freel and Ford in round four. Those guys will bat 1-3 in the Jarhead lineup this year with a 48, 47 and 44 on base count respectively. Bill also took bullpen studs Lidge and Linbrink in round two. Wow...that's one hell of a draft. He also took Brandon Webb with the 2nd pick in the draft. Can you imagine if he took Teixeira with that pick? That would have been one of the great drafts ever! Now it's understandable that he took Webb since the lack of quality starting pitching has been the bane of Bill's existence for some time. With Web's help the Jarheads won a respectable 89 games last season. Unfortunately, in spite of the great draft the Jarheads will not likely match that number as Webb has fallen back and no one has stepped up to take his place atop the rotation. To make matters worse, Pieniero, who looked like an up and comer, had regressed some. Bill took some grief last year for trading his #1 this year to get Jason Johnson.... but it looks like Johnson will be the Jarhead "ace" this year. Good luck with that.

Wall Street is in virtually the same boat as the Jarheads except his offense isn't quite as good and he's only got one stud in the pen.... could have had two had he not shipped Nathan off to New England. However, like US, two bullpen studs would not have been enough so I think Joe was wise to trade Nathan. While I think Joe has done a good job in the draft the past five years I will point to the fact that during that time he has only selected two starting pitchers in round 1, Zito in 2001 and Myers in 2003. Big trades during that time have netted excellent position players like Jeter and Abreu but to my knowledge no starting pitching...I think that has led to a shortage of quality pitching on Wall Street. I really like their draft this year with Upton, Holliday, Laroche and Brazoban.... but again no starting pitching.... which by the way made sense as there wasn't much starting pitching to be had in this year's draft. However, this self anointed expert thinks that the Baron front office is going to have to suck it up and pay for some starting pitching soon if they are going to compete with the Kegs and others after the champs.... easier said than done I know. This season the Barons will certainly be competitive but will struggle to get out of the cellar. If their position players stay healthy and develop as expected they will be able to focus on pitching next draft and possibly take that next step.

AL WEST

Projected Finish:

Arsenal Gunners

California Dreamers

Florida Sun

Hart Street Hogs

York Town Admirals

Hotlanta Possums

First year back in the AL for the Hogs after a successful visit to the NL. The Hogs are hoping to help bring some glory back to the AL after seeing the NL win the World Series 9 of the last 10 seasons. Prior to that the AL had won 5 consecutive years. Everything goes in cycles. This swami foresees good times coming soon to the AL.... but if it starts in 2005 it won't likely come from Hart Street. Most likely candidates to come out of the AL West are Arsenal, California and Florida. It's really a crapshoot between the three. Hart Street has an outside chance to contend. York Town and Hotlanta have no shot this year.

Is the 2005 FBN Champ likely to come out of this division? How do I know? I will say I don't see any team that knocks my socks off.... but some of the league's best starting pitching can be found here.... and generally speaking I think once you get into the playoffs starting pitching is huge.

Starting pitching is something Arsenal is blessed with. How happy is Dean that Roger Clemens decided to come out of retirement? Clemens, a rejuvenated Freddy Garcia, and a surprising Ryan Dress anchor a very solid starting rotation. The bullpen is nothing special and lacks the lights out closer, but should be adequate. Offensively this is a team to be reckoned with. Barry Bonds is a serious force when he has quality hitters in front and back of him.... something the Gunners have figured out but the Giants haven't. With Blalock and Javy Lopez protecting Bonds teams will have to pitch to Bonds. Consequently the Gunners will score lots of runs.

Hey, if you win championships with pitching and defense, California is your team. With the Morpheus Park dimensions of 1's all around the games there may end up resembling soccer matches.... will the announcers be confused and yell "GOAL!!" on the rare occasion a runner crosses the plate? The Dreamers don't figure to score that many runs but with Randy Johnson and Livan Hernandez starting half of their games they won't have to score that much to win. I still don't like having so many lefties in the rotation but it certainly helps that one of them is the Big Unit. The pen is just ok. Hawkins is an excellent closer but the rest of the bunch is pretty ordinary. As I said, they don't scare you with their offensive prowess...a far cry from those late '90's Dreamer teams that bashed 300 HRs. They are particularly weak against righties and whack lefties pretty good. They are very good defensively, especially on the infield with Boone, Renteria and Bell. They will be tough to beat at home.

