

American League East

By LORNE MANLY

PREDICTED FINISH

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New York

Any discussion of the Yankees has to start off with their awesome offense. The keys to this offense are Ricky Henderson and Don Mattingly. Never have two players, on the same team at the same time, so totally dominated the league. Henderson, the best leadoff man in the history of baseball, slammed 28 homers and stole 87 bases. Even though his on base percentage dropped from .419 to .358 and his average from .314 to .263 last year, Henderson was the igniter of the Yanks offense.

For Mattingly, there are few superlatives that can do him justice. He hit .352, 31 homers, drove in 113 runs and struck out less than 50 times. His work with the glove was nearly flawless, as he committed only 7 errors. If Mattingly decided he could hit HR's before the middle of May, his statistics would reach the stratosphere.

The rest of the Yanks hitting is also frightening. Dave Winfield (.262, 24, 104), Mike Pagliarulo (.238, 28, 71), and Don Pasqua (16 HR's and 45 RBI's in only 280 AB's) have power to spare and the addition of right-handed hitting Gary Ward shores up the Yank's problems with left-handed pitching. Claudell Washington and Ron Kittle give the Yanks depth on the bench.

The only problem areas on offense come from the shortstop and catching positions. Wayne Tolleson hit .284 and Joel Skinner .259, both with no power, but that can be overlooked in the context of the Yank's powerful lineup. Tolleson's defense is average while Skinner's is excellent; overall, the Yanks should not lose any games in the field.

The Yanks won't lose many games because of the bullpen, either. Dave "Rags" Righetti (8-8, 12, 45, 46 saves) is the premier relief pitcher in the league and Celio Guante (obtained in the Rhoden deal 5-12, 3.35, 4) is the ideal set-up man for Righetti. Starting pitching, however, is another story. This is New York's achilles heel. After Rick Rhoden (15-12, 2.84 with last place Pittsburgh) and Dennis Rasmussen (18-6, 3.88 but was it a fluke?), the pitching corps is a crapshoot. Let's see— we have 43 year old Tommy John whose pitches move so quickly as cars on the but he did have a 2.93 ERA in 13 games for the Yanks last year. Or we can try Joe Niekro, the 42 year old knuckleballer who had a 4.87 ERA last year. Lastly, there's promising rookie Bob Tewksbury (9-5, 3.31) a sinker-slider pitcher who is not overpowering, fitting the mold of Yank starters perfectly.

If Guidry re-signs in May 1 and the Yanks make a deal for another effective starter, their most glaring weakness would be turned into a strength. If George Steinbrenner can keep himself from meddling, the Yanks should take their first division title since 1981.

Toronto

Addition by subtraction was a catchphrase used often this winter, mainly by Vice-President Pat Gillick to defend his club's lack of moves. When confronted by critics demanding to know how the Jays improved themselves over a winter where they made no major trades or signed any free agents, Gillick points to the major teams in the AL East.

"New York didn't resign Ron Guidry, Gillick would say, Boston will not have Rick Gedman till at least May 1st and Detroit lost catcher Lance Parrish to the Philadelphia Phillies. The Jays, on the other hand, lost no player of significance and therefore, they improved."

Addition by other people's subtraction, however, is an excuse and nothing more. The Jays should have seized the chance to move ahead of their closest rivals. The addition of a Guidry would have made the Jays' starting rotation the best in the league. Signing free agent Bob Boone would have given the Jays an excellent defensive catcher to platoon with Ernie Whitt, and allow Matt Stark to mature in the minors. Both these free agents, though, would have cost a bundle. But signing Juan Benquez would have given the Jays a right-handed hitting backup outfielder, who is good defensively and can also play first, third and DH. In these days of a 24-man roster Benquez would have been an excellent addition to the Jays not only because of his versatility but because of his moderate price tag.

