

National League Preview

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The National League-East Division.

(1) **New York Mets** are a popular choice to win the pennant. The pitching staff consists of 20 game-winner David Cone, fire baller and former Cy Young award winner Dwight Gooden, plus aces Ron Darling, Sid Fernandez, and Bob Ojeda.

The Mets may have problems on offense, as both Gary Carter and Keith Hernandez showed their age last year when they suffered subpar seasons at the plate and on the field. Also, look for Darryl Strawberry to improve his paltry .196 batting average with runners in scoring position this season. The Mets still managed to lead the NL in runs (703).

Why will the Mets finish first? Pitching, pitching, and pitching. All the offense needs to do is give them adequate run support and nobody can stop the Mets this year.

(2) **St. Louis Cardinals.** This year Whitey Herzog may just move his team to a hospital, with Danny Cox (elbow), Pendleton (left knee), and Greg Mathews (tender left arm) already suffering from ailments.

The Cardinals will rely on Jose DeLeon (208 strikeouts), Joe Magrane (league best ERA in '88 with 2.18), Scott Terry, and rookie Cris Carpenter for starters. The bullpen is strong, with Todd Worrell (32 saves), Dan Quisenberry, Ken Dayley, and Frank DiPino.

If Pendleton returns, the Redbirds will have one of the most imposing batting orders in the East. If centerfielder Willie McGee can return to the run producing hitter that he used to be and Vince Coleman steals over 100 bases again, the Cards will produce.

They must also improve their play within the division (39-51) if they are to have any chance at challenging the Mets.

(3) **Pittsburgh Pirates.** The Buccos have returned to power under field general Jim Leyland and some shrewd front office maneuvers.

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The starting five should include Mike Dunne, Doug Drabek, John Smiley, Bob Walk, and Brian Fisher. Drabek lead the team in wins (15), and Walk was an All-star.

The Bucs feature what could be the best defensive outfield in baseball with Barry Bonds, Andy VanSlyke, and Glenn Wilson. The top of the batting order is potent

with Bonds(24 homers and 97 runs), VanSlyke(15 triples, 25 HR's, and 100 RBI's), and Bobby Bonilla (24 HR's and 100 RBI's). The Pirates lack production out of shortstop, a major reason for the trade of Felix Fermin to Cleveland for Jay Bell, a true hitting threat.

The Pirates need their pitching staff to be more consistent to make a run for the top.

(4) **Chicago Cubs.** Was 1984 that long ago? Rick Sutcliffe, Ryne Sandberg, and Scott Sanderson are the only remaining players from that pennant winning season. Don't expect the Cubbies to return anytime soon.

The pitching rotation includes Sutcliffe, Greg Maddux, Paul Kilgus, Mike Bielecki, and rookie Mike Harkey. Maddux (18), Sutcliffe (13), and Kilgus (12) were the only starters to win more than 10 games. The bullpen is unstable, as manager Don Zimmer will depend on wild fastballer Mitch Williams and Goose Gossage to breathe life into the league's worst relief pitching crew.

Although the Cubs lead the NL in hitting (.261), they hit only 113 homeruns, down from 209 in '87. This year should be no different, with Andre Dawson (24 HR's) and Sandberg (19 HR's) the only long ball threats on the team.

(5) **Montreal Expos.** Buck Rodgers is perhaps one of the best magicians in baseball, taking teams of little talent and somehow still challenging the top teams in baseball.

The Expos will come north with rookie Randy Johnson and the unproven Brian Holman to rotate with Kevin Gross, Dennis Martinez, and Bryn Smith. The bullpen is thin after the trade of reliever Jeff Parrett.

There is some talent to be most of it in the uniforms of OF Tim Raines, 3B Tim Wallach, and 1B Andres Galarraga.

The starting pitching is shaky, the bullpen is on the critical list, and Rodgers can only do so much.

(6) **Philadelphia Phillies.** The Phillies are a pretty easy team to read. New manager Nick Leyva inherits a starting rotation that handed out 628 free passes last summer on their way to a pitiful league worst ERA of 4.14. The Phils didn't overpower anybody at the plate either, hitting a low of .240 while their fielding percentage suffered at .976, equaling the NL's worst.

