

INSIDER '08 PREDICTIONS: CHEERS, AN OLD STYLE WORLD SERIES AWAITS



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By [Scott Miller](#)

CBSSports.com Senior Writer

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Six weeks on the road through spring training. Roughly 3,000 miles on the rental cars. All 30 clubs visited. Dozens of interviews in the notebook and hundreds of conversations burned into this steel trap of a mind. So ... all that makes these 2008 major league predictions foolproof, right? Let's just say I've seen your NCAA brackets. And if I were you, I'd pay attention and take notes.

AL East



Manny is wicked motivated now. (Getty Images)

1. Boston: Manny Ramirez is in the final season of his guaranteed contract, and he had a batch of red bats to break out (until he learned in Japan that they were against the rules and he went scrambling for emergency Japanese bats). I'd say the man means business.

2. New York Yankees: Tenacious new manager Joe Girardi is going to grind young pitchers Joba Chamberlain, Phil Hughes and Ian Kennedy into an ant hill-sized pile of fine drywall dust and ... wait, that was his Florida staff from two years ago. Now, Hank Steinbrenner says Girardi is the best thing that's ever happened to the Yankees. Maybe, but Roger Clemens haunting Andy Pettitte, Mike Mussina rapidly aging and Jason Giambi playing first aren't.

3. Toronto The Blue Jays are spending a club record \$93 million, which means they'll at least be able to re-decorate their annual third-place finish beautifully. Seriously, Scott Rolen and David Eckstein are winning players who will provide the Blue Jays with more grit than they've ever seen, and this is a club that can stay in contention all season if they avoid injuries. What was that, Rolen already has a broken finger?

4. Tampa Bay More good-looking youngsters at Tropicana Field than you've ever seen together at St. Pete Beach on spring break. Best news is, last year's sense of entitlement is gone. And when Evan (no relation to Eva, dammit!) Longoria is recalled from the minors, probably in May, the Rays just might be serious about leaving the cellar for the next several years.

5. Baltimore Orioles are livid that Pittsburgh is poised to tie the all-time major-league record of 16 consecutive losing seasons (Phillies, 1933-1948) this year, while the O's, poised for their 11th consecutive losing season, must wait.

AL Central



Cabrera: The new franchise centerpiece. (Getty Images)

1. Detroit: Desperate city mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, facing criminal charges for obstruction of justice, perjury and misconduct in office (all related to a romantic relationship with his former chief of staff), is looking into stealing credit from Tigers GM Dave Dombrowski for brilliant Miguel Cabrera acquisition.

2. Cleveland: Indians will leave tip jar atop dugout this season so Jacobs Field fans can contribute to the "Keep C.C. Sabathia Fund." The Cy Young winner is entering his final season of his contract before free agency, and he and the Indians must make sure it doesn't become a distraction. If it does, even Fausto Carmona won't be able to save their season.

3. Chicago White Sox: Compared agonizingly slow starts last season from Paul Konerko and Jermaine Dye, the national housing market is roaring. The Sox are embarrassed from last summer's 90-loss season and are re-energized. But is it a concern that they were overheard asking Jorge Orta whether he thinks he can still play second base?

4. Minnesota: All postcards from Johan Santana and Torii Hunter will be tacked up on a clubhouse bulletin board this summer while the retooling Twins dream of exotic locales. Meanwhile, Twin Cities women are thrilled at increased odds that bachelor catcher Joe Mauer may have an extra month free in October.

5. Kansas City: If Alex Gordon is hitting .173 again at the end of April, I will eat this column. But only if you first slather it in Gates barbecue sauce.

AL West

1. Seattle: Erik Bedard and Felix Hernandez could be the best match in Seattle since Jimi Hendrix and his guitar. Big Carlos Silva will gobble up 200 innings (as long as that's the most of anything he eats, he'll be OK). Jarrod Washburn is the No. 4 starter and No. 5 starter Miguel Batista won 16 games last year, for crying out loud. Let's see other teams match that depth. If the Mariners can score more than last year, they'll win. Of course, that means Richie Sexson has to get off his duff.

