



# Sports

by Jerry Keys

# 2008 Atlanta Braves Preview

The '07 Braves improved themselves from their '06 performance but were still let out in the cold come October. Atlanta kept things interesting until early September; unlike dropping below .500 and never making a serious push after early August in '06. Last year I had predicted Atlanta to win 89 games and maybe lock up a wild card spot. They fell five short but made a considerably better effort than the year previous. The Braves wrestled with the New York Mets for first place the first six weeks of the season and were only 1.5 games out in mid-July. It took 90 wins to procure a wild card spot in 2007.

Gone from last year are Edgar Renteria and Andruw Jones. Renteria was traded to Detroit and long time fan favorite opted for free agency and the big money. Atlanta landed two major players for the '08 campaign, Mark Kotsay and (a homecoming of sorts) former Brave Tom Glavine (wouldn't it be nice to see a late July acquisition of

Greg Maddux for a last gasp playoff run similar to the 90's).

One very bright spot for 2008 is we will see a full year of Mark Teixeira (17, 56, .317 in two months with Atlanta, 30, 105, .306 overall). Teixeira is Atlanta's first 1B to hit for power and average since Andres Galaraga in 1998. Kelly Johnson (16, 68, .276) turned in a solid performance for a first year starter and at a new position, 2B. Atlanta stalwart Chipper Jones (29, 102, .337) posted his best

numbers since '01 at 3B. And at SS is Yunel Escobar (5, 28, .326), who hopes to make Atlanta fans forget about Renteria very quickly. Brian McCann (18, 92, .270) will shore up the catching duties.

In the outfield is RF Jeff Francoeur (19, 105, .293), Kotsay (1, 20, .214 in limited duty with Oakland) in CF, and Matt Diaz (12, 45, .338) in LF. Key reserves

.358 with Houston) and Brandon Jones (0, 4, .158 in 19 ABs) will handle the back-up duties in the outfield. Along with being a clubhouse leader, Jones must post improved plate numbers (most importantly) and number of games played, along with "Teix", Francoeur, and McCann. Five Braves had 92 or more RBI's last year. A repeat is much needed (but do not hold your breath) from the returning four (A. Jones was the other). At-

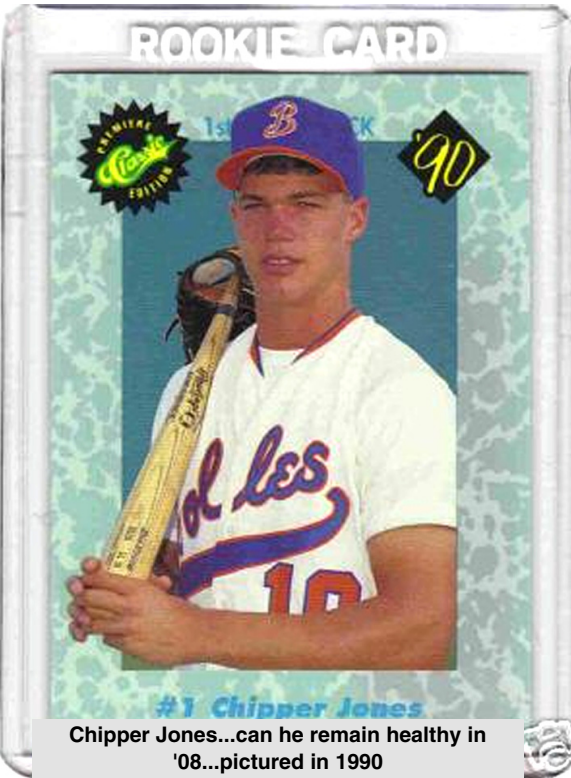
that could match anyone in baseball. The #5 slot is Chris James (11-10, 116, 4.24) by default but he will receive serious competition from Jeff Bennett (2-1, 14, 3.46 in 13 IP) and Jo-Jo Reyes (2-2, 27, 6.22).

The closer role is now Rafael Soriano's to lose (9 saves, 3.00) and if Mike Gonzalez (2, 1.59) can remain healthy, a perfect set-up guy. The middle relief is up in the air among several players. A solid starting five and a shut down 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> by Gonzalez/Soriano will keep the middle guys from being an overwhelming factor.

With starters not lasting as long as they once had, the #1-4 slots must average 15 wins each. Atlanta is still waiting for Hudson to recapture his old-Oakland numbers (but posted very respectable numbers in '05 and '07) and for Hampton to simply take the mound. Old faithfuls, Smoltz and Glavine, will attempt to defy aging and pitch effectively into their 40's. And if Gonzalez can remain healthy and post similar numbers as Soriano trims about a run off of his ERA, Atlanta will again contend seriously for a playoff spot.