Meanwhile, the offense wasn't exactly on fire either. Somehow Tommy Herr, Jaun Samuel, Mike Schmidt, and Lance Parrish couldn't keep the Phils out of the hitting basement. Samuel has moved from second to center to help replace the gap and make room for Herr, but so far the



New York Mets Darryl Strawberry gets a first inning double as the Mets open their season at Shea Stadium Monday. St. Louis Cardinals short stop Jose Oquendo waits for the throw from right field.

AP Sports Photo

transition has been rough.

The National League-West Division.

(1) **San Diego Padres.** General Manager Jack McKeon has made some big deals for the Padres, but none bigger than the acquisition of Jack Clark from the Yankees. McKeon didn't stop there, as he also picked up free agent lefty Bruce Hurst of Boston.

The Padres boast a strong pitching staff with Hurst (18-6), Eric Show (16-11), Dennis Rasmussen (16-10), Ed Whitson (13-11) and Walt Terrell who was acquired from Detroit. The Padres, in addition to Clark, have Roberto Alomar, Benito Santiago, John Kruk, Carmelo Martinez and three-time batting champion Tony Gwynn.

The only problem for San Diego appears to be in the outfield, where Gwynn will have to cover alot of ground between Kruk and Martinez, both of whom lack defensive range.

(2) **Cincinnati Reds.** Do the Reds always finish second? Manager Pete Rose has guided Cincy to four straight second place finishes.

For a change, Rose enters a season without having to worry about his pitching staff. Danny Jackson (23-8), Tom Browning (18-5), John Franco (39 saves) and Jose Rijo (13-8) give the Reds solid starting pitching.

Rose compliments his pitching with power such as Eric Davis (26 HR's and 93 RBI's), Kal Daniels (18 HR's, .291), Paul O'Neill (16 HR's, .73 RBI's), and Chris Sabo (11 HR's). Todd Benzinger, who

cracked 13 homers and drove in 70 runs for the Bosox last year, will play firstbase for the Reds this year.

(3) **San Francisco Giants.** Manager Roger Craig's main worry this year is age. Not his, but that of his starting pitchers. The staff is lead by Rick Reuschel (19-11, 3.12 ERA) who will be 40 years young on May 16. Joining Reuschel on the mound will be Don Robinson (10-5, 2.45 ERA, age 32), Kelly Downs (13-9, age 29) and Atlee Hammaker (9-9, age 31). The bullpen is thin, headed by Scott Garrelts who was 5-9 and blew 11 save oppotunities.

With Brett Butler (.287, 43 steals) and Will Clark (29 HR's, 109 RBI's, .282), the Giants almost don't need any other offense. However, if the Giants want to finish in the money, Candy Maldonado (68 RBI's, .255), Matt Williams (.205, 9 HR's), Robby Thompson (7 homers, .264), and Chris Speir (.216) must produce more than last year.

Without a solid bullpen stopper or offensive help for Butler and Clark, Craig and his pitchers may age quickly this year.

(4) **Los Angeles Dodgers.** What happens when you replace a young, solid secondbaseman with an aging vet and the league MVP suffers from injuries? You don't worry about making hotel reservations in October.

The Dodgers still have one of the best pitching staffs in baseball, including Cy Young winner Orel Hershiser. Questions remain about Fernando

Valenzuela's recovery from last seasons shoulder injury, and John Tudor is still recovering from elbow surgery and could miss half of the season.

Newly acquired Eddie Murray adds alot of power (28 homers) to the L.A. batting order and solidifies first. If Gibson's (25 HR's, .290) knee problems keep him out of the line-up, Murray and Mike Marshall (20 HR's, 82 RBI's) will have to carry the load. Expect a dropoff from the pitching staff, most of whom had career years last season. If Gibson can come back from the knee injury, the Dodgers will be a different team. It still won't be enough this year.

(5) **Houston Astros.** New manager Art Howe inherits a team with good pitching (Mike Scott, Bob Knepper, Jim Deshaies, and reliever Dave Smith) and virtually no offense other than Glenn Davis. What did the Astros do during the offseason? They signed free agent pitcher Jim Clancy and traded for Yankee hurler Rick Rhoden. That means Houston will have to manufacture runs like the Cardinals do, but the Astros don't have the speed nor the power of St. Louis.

(6) **Atlanta Braves.** The Braves have gotten so bad that it has even affected superstar Dale Murphy, who batted .226 last year. Things should improve this year, as the Braves have a stable of young quality pitchers in John Smoltz, Tom Glavine, Derek Lilliquist and Pete Smith. The problem is, the staff is inexperienced and there is no defense or offense to back them up.