Gillick chose to stand pat, for whatever reasons and the Jays may pay for it this summer. It is a shame because the Jays are only one or two players away from dominating the AL. Instead they remain much like every other team in the AL East, with major question marks heading into the season.

The Jays have the best starting outfield in baseball in 27 year old George Bell (.309 batting average, 31 homeruns, 108 runs batted in), Lloyd Moseby (.253, 21, 86) and home run king Jesse Barfield (.289, 40, 108). They are all excellent defensively with Barfield leading AL outfielders with 20 assists while Bell has blossomed, throwing 17 players on the basepaths last year. Rick Leach (.309, 5, 39 in only 246 at bats) adds depth but Kelly Gruber is out of his element as the fifth outfielder.

They have the best shortstop in baseball in Tony Fernandez (.310, 10, 65 and 25 stolen bases) who should keep getting better while Gruber and Mulliniks will share the third base chores. Mike Sharperson is the new second baseman and Upshaw is the incumbent at first. But after three disappointing seasons which have seen his stats drop from .306, 27, 104 to .251, 9, 60, Fred McGriff could steal his job. McGriff belted seven homers this spring to force his way onto the squad as a backup left-handed DH to Mulliniks and as a back-up baseman. He may soon force Upshaw out at first.

Ernie Whitt had better not get hurt this year because Stark is an unpolished rookie whose defense is suspect. Signing Boone would have answered the question marks at this position.

The Jays' chances, however, rest on their pitchers, namely the arm of one Dave Stieb. Stieb had the worst year of his career (7-12) with a 4.74 ERA and has bone spurs in his elbow. For the Jays to win the division, Stieb has to return to his league-dominating form. An optimistic sign for Jays' fans is his 3.35 ERA after the all-star break last year. If Stieb starts pitching as he used to, Jimmy Key (14-11, 3.57 ERA despite a miserable start), Jim Clancy (14-14, 3.94) and Joe Johnson (7-2, 3.89 with Toronto) solidify the Jays' starting

rotation.

The losers in the bullpen are also a strength. Mark Eichorn (14-6, 1.72 ERA, 10 saves) should have been last year's rookie of the year. Along with Tom Henke (9-5, 3.35, 27 SU) they are the best tandem in the league. The long relief picture is more clouded. Rookies Jeff Musselman and Jose Nunez have never pitched above Double A (except Musselman's 5.1 innings for Toronto last year) and are big question marks. It is a sign of the times, however, that despite these gaping holes, the Jays have less "ifs" than any other team in the league. If Stieb returns to form, Whitt stays healthy and the long relief does decently, the Jays should finish first.

Boston

The Red Sox saw their World Series hopes dashed when a ball rolled through Bill Buckner's legs last October and it may be a while until Boston gets another chance. Boston, however, still has the hitting and pitching to contend in the AL East.

Roger Clemens (24-4, 2.48 ERA) ended his walkout on the weekend and overnight Boston's chances improved drastically. Clemens will be hard pressed to match last year's unbelievable season. In '33 starts, Clemens had less hit and walks than innings pitched, he won 14 games after a Red Sox loss, and the league hit only .195 off him. His fastball was clocked at 97 mph and Clemens struck out 238 batters, including 20 in one game against Seattle. Clemens was the major reason Boston won last year.