2. Los Angeles Angels: They start the season minus two pitchers who combined for 37 wins last season in John Lackey and Kelvim Escobar, key set-up man Scot Shields and, likely, minus outfielder Gary Matthews Jr. (sprained ankle). Word on the scouts' grapevine is that Escobar is hurt worse than the Angels are letting on. We'll see. Definitely not the way you want to begin the season.

3. Texas: Why is it that everything is bigger in Texas except the Rangers' pitching staff every year? And why is it that you shouldn't mess with Texas, but everyone messes with the Rangers' rotation? Just wondering, while waiting for Kevin Millwood, Vicente Padilla and Co. to get hammered again.

4. Oakland: Team motto: Hey, Eric Chavez is still here.

AL Wild Card

Los Angeles Angels: Most sobering thought in the AL this season: At least one potential 90-win team among Detroit, Cleveland, Boston and New York will not make the playoffs because two of those four cannot win their division, and there's only one wild card spot available. The call here is Toronto, Tampa Bay and Kansas City are improved enough to lower the second-place AL East and Central clubs' win totals enough to put the second-place AL West team back in wild card play.

AL Champion

Detroit: Justin Verlander, Miguel Cabrera, Magglio Ordonez, Carlos Guillen, Placido Polanco, Edgar Renteria, Gary Sheffield, Curtis Granderson ... there's too much here not to like. Outfielder Jacque Jones will bat ninth, and this is a guy who should hit 20 home runs. To put it in Motown parlance, they'll be dancing in the streets ... just like in 1984.

NL East



Rollins: Another key weapon in Philly. (Getty Images)

1. Philadelphia: If Shane Victorino becomes a serious Most Valuable Player candidate, you'll really know Citizens Bank Park is skewed. Until then, Ryan Howard won two years ago, Jimmy Rollins last year and Chase Utley or Pat Burrell join them as serious candidates this year. The pitching isn't foolproof, but Brett Myers, Cole Hamels and Jamie Moyer and closer Brad Lidge will keep the brotherly love flowing in Philly.

2. Atlanta: Mark Teixeira, Chipper Jones, Jeff Francoeur and a rotation of John Smoltz, Tom Glavine, Tim Hudson and Mike Hampton will give the folks at CNN (world headquarters: Atlanta) a baseball team to be proud of.

3. New York Mets: Love Johan Santana. Love David Wright and Jose Reyes. Would love to love Pedro Martinez again. Don't love Moises Alou's injury-prone body, Carlos Delgado's hip, Luis Castillo's knee, Carlos Beltran's knees or the rotation once you get past Santana and Pedro.

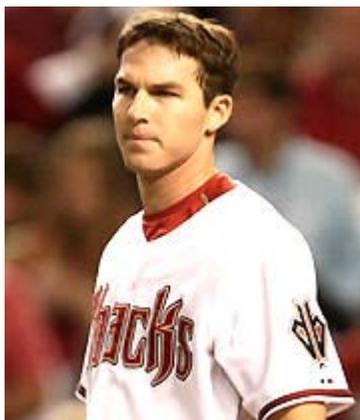
4. Washington: The Nationals will be worth watching closely this season. Now, if it's because of the team on the field instead of simply as a background to their great-looking new stadium, then it will be time to deliver one of those we're-not-worthy bows to GM Jim Bowden and manager Manny Acta. Pray that ex-cop James Williams, hired to keep Elijah Dukes out of trouble, is not the Nats' biggest go-to guy this season.

5. Florida: Manager Fredi Gonzalez, willing to try anything to improve on the Marlins club record 137 errors last season, was last seen talking stick-um with Fred Biletnikoff.