After years at the top the Florida Sun finally came down to earth last season winning only 81. Is age catching up with them? If that's the case they might be rearing up and gasping one last breath in 2005 as old guizers(sp?) Maddux, Glavine, Franco, Alou , Vizquel et all seem primed for one last shot. Solid rotation although Maddux and Colon may suffer some from gopheritis, and a good closer...though the pen could use more depth. Petty solid defense except at 2B and a nice balanced offense with Dejesus, Vizquel and Snow offering on-base at the top and Alou and Rodriguez rounding out the middle of the order with excellent punch. A very solid team that should hang right in there. My gut just tells me that Arsenal and California will win the day.

Coming off a 42-win season where the Hogs were gutted (again), this year's squad bears little resemblance to that rag-tag bunch. The Hogs chose to continue the rebuilding process this season rather than go for relief pitching in the draft. Consequently the Hogs will be competitive this year but I can't see them winning more than 80-85 games. The Hogs certainly appear to be set up to succeed soon however with young studs everywhere. There's Peavy and Prior leading the rotation, closer in training Chad Cordero, young power hitters Teixeira and Dunn and a fine young leadoff hitter in Juan Pierre. Being totally subjective of course, I'd have to say that this team and the Chiefs have the rosters most likely to dominate 3-5 years down the road. I'll let you know how that turned out in 2010. For 2005, a very good offensive and defensive team. Really the only thing standing between the Hogs and serious contention is a 100% Prior and a couple of bullpen studs...of course they don't have that so it'll likely be wait til next year and play the spoiler.

Yorktown doesn't have enough pitching to contend. Mulder and Miller had off years...and they can't win when that happens. The offense is really good so they'll still win some games. Delgado, Chavez and Ramirez in the middle of the lineup ain't too shabby. Hard to win with Brian Anderson in your rotation though, not to mention the human batting practice machine Carlos Silva. But there is hope for next year if the M&Ms bounce back.

Yorktown pitching looks like mighty fine, however, compared to the smucks pitching for the snake bitten Possums. The Possums will not win many low scoring games with a rotation that led by Estes, Ishii and Acevedo. I say snake bitten because I think Hotlanta has drafted it's fair share of starting pitching but they never seem to pan out. Last year they took SF starter Williams high in round one. He may still be good but his stock has certainly plummeted. Oh well...them's the breaks. They have had much better luck drafting position players with guys like A. Jones, Beltre and M. Giles. However, until this team is able to acquire some quality starting pitching they can depend on year in and year out, it's going to be an uphill struggle.

NL WEST

Projected Finish:

Jersey City G-Men

Connecticut Blue Devils

New England Angels

Klee's Klubbers

Margaritaville Parrotheads

Salem Psychics

This division is my curse! This is the third time I've done the write up. I keep losing it.

Anyhow, for the third time I will say that I did not save the best for last. This is not only the weakest division but also will likely be the least competitive in terms of a pennant race. Jersey City is clearly the favorite. If they don't make the playoffs I might have to start buying into some of Dom's claims that there is a Griffin Curse. I also think that Connecticut is close to a lock though New England could put up a fight.

The G-Men have a nice rotation with Schmidt, Bonderman, Penny, Wright and Suppan. Plus the pen is very good....Gordon is lights out as is Calero....talk about better lucky than good....I would have never figured those two to be as good as they were. The only thing lacking is a situational lefty. Offensively the team is solid. I think in retrospect Dom would agree he over paid for Burnitz, especially seeing the card he got. But I thought he got Blake pretty cheap so you win some and you lose some. The loss of Thomas for part of the year and Salmon maybe forever hurts some, but this team just seems to keep trucking on each year. Larkin as SS is a huge weakness defensively....plus Klesco in LF and Blake at 3B are not gems either. I don't see a team with a "4" SS going deep into the playoffs.... but this team has enough going for them to overcome that during the regular season. Dom can always pick up a defensive player at the end of the year or maybe use Rey Sanchez more in the playoffs.