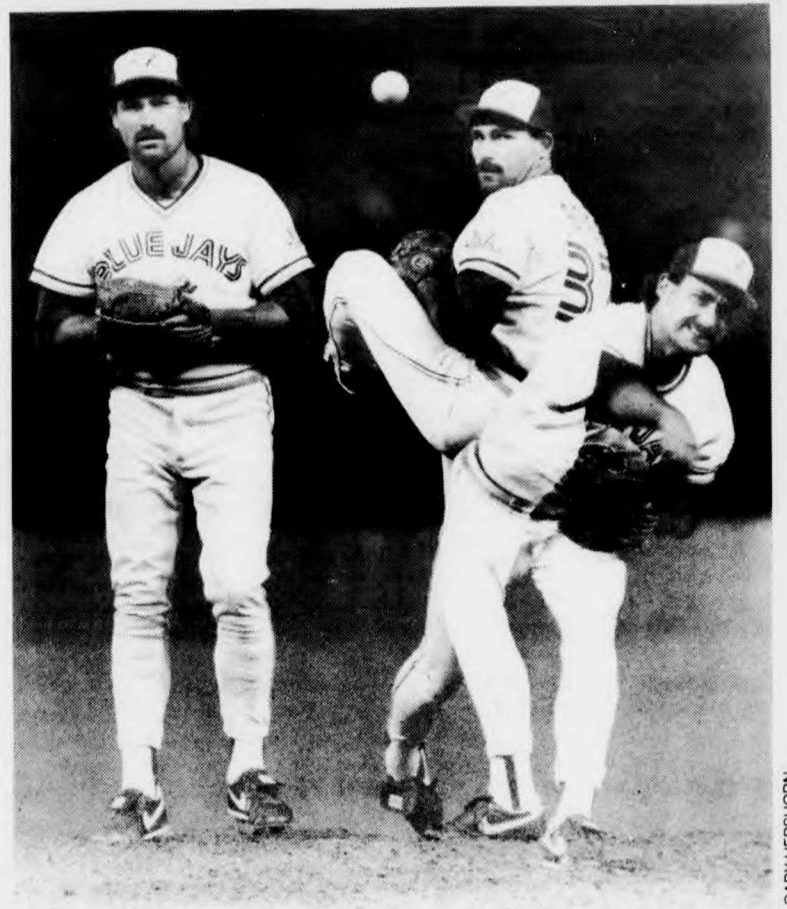
Bruce Hurst (13-8, 2.79) and Oil Can Boyd (16-10, 3.78) did not hurt the team either. The three together are the top starting rotation in the American League but the rest of the pitching staff is riddled with question marks. Can Bob Stanley (6-6, 4.37, 16 saves) be an effective fourth starter; can Jeff Sellers (3-7, 4.94) or Rob Woodward (2-3, 5.30) fill the fifth spot in the rotation; can Calvin Schiraldi repeat his August and September of last year (4-2, 1.41, 9 saves) or did his performance in the World Series shatter his confidence?

Offensively, the Red Sox are still strong but most of their stars are on the downside of their careers. Bill Buckner (.267, 18, 102) brings tears to the eyes with his defensive play at first and was only a threat at the plate in August and September. 35 year old Dwight Evans (.259, 26, 97) 33 year old Jim Rice (.324, 20, 110) and 38 year old Don Baylor are all fine players but do not compare to the top sluggers on the Yankees, Blue Jays, or the Indians for that matter. The Sox, have no speed to speak of, as well.

Spike Owen (.183, 1, 10 in 42 games for Boston), even though he has a great name, is not the answer at shortstop and there is no depth in the infield, outfield or behind the plate. When (or maybe if) catcher Rick Gedman returns (.258, 16, 65), the Sox will send out Dave Sax and Marc Sullivan with the tools of ignorance. Ed Romero, Pat Dodson and Mike Greenwell are not what you call a strong bench.

What you can call strong is third base. As a matter of fact, you can call Wade Boggs any superlative you want. He led the league in average, again, hitting .357 numbered over 200 hits for the fourth straight year. In a year marred back injuries and the death of his mother in a tragic car accident, Boggs not only put his normal offensive numbers on the, he improved defensively, leading the league in putouts.

Second baseman Marty Barrett (.286, 4, 60 and 15 stolen bases) is another solid ballplayer but for the Sox to win they need Clemens to pitch as he did last year. The chances



A MILLION DOLLAR MOTION: Former ace of the staff Dave Stieb must rebound after a disappointing season last year if the Jays are to challenge for the East title.

of this, however, are slim. Add to that the loss of catcher Gedman until at least May 1st, the nearly crippled state of Buckner and the aging of the outfield, it is evident the Sox will not repeat.