NL Central

- 1. Chicago Cubs:** You really don't believe Felix Pie's twisted testicle this spring was another omen as Cubs embark on their 100th season since winning a World Series, do you? They've got an ace in Carlos Zambrano, Kerry Wood could rise again as a closer and Kosuke Fukudome in a lineup with Alfonso Soriano, Aramis Ramirez and Derrek Lee will have Hall of Famer Ernie Banks again chirping "Let's play two!" -- and mean it.
- 2. Milwaukee:** Vegetarian Prince Fielder promises to recycle every opponent in Brewers' path this season, and Ryan Braun in left field looked a whole lot better this spring than Ryan Braun at third base did last season. These Brewers will slug. Question is, can they pitch and catch enough to fulfill the promise that led to franchise-record attendance last summer?
- 3. Cincinnati:** If you're hearing the names of first baseman Joey Votto and pitcher Homer Bailey often this summer, then you won't even need to look at the standings. You'll know: The Reds will be in contention.
- 4. Houston:** If the Astros pitch anything like they did this spring, don't forget to wear hard hats to Minute Maid Park this summer. And be ready to duck. Because after Roy Oswalt in this rotation ... let's just say all this talk about Wandy Rodriguez's potential has gotten tiresome. It's about time he did something.
- 5. St. Louis:** Why so low with the Cardinals? This line from the transactions column in the March 26 newspapers says it all: "Placed RHP Chris Carpenter, LHP Mark Mulder, RHP Matt Clement, RHP Joel Pineiro, LHP Tyler Johnson, RHP Josh Kinney and OF Juan Encarnacion on the 15-day DL, retroactive to March 21." Good luck with that, Tony La Russa.
- 6. Pittsburgh:** Hey kids, the Pirates didn't always lose. They once had players like Willie Stargell, Roberto Clemente, Pie Traynor, Honus Wagner, Bill Mazeroski and Lloyd "Little Poison" Waner. Unfortunately, the Hall of Fame has all of those players now, and these Pirates had Byung-Hyun Kim in camp this spring.

NL West



Ready to deliver, Stephen Drew? (Getty Images)

- 1. Arizona:** Brandon Webb and Dan Haren as a one-two punch? Opponents may as well try sitting on a cactus. And if Randy Johnson overcomes a second back surgery in two years? Opponents ... well, let's not even go there. Diamondbacks have pitching in a pitching-rich division. Question is, can they score enough? Shortstop Stephen Drew, right fielder Justin Upton and third baseman Mark Reynolds will go a long way in answering that. And the answer I expect is, yes.
- 2. Colorado:** Very difficult to write Rockies things this year because usually at this time of the spring, it's silly to do anything other than make fun of them. Now, you've got to heap on the praise, starting with brilliant shortstop Troy Tulowitzki. Rockies could finish anywhere from first to fourth in this division, depending on whether Jeff Francis, Aaron Cook, Ubaldo Jimenez and Franklin Morales pitch as well as they have in the past
- 3. Los Angeles Dodgers:** If Florida and Michigan are still attempting to figure out how their delegates are going to count in the Democratic National Convention this summer, then the Dodgers can spend the final week of spring training attempting to figure out their outfield. Will Andre Ethier play left, or Juan Pierre? More pressing might be how they're going to plug the gap at third with Nomar Garciaparra and Andy LaRoche hurt.

4. San Diego: Seriously, the Padres opening day left fielder looks like it will be Jody Gerut, who hasn't taken an at-bat in the majors since 2005. And Cubs fans, stop your laughing: Yes, the Padres are hopeful some pitcher named Mark Prior will contribute later this season.

5. San Francisco: The Giants are ready to take their post-Barry Bonds sabbatical.

NL Wild Card

Atlanta: The Braves ranked third in the NL in both runs scored and ERA last season and somehow missed the playoffs. They're better this year.

NL Champion

Chicago Cubs: One year in Chicago down, manager Lou Piniella knows his personnel. And the Cubs know Lou. And in an indication of good things to come, Carlos Zambrano will not slug one catcher in the dugout all summer.

World Series

Detroit over the Cubs: The AL remains the varsity to the NL's jayvees. But they'll be partying like it's 1945 (Tigers over Cubs in a seven-game World Series) in each of these cities in this Old Style World Series.

