

Excalibur's Guide to the '86 American League East

In a preview of the toughest division in baseball, Excalibur's resident baseball fanatic Lorne Manly takes an in-depth look at each team in the AL East in order of their probable finish.

NEW YORK

Despite the season ending injury to pitcher Britt Burns, the Yankees should win the American League East. No team except Boston can match New York offensively. Rickey Henderson, Don Mattingly, Dave Winfield, and Mike Pagliurilo are all capable of hitting 20 home runs, and both Henderson and Winfield are threats on the basepaths (80 and 19 stolen bases respectively).

Pagliurilo (19 homeruns and 62 runs batted in only 380 at bats) should blossom this year after being given the full-time job at third base, while the recent trade which saw the Yanks receive Mike Easler for the disgruntled Don Baylor adds more left-handed power to the lineup and will prevent opposing pitchers from pitching around Mattingly and Winfield.

The Yankees' fielding ranks as possibly the best in the league with four possible Gold Glove candidates in Winfield, Mattingly, Pagliurilo, and pitcher Ron Guidry. All except Pagliurilo won the award last year. Relief pitching is not a worry either. Dave Righetti (12-7 record, 2.78 earned run average, and 29 saves) and Brian Fisher (4-4, 2.38 ERA, 14 saves) give the Yanks the best left-right relief combination in the major leagues, and they are ably assisted in the bullpen by Bob Shirley and Rod Scurry who will handle the long and middle relief duties.

The major question about the Yankees is the starting pitching. The addition of Burns appeared to have solved the problem but his chronic hip condition has sidelined him for at least the year, leaving Ron Guidry (22-6, 3.27 ERA) to carry a heavy load for yet another season. Knuckleballer Joe Niekro, who has averaged 16 wins over the last eight full seasons, is assured of a spot in the rotation as is rookie Bob Tewksbury who had an excellent spring. Scouts who saw him pitch in the minors last year have forecast 15 wins for the confident and poised rookie.

Ed Whitson and Dennis Rasmussen round out the rest of the staff, causing a lot of concern to the Yankee brass. But if they can keep the Yanks close to the seventh inning, the bullpen will then be able to take over. Also, do not be surprised if Tom Seaver of the Chicago White Sox is in a Yankee uniform by June if not earlier.

There is history working in New York's favor as well. The team that has finished second in the American League East the last five years has won the division the following year. Toronto accomplished this last year after finishing second in 1984, following in the footsteps of Detroit, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and New York. It is now the Yankees' turn.

DETROIT

The Detroit Tigers would boast the best starting rotation in the American League if it weren't for the Kansas City Royals. Jack Morris (16-11, 3.33 ERA), Dan Petry (15-13, 3.36 ERA) and Walt Terrell (15-10, 3.85 ERA) have been joined by lefthanders Frank Tanana (who won 10 games for the Tigers in only three months) and Dave LaPoint. With Willie Hernandez in the bullpen the Tigers are a force to be reckoned with in the AL East.

Offensively, outfielder Kirk Gibson is the story. Hopefully, he will be able to look his teammates in the eye after the humiliation of accepting a paltry \$4.1-million contract for three years, and post the usual numbers on the board. Last year this meant 29 homeruns, 30 stolen bases, 97 runs batted in and a .287 batting average. There is no one in baseball who doubts Gibson will be the next 30-30 man (30 homeruns and 30 stolen bases), and '86 should be the year he accomplishes this.

The rest of the outfield, however, does not promote as much optimism. Dave Collins and Larry Herndon are to platoon in left but

neither is known for his defense and Collins had a poor spring. There are also doubts Collins can hit on grass, and without getting on base his speed matters little. Chet Lemon is the centerfielder who seemed to show up only when August arrived last summer. Lemon had 14 of his 18 HRs and 40 of his 68 RBIs after August 1, and if the Tigers are to challenge they need Lemon to return to form.

The health of shortstop Alan Trammell's shoulder is a question mark as is third baseman Darnell Coles' defense. Perennial spring sensation Mike Laga, who hit eight HRs this exhibition season, is the starting first baseman against right-handed pitching but has yet to prove he can hit during the regular season. Darrell Evans hit 40 HRs last year but Sparky Anderson, in his infinite wisdom, has decided to make Evans a part-time player. Detroit cannot afford such managerial genius if it expects to make a serious run at the division title.