Cleveland

The 1987 Cleveland Indians are, in many respects, like the Boston Red Sox of the early 1980s. Their young core of hitters will keep them at least above .500 and close to the leaders, but a nondescript pitching staff will prevent the Indians from making that final leap, at least this year.

Cory Snyder (.272, 24, 69 in just 103 games), Brook Jacoby (.288, 17, 80), Mel Hall (.296, 18, 77), Tony Bernazard (.301, 17, 73 and 17 stolen bases) and Brett Butler (.278 and 32 stolen bases) give Cleveland a nice balance of average, power and speed. First baseman/outfielder Joe Carter (.302, 29, 121, 29 stolen bases), who led the league in RBI's, provides the Indians with all of these in one package.

The Indian's defense last season was below average but there were bright spots. Julio Franco, who had averaged 33 errors a season from 1983-85, cut that to 19 last season, a very respectable total. Jacoby has above average talent at third and Snyder has scout drooling over his arm for both accuracy and power.

Second baseman Bernazard and first baseman Pat Tabler, who will play against lefthanders are average at best but catcher Rick Dempsey, formerly of Baltimore, should lend a stabilizing presence to both the infield defense and the pitching staff.

For it is the pitching staff that needs help, and lots of it. The team ERA last year was 4.58 and there are few new faces to take the mound for the Indians. Behind Tom Candiotti's knuckleball, the starting staff is weak, to put it charitably. GM Joe Klein decided not to trade away any of his offensive talent for the much-needed pitching help, and will have the Indians start the season with a rotation of Candiotti (16-12, 3.57), Phil Niekro (11-11, 4.32), Ken Schrom (14-7, 4.54), Scott Bailes (10-10, 3.57) and Gret Swindell (5-2, 4.23). The stats, namely the win-loss statistics, are misleading. Seven Indians finished with more walks than strikeouts, Schrom allowed 34 homers, the fifth highest in the

league and Niekro walked 95 batters.

Swindell, however, gives the rotation a chance to be average. The 21 year old was promoted to the major leagues after only three Class A appearances and was bombed in his debut against Boston (the final score was 24-5). But in his next eight starts, he pitched into the seventh inning or more seven times and batters only hit .234 against him. He tore up the instructional league last fall and Cleveland's fortune's this season depend heavily on him.

The bullpen is also a cause for worry. Ernie Camacho (2-4, 4.08, 20 saves) is very good when he is healthy but after undergoing surgery twice in 1985, he wasn't able to pitch as often as the Indians would have liked. The Indians' braintrust is praying Camacho's elbow remains healthy. Lefties Ed Vande Berg, recent addition Steve Carlton, and rightie Tom Waddell give the Indians decent middle and long relief, but if they don't trade for a top starter or another good reliever, the Indians will not move higher than fourth.

Detroit

Detroit's fortunes this year depend on three things: a catcher to fill even half of Lance Parrish's shoes; Dan Petry rebounding from elbow surgery and a poor season; and Willie Hernandez overcoming his arm problems. Without these three items, the Tigers will be looking at a long season.

Parrish (.257, 22, 62 in only 91 games) took his excellent defence and powerful bat to the millionaire's club in Philadelphia. To take his place, manager Sparky Anderson will experiment with four different catchers—Mike Heath, Dwight Lowry, Matt Nokes and recently acquired Orlando Mercado. Of the four, only Mike Heath has any extended major league experience but Anderson plans to platoon him at first (and right field until Gibson returns from yet another inquiry).

After Jack Morris (21-8, 3.27), the starting rotation is fair at best. Frank Tanana's junk (12-9, 4.16) may get him through another year but Walt Terrell (15-12, 4.56) is no better than a .500 pitcher. A lot hinges on Petry's comeback and rookie Eric King (11-4, 3.51) avoiding the sophomore jinx.

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