

American League West

By JEFF SHINDER

PREDICTED FINISH

1. California Angels
2. Texas Rangers
3. Kansas City Royals
4. Chicago White Sox
5. Minnesota Twins
6. Oakland Athletics
7. Seattle Mariners

California

Poor Gene Mauch. Mauch will probably go down in history as the best manager who never won a pennant. Last year his Angels were a strike away from the World Series before Dave Henderson intervened to relegate the Angels to their traditional bridesmaid position. The Angels, however, have the ingredients to be a force in this weak division and Gene Mauch may eventually get his day in the sun.

The Angels possess the division's best core of starting pitching. Composed of Mike Witt (18-10, 2.84 (Earned Run Average)), Kirk McCaskill 17-10, 3, 36), Don Sutton (15-11, 3.74) and John Candelaria (10-2, 2.55), the Angels front line staff possesses an excellent blend of experience and youth. Last year these four combined for a superb 60-33 record. The only concerns are Sutton's age (42) and Candelaria's unpredictable elbow.

The return of Donnie Moore (4-5, 21 saves) from shoulder trouble will provide the Angels with the much needed stopper out of the pen. Complementing Moore in the bullpen will be lefthander Gary Lucas (3-1, 3.30).

The Angels strong pitching is backed by a strong defence, with their strength concentrated in the key positions up the middle. Gary Pettis provides California superb range in centre field. Dick Schofield has improved steadily at shortstop and his new partner in the middle infield is talented youngster Mark McLemore (.276 in triple A). Catching however may be a weakness unless the Angels manage to resign Bob Boone after May 1. Filling in for Boone will be Butch Wynegar (.206 7 homeruns, 29 runs batted in).

Although not regarded as an offensive powerhouse, the Angels scored a healthy 786 runs last season. California was led by rookie sensation Wally Joyner (.290 22, 100) whose fine season was certainly no fluke. The platoon combination of Rupert Jones (17,49) and George Hendrick (14,17) gives the Angels solid production in right field.

If California can get solid performances from their number 3 and 4 starters (Sutton and Candelaria) in addition to solid comeback from the flamethrowing Moore, they will easily have the horses to repeat as A.L. west champions.

Texas

The Texas Rangers are one of the most interesting and unpredictable teams in the American league this season. Catapulting from perpetual mediocrity the Rangers became a contender last season largely on the backs of an excellent core of freshman talent. Texas' fortunes this year rely on the continued progress of their young players. It is not inconceivable that the Rangers could breathe some fresh air into the playoffs this season. To do so the

Rangers must receive some consistency from their inexperienced starting pitching. A merely ordinary bullpen will also undermine Texas' chances this season. Regardless, the Rangers have the talent to make the American League West race a tight one.

With the exception of workhorse Charlie Hough (230 innings, 17-10, 3.71), Texas must rely on a collection of erratic sophomore starters. This group is led by talented hard thrower Bobby Witt (11-9, 5.48) who can be very tough if he can find the plate (143 walks, 174 strikeouts last season). Witt's 7-0 finish in 86 may be an indication of his future value. Following him the Rangers will parade Edwin Correa (12-14, 3.79) and Jose Guzman (9-15, 4.54) to the mound. The ERA's of this promising trio look even worse when you consider that Arlington is a good pitchers park.

The suspect nature of Texas' pitching is reinforced by their average bullpen. Led by journeyman Greg Harris (10-8, 2.83, 20 saves) and Mitch Williams (8-6, 3.58 8 saves) the Ranger's pen is not overly impressive. If the starters live up to their erratic billing this mediocre collection could be in for a long and busy summer.

The Rangers 771 runs scored last season is even more impressive in light of the nature of Arlington stadium. Leading the way is the division's finest outfield. Oddibe McDowell (.266, 18, 49) is one of the leagues most impressive athletes. The Rangers have high hopes for Rubeen Sierra who produced 16 HR's, 55 RBI's in little more than half a season last year. Pete Incaviglia (.250, 20, 88) is the classic 'either it's a clout or an out' hitter. Incaviglia's awesome power was offset by his ridiculous tendency to strike out (185 k's). The Rangers also receive solid production from first baseman Pete O'Brien (.290, 23, 90) shortstop Scott Fletcher (.300, 3, 50), Catcher Don Slaught (.264, 13, 46 in only 314 ab's) and DH Larry Parrish (.267, 28, 94).

The talented Rangers' are probably a year and a couple of moves (bullpen stopper for one) away from being the odds on favourite in the West. Yet if Texas' green pitching staff improves dramatically this season, the Rangers could find themselves in the playoffs come October.

Kansas City

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There is justice in this world. After winning the World Series (and beating our beloved Blue Jays in the process) with a popgun lineup that couldn't even scare the Seattle Mariners, the Royals crash landed last season finishing a disastrous 76-86. KC, as they did in 85, led the league in pitching and their team batting average of .252 was identical to their 1985 performance. The Royals were killed by off seasons from George Brett (.290, 16, 73), Bret Saberhagen (7-12, 4.15) and Dan Quisenberry (12 saves). Realizing their woeful lack of depth and offence the Royals made a number of moves to alleviate the problems. The result will be a more competitive KC team that may find itself in contention provided some of their pitching returns from oblivion.

