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Sunday, May 15, 2005

Historical Perspective - 1994

So, just for a little perspective, this is the worst the A's have been after 36 games since 1994, when they were 10-26 (on 5/14). For the rest of the way, that team went 41-37, to finish 51-63 in the strike-shortened season. That, by the way, is just one game behind Texas, who had been six and a half ahead of the A's on May 14th.

Let's compare the teams!

Baseball Prospectus has, thank goodness, historical stats, so we can compare the production of the key players. I'll use MLVr for hitters and VORP/IP for pitchers.

Behind the plate, Terry Steinbach was still two years away from a fantastically suspicious 35-homer walk year, and he put up a 0.014 MLVr: nothing special, but nothing to complain about from a 32-year old catcher, either. Jason Kendall, meanwhile, is 31, and hitting -0.244. That's ugly, and while it's far below what PECOTA figured for him (weighted mean of -0.003), it's, frankly, not surprising me. I don't know what I said about him this off-season, but his lack of power should have worried everybody, and it seems to be showing now. Kendall has all of six extra-base hits on the season, for an ISO of .048. The average catcher in 2005, while not much of a hitter, at least puts up an ISO of .135. Winner: 1994.

Mark McGwire and Troy Neel split the time at first, with Neel getting about 2/3 of the starts there. Neel was a slightly below-average hitter at first, while McGwire hit for his usual low batting average, high walks, high power numbers. A weighted average (by plate appearances) of their MLVr's results in a 0.129 figure for the first basemen. We all know who's at first for Oakland these days. Not only is Scott Hatteberg not hitting for any power, though (expected), he's also not walking as much as you might think, with an isolated on-base percentage of just .058, when PECOTA figured him for a .090 figure. Granted, that kind of difference can be made up just by having a three-walk day somewhere next week. Anyway, Hatteberg's lack of any offensive skill results in a -0.074 MLVr, against his PECOTA projection of 0.015. No matter what happens, in other words, Hatteberg isn't going to ouhitt 1994's first base team. What if Oakland brought up Dan Johnson? The 0.129 number he'd be trying to match is somewhere between his 75th and 90th percentile projection, so you'd figure him for maybe a 20% chance of outhitting the 1994 team. Advantage: 1994.

Oakland's main second baseman in 1994 was Brent Gates, and while he only logged 64 games on the season, the rest of the starts were split among a cast that included Steve Sax, Scott Hemond, Fausto Cruz, and Francisco Matos, with nobody appearing enough to really register offensively. Gates put up a -0.091 MLVr, taking a slight step back from his 1993 season and beginning his long, disappointing slide to being out of the majors after his age-29 year. This A's team is running out a combination of Keith Ginter and Mark Ellis, with Ellis getting about 60% of the plate appearances so far. It hasn't mattered which one has been out there, though, because neither has hit. Their weighted average MLVr is -0.180, twice as bad as Gates's numbers eleven years ago. PECOTA sees Ginter as essentially a league-average player, predicting a 0.005 MLVr for him, while Ellis isn't actually hitting that much worse than he might be expected to. His -0.111 MLVr slots in nicely between his 40th and 50th percentile projections. In other words, two things have to happen for the A's to start getting production at second: Ginter has to play almost all the time (not going to happen) and he has to start hitting. Advantage: 1994.

Scott Brosius was having his fourth consecutive terrible year with the bat (his OBP's stayed under .300 until he turned 28), but nobody else really got a shot at third base. I guess we know why Eric Chavez was drafted two years later. Anyway, Brosius's no average, no walks, no power act came out to a -0.133 MLVr for the season. I'm sad to say that I'd rather have Brosius doing twice as bad over Eric Chavez right now. Chavez is hitting for a -0.321 MLVr as of this writing. That's ugly. That's horrible. That's not even close to anything PECOTA has for him (his weighted mean MLVr is 0.198). Unless Chavez is hiding an injury, he has to start hitting sometime, and when he does, he'll probably surpass Scott Brosius. And if he doesn't? Well, maybe that Leon Durham in 1985 comparison isn't such a bad one by PECOTA. Still, advantage: 2005.

At short, Mike Bordick was running through his usual routine, good for a -0.178 MLVr. Bobby Crosby's grade is, of course, incomplete at this point, but Marco Scutaro has put up a -0.076 MLVr in his absence. No matter who's out there at the six-hole, then, you've got to figure they'll out hit Bordick. Advantage: 2005.

