



Sports

by Jerry Keys

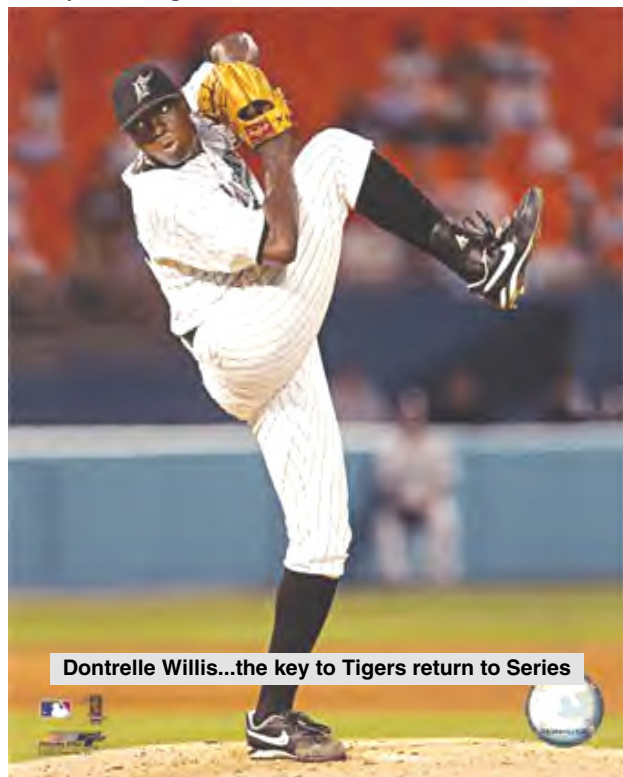
It took several re-looks before I could believe it. Glancing over rosters, depth charts, mound depth... I guess it was true. Baseball has Twilight Zone'd itself back 25 years. More than seven teams have a logical chance of being crowned champions. And who said baseball can not live after Barry Bonds!

The American Angels, (at press time no one is quite sure if they are Los Angeles, California, or Anaheim) have the inside track for the AL West (again). The addition of Torii Hunter was not the pace setter but the Angel's more balanced starting pitchers (John Lackey, Kelvim Escobar, Jered Weaver and Jon Garland) and solid closer (Francisco Rodriguez). If Oakland's top management would stop praising *Moneyball* and try fielding a competitive team (yeah, sigh, it does cost money Billy), the Angels would not be favorites for the 6th straight year.

Seattle needs help desperately at the plate and should not expect to win the West by Felix Hernandez alone. As for Texas...well their most explosive slugger last year was Sammy Sosa. Five or ten years ago that might have meant something... not anymore.

The AL Central, once Minnesota territory, is now Detroit's to lose. During the off-season the Tigers added Dontrelle Willis, Edgar Renteria, Jaques Jones and Miguel Cabrera. The Tigers will reclaim the AL Central flag from Cleveland with a potent offense and solid hurlers on the hill. The Indians possess a formidable offense and a respected pitching staff. In any other division, the Indi-

ans would be considered a front-runner. They may not win the Central but will definitely lock-up the wild



Dontrelle Willis...the key to Tigers return to Series

card.

The Chicago White Sox have the mashers at the plate but have too many question marks on the mound (only two returning starters had ERAs under 5.00). The Twins had the best core of young talent in baseball not too long ago. Johan Santana... gone, Matt Garza...

many holes in their pitching staff. I wonder why. I had trouble convincing a couple of youngsters there is an official major league team in Kansas City. When I mentioned they were one of

the best teams in baseball from the mid-1970's to mid-1980's they just laughed.

The world champion Boston Red Sox should claim the AL East again and try to win their third Series in five years. There are several question marks for



Dan Haren...will shift balance of power in NL West

gone, and if Francisco Liriano returns to his '06 form... probably gone too. Funny thing... Minnesota complains they have so

Boston on the mound (Josh Beckett's health, will Curt Schilling ever pitch effectively again) but should have enough depth to dis-

2008 Baseball Preview

tance themselves from the pack. I have thought it for several years... that the New York Yankees' pitching staff would fall apart. This is the year it does. This will also be the year several aging sluggers succumb to nagging injuries and the realization their "career year" was a couple of years ago. The Yankees are not going to miss the playoffs for the first time since 1993 because of new manager Joe Girardi but because Joe Torre is gone. Torre was the glue that kept the Yankees winning when they should have fallen apart several years ago.

The Toronto Blue Jays have several bright spots on the mound but way too many holes at the plate. Their batting order would have looked lethal if it were 2004. We used to hear about the "Oriole Way" when you read about Baltimore years ago. I suppose they lost their way... ain't that right Peter Angelos (ask an Oriole fan about Peter). Numerous pundits are raving about Tampa Bay. I did for several years... got old.... let someone else get frustrated.

The NL Central is now what the NL West was earlier in the decade, the division no one wants to win. Milwaukee is most people's choice to win their first division since 1982. I'm going to stick with Lou Piniella's Chicago Cubs and pick a repeat winner. You never know, the stars may be in

alignment and the Cubbies could erase the now-100 year old curse.

The NL West is the division to watch. Four of the five teams sport a good

Angelos. The Mets, Cubs and Diamondbacks will win their division. In the AL the wild card will be between Cleveland, Seattle, Chicago and Toronto. The division



Will Johan Santana thrive in NY... or be the next Frank Viola

chance of winning the West. One sure thing... the only other team in the West, San Francisco, will lose 100 games. Arizona distanced themselves from Colorado with the addition of Dan Haren. If Randy Johnson has one good year left, Arizona would have four solid starters.

The Rockies won eleven straight and 14 out of 15 to win the West last year and swept the NLDS and NLCS. As usual it depends upon how well their staff holds up after the All-Star Break.

The Dodgers and Padres should be in the race until September and pressure Colorado for the wild card spot. The wild card spot should come down to Colorado, Atlanta, Philadelphia, San Diego, and Los

winners will be Boston, Detroit and the Angels.

As for the hitting milestones... Ken Griffey will hit his 600th home run sometime this month. Our future home run king Alex Rodriguez will be passing Ted Williams, Willie McCovey, Jimmy Foxx, Mickey Mantle and Mike Schmidt this year as he tries to set himself in position to pass 600 in 2009. Manny Ramirez and Gary Sheffield will club their 500th homer this year. Chipper Jones will hit his 400th (remember back in the day when 400 homers meant something... 25 years ago only 19 players had passed 400, after 2007 there were 42). And the player with the longest current tenure with the same club... John Smoltz, since 1988.

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