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The Mets

The signing of Carlos Beltran makes the Mets an intriguing team in my mind. Without looking at things further, I'd call the Mets something like an 83-win team with a chance for things to break right and have them win eight or ten more than that, along with the division.

The question, of course, is whether this holds up under the scrutiny of some actual analysis, keeping in mind that rosters are far from set, especially since Carlos Delgado and Magglio Ordonez are still free agents and Sammy Sosa could probably still be had in a trade. Still, we can look at how the team should and could be better or worse going into next year.

Since Beltran is the new guy, let's start with the outfield. The leaders in games played at each of the positions last year were Cliff Floyd in left, Mike Cameron in center, and Richard Hidalgo in right. Hidalgo is gone, and we'll assume that Cameron will move to right with Beltran replacing him in center. Floyd and his numerous injury replacements (with Victor Diaz probably being chief among them) will cobble together 162 games in left.

Cameron was a disappointment in 2004, underperforming his PECOTA weighted mean projection (sub. req.) by over 20 EqA points while also watching his defense take a hit, dropping from 22 fielding runs above average (FRAA) in 2003 to just 4 last year, despite essentially equivalent playing time. I'd figure Cameron for about the same offensive numbers while adding to his defensive value, due to both a bounce-back factor as well as his skills being worth more above the average right fielder's than the average center man's. Last year's right field team, Hidalgo and Karim Garcia, who together played over 130 games in the starboard corner, were eight batting runs below average (BRAA, which is actually Batting Runs Above Average, of course, and Garcia and Hidalgo's numbers are negatives) and four fielding runs below average. Replace that with eight batting runs and eight fielding runs from Cameron and the Mets are looking at a 28-run improvement at just one position.

Meanwhile, Carlos Beltran was good for 35 BRAA and 3 FRAA in center last year, split between his two teams, so if we figure him for 30 and 3 (assuming that last year was his peak season rather than a breakout to a new level of performance) in 2005, that's a 21-run improvement over Cameron's play in center.

Left field by committee is hard to get a handle on, because you never know what minor acquisitions the Mets could make to back up Cliff Floyd. The easy thing to do is to just assume that in the end, new positives will cancel old negatives and vice versa, leaving left field in essentially the same value state the Mets had in '04. Already, though, with only the shifting that the acquisition of Beltran causes, the Mets could be looking at a 49-run improvement.

NEWSFLASH Of course, now comes the news that Cameron doesn't want to play right field and wants to be traded, rendering much of the above moot, as we have to assume that the Mets will have a completely new right fielder to go with their shiny new center fielder in 2005. Whether that right fielder is Victor Diaz, Magglio Ordonez, or Sammy Sosa remains to be seen, and each of those choices impacts the above analysis differently, with a special focus on Diaz, since the Mets would no longer be able to count on him filling in for the inevitable Floyd injury.

In the infield, third base should be manned by David Wright all year, after a season that was basically half-Wright, half-Ty Wigginton. The two had essentially identical VORP despite Wright ending up with about fifty fewer plate appearances than Wigginton. On the other hand, you have to wonder whether he's really ready to slug .525 in a full season. PECOTA, after all, had him pegged for just a 10% chance to post a slugging percentage even as high as .417 in 2004. It's hard to say with this kind of back-of-the-envelope math we're doing here, and PECOTA, when the new projections come out, will know a lot more than I do about Wright's expected ranged of production this year, so let's just put third base down as a wash.

Because I have no idea who'll play second and who'll play shortstop between Jose Reyes and Kaz Matsui, let's refer to the keystone as a unit. There's nowhere to go but up for Reyes, who has to be better than a .237 EqA hitter. Matsui was also a disappointment with the stick, though not on the level of his double play partner. Let's assume that Kaz pulls a Hideki and gets some of his lost power back while Reyes finally manages to stay a little bit healthy (and misses "only" twenty games this time around due to minor owies and some Bonds-like precautions in taking care of his legs) and the Mets pick up twenty runs, conservatively, between the two positions.

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At first base and catcher, at least until the Mets sign Delgado or something, there appears to be something of an unsettled mess. We'll get to see some Jason Phillips (who had an awful year), some Mike Piazza (who'll miss 40-60 games again, I'm sure), and even some Vance Wilson. Phillips almost has to bounce back, while Piazza will probably provide roughly the same performance he did in 2004: perhaps he'll hit a little more in a bit less time or maybe he'll play more and hit worse, but in any case, I'm guessing he'll give the Mets essentially the same value for their mega-bucks. Let's be conservative, though, and figure that the Mets get about 15 runs better because of Phillips's return to respectability.

On the offense and defense, then, I've got the Mets down for a gain of 84 runs, so let's call that a seven game improvement. If we use 76 wins as a starting place (using Baseball Prospectus's Adjusted Standings as a better measure of how many games this team "should" have won last year than their actual win total), we're up to the aforementioned 83 wins already.

I won't go into any detail with the pitching, largely because it seems much more hard to predict than the offense, but it seems like the team, in adding Pedro Martinez and retaining Victor Zambrano, Kris Benson, and Tom Glavine, at worst held steady, and more likely added some value over last year.

Now, I can't say I'm going to pick the Mets for first place when March rolls around, in no small part because I don't have a lot of faith in Omar Minaya's ability to take a team that could be in contention and make them better at the trade deadline (without giving up the whole farm system for a dubiously-valued veteran, that is). When I do make my predictions, though, I can say that the team will not be in that Bud Selig-created "no hope and faith" category, either.

Posted by jason in Baseball at 22:40