The Tigers should receive good years from Evans (if he's allowed to play regularly), second baseman Lou Whitaker (21 HRs from the leadoff position) and catcher Lance Parrish (28 HRs and 99 RBIs). These three players, Gibson, and the pitching staff guarantee Detroit at least a third place finish. It is the rest of the infield, Lemon, and the reserves which will determine how much higher the Tigers go.

TORONTO

A tremendous hue and cry will arise from all devoted Blue Jay fans because of this ranking but the Jays have too many question marks to repeat as champions, the bullpen and catching being the most visible. Bill Caudill's future is in doubt as is Gary Lavelle's, leaving the stopper's role to Tom Henke. Henke (3-3, 2.03 ERA, 13 saves) was a major factor in the Jays' success last year but whether this was just a fluke remains to be seen. Signs of fallibility appeared at the end of the season and in the playoffs last year and was less than awesome this spring in Florida.

The starting rotation, on the other hand, is very strong. Stieb, Alexander, and Key combined for 45 wins and an ERA just under three. Jim Clancy won nine games despite injuries and Jim Acker should fill in nicely as a fifth starter. But Blue Jay history has shown that without a good bullpen it does not matter how good one's starting rotation is. If this Achilles heel of the past starts acting up again, the Jays will be in for a long summer.

Catching is the other major problem area. Ernie Whitt is fine as the left-handed hitting half of the catching tandem but, as last year's tailspin in September showed (a .145 average with one homerun and 4 RBIs from September 2 to September 21), he cannot handle these duties himself. 37-year-old Buck Martinez has made great strides in his recovery since breaking his leg in Seattle last July but no one is quite sure, besides Martinez himself, if he can withstand the rigors of the regular season. And even if he can do that, he cannot hit. Before getting injured Martinez hit a Mario Mendoza-like .162, driving home a mere 14 runners.

The rest of the starting lineup is not a concern. The outfield of George Bell (.275 average, 28 HRs, 95 RBIs), Jesse Barfield (.289, 27 HRs, 84 RBIs), and Lloyd Moseby (.259, 18 HRs and 70 RBIs in an off-year) are all only 26 years of age and have not reached the peaks of their careers. The infield is set with Willie Upshaw, Damaso Garcia, Tony Fernandez, and the platoon at third of Rance Mulliniks and Garth Iorg. Cecil Fielder may steal the DH job from Cliff Johnson on the basis of an excellent spring and Rick Leach and Kelly Gruber provide depth in the outfield and infield.

The Jays, though, must remain healthy and the bullpen must perform if they are to challenge for the title. These factors will decide if the Jays will be in the running come September or reduced to playing the role of spoiler.



ROBERTA DIMAIO

LOOKING GOOD: Blue Jays shortstop Tony Fernandez looks resplendent in his original Pierre Cardin Excalibur sweatshirt. Fernandez knows a shortstop is only as good as he looks, and this San Pedro de Macoris native is now ready to take the AL by storm this year.

BALTIMORE

Pitching. No team in baseball has had such consistently excellent pitching as the Baltimore Orioles. Yet last year the staff did its best Seattle Mariner imitation, leaving the baseball community shaking its head. The Orioles allowed more runs (764), homeruns (160), and hits than any staff in Oriole history. Their team ERA (4.38) was also the worst ever and only Ken Dixon (8-4, 3.67 ERA) and Don Aase (10-6, 14 saves) pitched even remotely close to the Orioles of yesteryear. Baltimore's success this year depends on the revival of the rest of the pitchers' arms on the team. If Mike Boddicker, Storm Davis, Mike Flanagan, Scott McGregor, and Tippy Martinez regain their touches, Baltimore could easily win the division. Flanagan, Davis and Boddicker flashed glimpses of their old forms this spring but did not show the consistency the Orioles require.

Offense is not a problem for the Orioles. Baltimore led the league with 214 homeruns last year: Eddie Murray, Cal Ripken, Mike Young, Fred Lynn, and Larry Sheets combined for 125 of these and five could easily increase the total this year. If Alan Wiggins plays every day, he is capable of stealing 50 bases and leftfielder Lee Lacy also has considerable speed (10 stolen bases last year but 31 in '84 for Pittsburgh). All this offense will be fun to watch but unless the pitching drastically improves, fourth place is where the Orioles will finish in '86.