American League Awards

MVP: Miguel Cabrera, Detroit:

Welcome to paradise, Miguel. Great team, superior league, lots of protection in the order. And my, what great shape you've gotten yourself into.

Cy Young: Erik Bedard, Seattle:

Answering the eternal question, what do you get when you move a stud lefty who is about to hit his prime and who would have led the AL in strikeouts but for a September oblique injury into a pitcher's park? The Cy Young Award, of course.

Rookie of the Year: Evan Longoria, Tampa Bay:

Yes, smarty pants, I know he was optioned to Triple-A Durham. Last year's NL winner, Milwaukee's Ryan Braun, started the season in the minors, too. The bet here is Longoria is so good that he'll edge Boston's Jacoby Ellsbury once he's recalled in, say, May.

Manager of the Year: John McLaren, Seattle:

He has all the tools to bring the Mariners their first AL West title since 2001.



The real Vernon Wells, ready to stand up? (Getty Images)

Comeback Player of the Year: Vernon Wells, Toronto:

Wells is way better than .245, 16 homers and 80 RBI. And now that his shoulder is fixed, he'll show it.

Surprise Player: Scott Baker, Minnesota:

My friend Jeff Fletcher of the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* looked it up and says that only five pitchers with at least 100 innings pitched in the AL last year averaged five or more strikeouts, two or fewer walks and one or fewer homers allowed. Those five: Toronto ace Roy Halladay, Cleveland's Cy Young winner C.C. Sabathia, Boston ace Josh Beckett, Oakland's Joe Blanton ... and, yes, Baker.

Disappointing Player: Dontrelle Willis, Detroit:

I sure hope not because, as much as we're not supposed to allow personal feelings to get in the way, Dontrelle is one of my favorite guys in the game. But his numbers have declined in each of the past three seasons and he is coming off of a brutal spring. When you get yanked from the game and head toward the bullpen to work on your fastball location, that's not a good thing.

Surprise Team: Chicago White Sox:

Remember them? Just three seasons removed from a World Series title? They're not as bad as the 90 losses last year would indicate.

National League Awards

MVP: David Wright, New York Mets:

He's got five tools, personality, business acumen (very early investor in Vitamin Water), good looks and a sense of humor. He'll own New York, especially once Derek Jeter slows down.

Cy Young: Jake Peavy, San Diego:

He was the unanimous winner last year and he clocks into work in pitcher-friendly Petco Park. More important in the nothing's changed department: His fastball still sizzles, his mind is sharp and he's as competitive as they come.

Rookie of the Year: Kosuke Fukudome, Cubs:

Always give the edge to the players coming over from Japan, because they're eligible and they're more polished than true rookies. Plus, Fukudome is really good and will have a lot of support in Wrigley.

Manager of the Year: Lou Piniella, Cubs:

Those won't be boos in Wrigley Field, they'll be, Looooouus.

Comeback Player of the Year: Nick Johnson, Washington:

Remember him? Big guy, first baseman, once played for the Yankees before a broken leg put him out of action, seemingly, five years ago? He should be in position to help remind you this summer. Finally.

Surprise Player: Kris Benson, Philadelphia:

He should be ready to go by May. And the best thing for the Phils is he's healthy enough to make you hear a lot more from him than from his infamous wife, Anna.

Disappointing Player: Jeff Kent, Los Angeles:

He'll open the season with a strained hamstring, he'll be 40 on opening day and he wasn't even sure he wanted to come back for another year when last season was finished. It's a young man's game, and Kent has old legs for a second baseman.

Surprise Team: Cincinnati Reds:

If Bronson Arroyo reverses course -- prediction here is he will -- and they find another starter or two, they have the bats to contend deep into the summer.

First Manager Fired

John Gibbons, Toronto: It's always an ominous sign when a manager enters a season in the final year of his contract. And given the AL East carnivores, Gibbons is going to need healthy and productive seasons from all of his Blue Jays or it could be curtains. Meanwhile, the Mets' Willie Randolph is on notice. A slow start and GM Omar Minaya will have no choice.