Perennial power Connecticut has the nice luxury of retooling a little and still contending. Traded away guys like Radke, Renteria and Bay to get a little younger. Even with those guys leaving town, the remaining guys are more than enough to contend in this division. The Blue Devils won't knock your socks off offensively or defensively.... very ordinary outside of Mueller and Hafner who kill righties and the usual assortment of lefty crushers. Counsel at SS (3) and Williams in CF (4) vs. LHP are the most glaring deficiencies afield. The strength of the team...and a key strength to have is it's pitching. Even without Radke the Devils trot out a very solid rotation with Pavano, Wells, Morris, Lopez and Lowry. No real aces but very solid. Morris will probably suffer because of his propensity towards the long ball. The pen will be great with Benitez, Mota, Adams and Gregg. I think the pen will be a difference maker for this team.

The Angels were very busy this off-season and should put an exciting team on the field. They are really the only team I see having a serious shot at challenging CT for the

wildcard.... but I don't think they have enough to overcome Garciparra's 4 at SS and Womack's 4 at 2B. Offensively, they have a lot of pop but not much on-base.... guys like Finley, Koskie and Konerko with fairly low on base but big diamond numbers. They will be getting a lot of solo HRs. With Nathan, Smoltz, Takatsu and Mendoza the Angels probably have the leagues best bullpen. Sheets is a Strat stud and should win a ton of games. However, after Sheets, the starting rotation gets a little rough with guys like Ortiz, Moyer and Batista. I think innings 1-6 are going to be problematic for this team...give them a lead though and you will go home a loser. Darkhorse.

I have vowed never again to predict a playoff spot for the Klubbers since they hose me every time I do. Fortunately I feel confident they don't have the horses to get over the hump this year....do they made it easy on me. Have you ever seen a team with so many mediocre to bad starting pitching innings? The only one any good is Lilly. Even the usually reliable Lawrence gives up too many dingers to LHH, Millwood had gone down the toilet, yada, yada, yada. I'm not sure taking Amanzar in the second round of the draft made sense unless their GM thinks they can contend or thinks the 30 year old reliever is just coming into his own. Why is it I feel so free to criticize Roland and give every one a free ride? Same reason dogs lick their you-know-whats... I guess I'm just hoping he picked the wrong guy in round 3 when he took catching prospect Snyder and I followed immediately with fellow Arizona catching hopeful Hill. Makes perfect logic that a crumby second round pick would be followed by a crumby third round pick, right? Anyhow, even with Amanzar whom will likely close for the Klub, the pen doesn't excite me. Ramirez, Posada and Palmiero drive a decent offense that klubs lefties and gets on base without the benefit of a lot of HR pop vs. righties. Nice freakish card by Dinty Mohr. Funny thing is this team could win the same 80 or so that last year's far superior team did. It'll help to play SP 18 times.

Ok, Parrotheads.... no chance to be drinking the victory margarita this year. Without Trot Nixon, a corner infielder who can hit his way out of a paper bag or a viable catcher this offense is the leagues most impotent this side of Salem. The rotation boasts some names you'll recognize like Lieber, Pettite and Hampton.... but aside from Pettite all there are is lefties that can't get righties out and righties who can't get lefties out. One thing they do have is a decent bullpen so make sure you get the starters. Shields and Torres provide a lot of solid setup innings and lefty rook Gonzalez is a lights out guy for 47 innings. But bottom line is no offense, weak starting pitching, top 5 pick.

Welcome back to the league Rich! I'm sorry I won't get to play you face to face this season....really sorry, I assure you! The rest of the NL West will get to fatten their win totals as Rich does his famous burn and pillage routine. It's worked in the past, and as you know Rich off loaded a mediocre Orlando squad and brought in a butt load of young guys and prospects. The laundry list starts with #1 pick Greinke and continues with guys like Mauer, Swisher, Barmes, Lopez and Cantu. If some of those guys live up to the hype and other youngsters like Bay, Patterson and Beckett progress the Psychics could be well on their way. I see this as a multi year rebuilding process however. Rich will no

doubt have his thrills and disappointments watching all these young guys this year. Good luck with that!

Ok, that's a wrap for this year's Inside the Fly By Night. I hope you enjoy it and do your best to prove me right or wrong. Have a great 2005 FBN Season!!!