The Braves posted a dismal one-run game record (18-25).

Reverse the wins and loses, Atlanta wins the East by two games. The Mets have the names (most notably Johan Santana, along with Pedro Martinez, John Maine, Oliver Perez, and



teammate Phil Niekro) with 16 wins and Maddux can slip into 5<sup>th</sup> place (passing greats such as Roger Clemens, Kid Nichols, Warren Spahn, and Pud Galvin) with 18 wins. Randy Johnson is 16 wins from 300. Can Mike Mussina collect 50 more to reach 300?

Former Brave Mike Stanton needs 75 games appeared to break Jesse Orosco's mark (1252). Maddux should become

the 13<sup>th</sup> player to log 5000 innings pitched (186). If Johnson remains healthy, he should come within 1000 SO's of Nolan Ryan's 5714. Maddux needs 70 SO's to enter the top 10 all-time (passing Niekro). Smoltz need 25 SO's to become the 16<sup>th</sup> pitcher to log 3000 SO's. Maddux should move into 4<sup>th</sup> place with his 10<sup>th</sup>

start this year (717<sup>th</sup>), behind only Don Sutton, Ryan, and Cy Young. With 31 starts, Glavine could become the 9<sup>th</sup> pitcher to log 700.

A plea to all major league baseball teams: sign Julio Franco this year; he will turn 50 on August 23. Don't deny him the chance to play until 50 like the Los Angeles Dodgers did Hoyt Wilhelm in 1972 (was released five days before the big 5-0). But don't make a

mockery of it like Minnie Minoso, who "retired" in 1964 but returned in '76 at age 50 (for 8 AB's), '80 at 54 (2 AB's), and attempted to in '90 at age 64

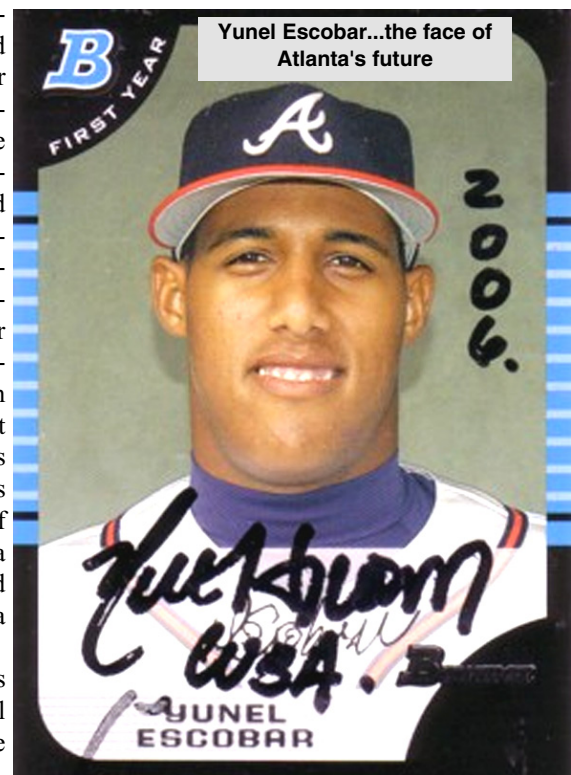


will be Scott Thorman (11, 36, .216), Omar Infante (2, 17, .271 limited duty with Detroit), Martin Prado (0, 2, .288 in 59 ABs), and spelling McCann will be Clint Sammons (only 3 ABs in '07) in the infield. Key note: a non-roster invitee to spring training is former Brave catcher Javy Lopez (last played in '06 for Boston), who ran after the money and free agency after a career year in '03 (43, 109, .328) and never lived up to the billings.

Josh Anderson (0, 11,

lanta can match Philadelphia's numbers at the plate but not the favorite (for the third year running) the New York (choke artists on 2007) Mets.

Atlanta has the "potential" to send out one of the best rotations in baseball for '08. John Smoltz (14-8, 197, 3.11) and Tim Hudson (16-10, 132, 3.33) return to anchor the rotation. Returning Brave Glavine (13-8, 89, 4.45) and "Mr. Injury" Mike Hampton (last pitched in '05) can round out a #1-4



climb than '07. If they could just turn around those one-run records to their favor...who knows.

As for pitching milestones, Glavine can reach 16<sup>th</sup> place (passing his '87