BOSTON

Every year it seems baseball prognosticators praise the Bosox' offense and lament their pitching woes. But last year the Red Sox had the sixth best ERA (4.06) in the league, completed the most games (35), struck out the third most hitters (913), and gave up the second fewest home runs (130). Add these statistics to their excellent offense and one would think that the Red Sox would be in the thick of the pennant race. One, however, would be very wrong. Boston finished fifth with an 81-81 record, 18 games behind the Blue Jays.

What happened? August, that's what. The Red Sox dropped 17 out of 20 games and went 8-21 for the month. Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd (15-13, 3.70 ERA) faltered miserably in the second half, having what seemed to be a domino effect on the rest of the staff. If the oft-injured Roger Clemens is healthy and Boyd pitches well the whole season Boston may make a run for the championship. Starters Al Nipper and Bruce Hurst have never lived up to their potential and the bullpen of Bob Stanley, Sammy Stewart and Wes Gardner is not one to strike fear in the hearts of Boston's opponents.

The offense, however, does. Firstbaseman Bill Buckner had the best season of his career last year, batting .299 with 16 HRs and 110 RBIs. Add him to Jim Rice, Tony Armas (who if healthy can hit 40 HRs), Rich Gedman, Dwight Evans, and newly acquired Don Baylor, and the Red Sox have their usual power parade.

And then there's Wade Boggs. Boggs hit .368 last year and drove in 78 runs. What is even more remarkable is Boggs' .390 average with

the count 0-2, and his .500 on base percentage in Fenway Park. Boggs also led the league in times left stranded on the basepaths, striking a discordant note in Boston's otherwise healthy offense.

So, as usual, it will be the pitching that decides how close to first the Red Sox come. This year, however, will not be the year in which this pitching potential materializes, and Boston will finish in fifth again.

CLEVELAND

The Indians can be proud of the excellent core of young talent they have. With outfielders Brett Butler (.311 average and 50 stolen bases), Joe Carter, and Mel Hall (who was hitting .318 when his season ended abruptly due to a car accident) completely healthy, the Indians can score a lot of runs. Other sources of power in the lineup are designated hitter Andre Thornton (19 HRs and 74 RBIs over the last 77 games) and third baseman Brook Jacoby (20 HRs and 87 RBIs).

The pitching is another story. The Indians' 4.91 ERA was the highest since the woeful 1962 edition of the New York Mets, who had an ERA of 5.04. Only Neal Heaton and Ken Schrom will remain in the starting rotation all year and they are average at best themselves. The bullpen could be Cleveland's saving grace and help prop up the Indians' sad excuse for a starting rotation. If Ernie Camacho has recovered from elbow surgery and returns to the form that netted him 23 saves in 1984, the Indians' fortunes may improve. The improvement, though, will only be to sixth place.

MILWAUKEE

The Brewers have decided to build for the future which means a last place finish in the AL East this year. Milwaukee is going with four promising rookies in its starting rotation along with two or three in the field. Juan Nieves (33-9 over three years in the minors), Bill Wegman, Tim Leary, and Dan Plesac join the veteran of the staff, Ted Higuera, who was 15-8 with a 3.90 ERA last year in his rookie season. The bullpen does not show as much promise. Mark Clear, who walked almost a batter an inning (50 walks in 55.2 innings pitched) is not the answer to the Brewers' short relief problems and neither is Danny Darwin, a starter at heart.

Billy Joe Robidoux will start the season at first base (with Cecil Cooper on the disabled list) and he may bring back memories of the 1982 Harvey Wallbangers which clubbed 216 homeruns. Robidoux definitely has the power to hit 30 homers or more but the jury is still out on whether he can hit big league pitching. Giant castoff Rob Deer is the opening day rightfielder while speedy Mike Felder may also see action in the outfield, the two flanking centerfielder Robin Yount.

Milwaukee still has some fine hitters in Yount, Cooper (.293, 16 HRs, 99 RBIs), and third baseman Paul Molitor (.297, 10 HRs and 21 stolen bases). But it won't be enough to keep Milwaukee from finishing in the cellar as the Brewers suffer through growing pains on the long, tortuous road back to respectability.