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### Predictions, pt. 3 - Atlanta

Like everyone else, I figured this was finally the Braves's year to lose. Like everyone else, I was wrong again. Of course, the Braves came to the same end as always, getting knocked out of the playoffs in the first round, this time by the Astros.

It was entirely reasonable to figure this team for done. Look at the top five starters (by starts made): Russ Ortiz, John Thomson, Jaret Wright, Mike Hampton, and Paul Byrd. There are injury problems, effectiveness problems, mechanical problems, head problems, Coors problems ... every imaginable kind of problem has been experienced by that staff. What did Leo Mazzone mold from this motley crew, though? A rotation where no pitcher had an RA+ under 101. Basically, he got four league average performances, with John Thomson's 107 being best among that group, and one that was significantly better: Jaret Wright's 119. Wright probably had the most performance-related downside of the group (as opposed to injury-related downside), but he may have had the most upside coming in as well, and Mazzone, as usual, delivered on the potential.

That those starters were actually not 1-5 at the beginning of the year, but 2-6, makes their performance all the more impressive. Horacio Ramirez started the year very well, making nine starts with a 127 RA+ before going down with a shoulder injury. Paul Byrd timed his comeback well, though, so there was just a small gap between Ramirez going down and Byrd making his season debut.

The bullpen was fronted by an excellent-as-usual John Smoltz, but the Braves also got excellent contributions Antonio Alfonseca and Juan Cruz. Cruz was absolutely stolen from the Cubs for Andy Pratt (who the Cubs turned into Ben Grieve) and Richard Lewis, who hit well in AA but couldn't handle his first taste of AAA this year and will likely be headed back there next year, at 25. So he's still got time to make it, but he's not what one usually calls a prospect, I think.

It ought to be noted, though, that despite Cruz's 151 RA+ in 72 innings, his performance was calculated by BP as taking away about half a win from the team this year in their reliever evaluation tools. That's not really an odd disparity, especially for relievers, but it certainly is a big one: a swing of two and a half or so wins to the negative.

The Braves in general got good performances out of all their pitchers, as we've come to expect from a Leo Mazzone team: just 108.6 innings were pitched by guys with a sub-100 RA+. No other team even comes close to that kind of performance. In fact, the vast majority of teams had one or more pitchers below league average who by themselves threw more than 110 innings.

The offense was supposed to be the problem, with the departures of Vinny Castilla (not that he was going to keep up his hitting anyway), Gary Sheffield, and Javy Lopez.

Surprises abounded, though. Chipper Jones moved back to third base (thank goodness he came to his senses), where, while he struggled, he still outhit Vinny Castilla, who moved back to Colorado to take a ride in the Juvenation Machine. J.D. Drew adequately replaced Sheffield, almost hitting as well as Shef did in 2003 and, most importantly, staying healthy, reaching 500 and 600 at-bats for the first time in his career. Finally, Johnny Estrada played out of his mind, hitting right around his 90th percentile PECOTA, which, while it still wasn't nearly as well as Lopez hit last year (the Braves lost over .200 points of slugging behind the plate), was enough to soften the blow of the loss.

Similar to the pitching staff, the Braves's offense didn't carry them to the playoffs with a couple of stars, but with general adequacy. There were regular starters at six of eight positions for the Braves and each of those players had a positive MLVr, with Rafael Furcal putting up the worst mark, at .031. At first base, the Braves played a platoon of Julio Franco and Adam LaRoche, who were both over .100, and in left field, after Chipper Jones vacated the spot, most of the time was split between Charles Thomas and Eli Marrero, with DeWayne Wise also getting 21 starts out there. Marrero and Thomas were both in the positive, with Marrero's .270 MLVr coming in second only to Drew, while Wise was marginally (-.091) negative, but got just 175 at-bats to do any damage with.

I guess my underestimation comes down to expecting the Braves to behave like most other teams: some good players, some bad players. Instead, they were like the residents of Lake Wobegone and that, along with the semi-implosion by the rest of the division, was enough to carry them back into the breach once more.

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