Oakland's three main outfielders were Stan Javier doing his no-hitting dance in center, Ruben Sierra doing his no-walks

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dance in right, and Rickey Henderson doing his no-power dance in left. None of the outfielders, in other words, were all that good, though at least Henderson put up a .411 OBP for the year, despite just a .260 batting average. Rickey wasn't completely done, as he had two more good power years left in him (1995's .147 ISO and 1999's completely ridiculous .151 ISO at age 40 in Shea Stadium). The three put up a weighted average MLVr of 0.008 for the season. Since Charles Thomas is apparently a mop-up outfielder, I'll use Nick Swisher, Bobby Kielty, Eric Byrnes, and Mark Kotsay as Oakland's outfield team. That group has averaged a -0.019 MLVr for the year, though it ought to be noted that if we remove the injured Swisher from the equation, the three that are left have gone for a 0.017 on the season. Eric Byrnes is dragging, of course, while Bobby Kielty has made Billy Beane look good and been the best hitter on the team. Mark Kotsay has balanced a hot start with a return to earth. Kielty and Swisher are hitting in the upper and lower reaches of their PECOTA projections, respectively, but not above or below their 90th and 10th percentile projections. Byrnes is between his 10th and 25th percentiles and Kotsay right around the middle of his projected range. Kielty is the only, one, then, who might be expected to come down a little, and even that could be mitigated: perhaps PECOTA is placing more weight than necessary on his awful time in Toronto and last year in Oakland. That time adds up to about 400 at bats, while his previous 500 at-bats, with Minnesota, ranged from decent to excellent. All in all, then, I think advantage: 2005.

The great Geronimo Berroa was Oakland's DH in 1994 and he put up a 0.195 MLVr, the best on the team. His only challenger for team MVP might have been Mark McGwire, and that challenge was rendered moot by McGwire's lack of playing time. Erubiel Durazo, meanwhile, is hitting -0.082, opposite PECOTA's 50th percentile projection of 0.088. Berroa obviously wins right now, and in order for Durazo to catch the popular Dominican hitter, he'd probably have to outperform his 90th percentile projection the rest of the way. In other words, advantage: 1994.

It's not even fair to compare the pitching. That 1994 team saw Ron Darling as Oakland's ace and Dennis Eckersley, who had his last good year two years earlier, as the closer. Billy Taylor did good work in the bullpen also, while Steven Ontiveros was Oakland's best pitcher by VORP, but benefitted from a remarkable 0.236 BABIP. Mark Acre looks good by ERA, but his BABIP was even lower and he walked more batters than he struck out. The edges of the staff held such men as Steve Phoenix and Roger Smithberg, who I think Baseball-Reference just made up.

Is there any reason, then, to think that this year's team couldn't do what 1994's team did and play over .500 the rest of the way, finishing up close to the leader of the division? No. On the other hand, should we really be taking comfort in aspiring to be a team that finished twelve games under .500?

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 08:57

Thanks for the nice comments. I like posting here because we concentrate on one or two issues at a time and neither of us has an axe to grind. We both respect Beane but don't think he is infallible. I think he must have some sort of plan for the roster construction and the Dan Johnson dilemma but I don't see it clearly yet. Hatty's offensive production is really that of a SS/2B or a defensive C so it does no good to play him over what looks to be a pretty decent upgrade.

With Boston coming to town this season looks done. The real danger I think is that things get so bad, players get in such a funk, that the front office can't properly evaluate what they have. I believe Billy will leave Ethier and anybody else in AA in the minors for the whole year. Garcia or Rheinecker might be brought up later if the pen remains thin, but everyone else will move up within the minors. Good to see that Barton hit his 4th HR and is now over .265, and that Herrera is finally making contact after a rough first 3 weeks.

Beane certainly wants to trade but it would have to be for youth; I discount the Sweeney rumors and, like you, think it would be a major step in the wrong direction. I'll be checking in from time to time and keep up the great work.

Anonymous on May 16 2005, 01:33

Please..Dotel is lightyears ahead of Eckersley.

Nice little comparison...references to Kendall's production is depressing, though. He was probably the hitter I most looking forward to seeing this season. Don't ask me why, but I'd like to see Kendall put back into the leadoff spot, like he was in Pittsburgh, and see if that does anything for him. Yeah, if it doesn't, then the team looks stupid, but still, it'd be worth a try. It might be a comforting and familiar spot for him. Besides, I've been one of those supporters for Kotsay to move over a few slots in the batting order anyway.

Anonymous on May 15 2005, 10:13