The Royals 654 runs scored was 13th in the league surpassing only the inept Chicago White Sox. KC has responded by giving youngsters Bo Jackson (.277) and Kevin Seitzer (.319 Omaha) spots on the roster. The Royals also swung a deal that landed them Danny Tartabull (.270, 25, 96). In addition to the young outfield prospects the Royals have veterans Willie Wilson (.269, 9, 44) and Lonnie Smith (.287, 8, 44) returning for another season. Another new addition will be outfielder-D.H. Juan Beniquez (.300, 6, 36, 343 AB's).

Kansas City's infield is loaded

with question marks. Can George Brett throw adequately from third base after off-season surgery on his right shoulder? If not, will he displace Steve Balboni (.229, 29, 88, who is also recovering from surgery) at first? At shortstop the only question is why are Buddy Biancalana (.242, 2, 8) and Angel Salazar (.245, 0, 24) still wearing major league uniforms? Unquestionably this team needs more punch from their shortstops. Frank White (.272, 22, 84), despite advancing age, remains a fixture at second base. KC also has a potential headache at catcher where reliable Jim Sudberg will be replaced by unproven former Met backup Ed Hearn (.265, 4, 10, 136 AB's). Hearn, however, will probably provide the Royals with a little more punch than they received from the departed Sudberg.

KC still has the pitching arms that carried them in '85 and Saberhagen cannot possibly be as bad as he was last season. The rest of the rotation is solid with Danny Jackson (11-12, 3.20—awesome slider) Charlie Liebrandt (14-11, 4.08), and Mark Gubicza (12-6, 3.64) giving them four established starters.

The rapid decline of Dan Quisenberry has the KC brass very concerned. Without him, the Royals must rely on Steve Farr (8-4, 3.14, 8 saves) and Bud Black (5-10, 3.20 9 saves).

Despite a litany of question marks the Royals will probably resurrect themselves and post a solid season. If the Royals get solid contributions from their key performers in addition to leading the league in pitching again, they will be at worst a .500 team. With this perplexing franchise an upset division title can never be ruled out.

Chicago

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It's hard to believe the Chicago White Sox were division champions in 1983. In just three years the White Sox deteriorated into the weakest offensive team in the AL (644 runs scored in '86—yes, even worse than KC) Casting hope on an otherwise depressing situation is their decent starting pitching staff. In 86, however, the White Sox were plagued by a weak bullpen. Being a team that did not score many runs, the weakness of the White Sox bullpen was disastrous. Since the prospects for an offensive explosion are dim in Chicago, it is imperative that the Sox solidify their bullpen situation. Without improvement in this area it will be a long lonely summer at Comiskey park.

The White Sox stopper, Bob James had a disastrous '86 season going (5-4, 5.25) with only 14 saves. If he can return to his 32 saves 2.15 ERA '85 performance the White Sox will be an improved team this season. The White Sox are also encouraged by the strong performance of youngster Bobby Thigpen. In just two months Thigpen went 2-0 with a 1.77 era and seven saves. His presence for an entire season will remove the pressure from Bob James' shoulders and solidify the White Sox pen.

Chicago is blessed with a more than adequate starting rotation led by Floyd Bannister (10-14, 3.54) and Richard Dotson (10-17, 5.48). The White Sox were third in the AL in team ERA last year and Dotson's miserable '86 totals are expected to improve. Behind them are Neil Allen (7-2, 3.78) and Jose De Leon (4-5, 2.96), who impressively led the league in hits per nine innings (5.58). In a demonstration of confidence in their starting pitching, the White Sox dealt Joe Cowley to the Phillies for Gary Redus last month.

Redus' acquisition will improve the White Sox' pathetic on base percentage. Redus scored 42 runs in only 275 at bats, a clear reflection on

his ability to get on base. Chicago's offensive performance depends heavily on the ability of Harold Baines (.296, 21, 88), Ron Hassey (.323, 9 49, 340 at bats), and Greg Walker (.277, 13, 51, 282 at bats) to rebound from injuries.

In the infield, the White Sox are reasonably sound up the middle with slick fielding Ozzie Guillen (.250, 2, 47) at short and Donnie Hill (.283, 4, 29) at second. Their weaknesses are at third base Tim Hullett's production (.231, 17, 44) is inadequate for the position he plays. Another soft spot could be catcher with inexperienced Ron Karkovice (.247, 4, 13) is slated for the position.

The White Sox are in a position where they might achieve respectability they enjoyed just a few years ago. A decent starting pitching staff and a revitalized bullpen should carry the team. The team's anemic offence should improve with Walker, Baines, and Hassey returning to health. The Sox should finish a respectable fourth.

Minnesota

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The Minnesota Twins are a classic example of a team whose home park creates distorted statistics that breed illusions about the Twin's performance. The Metrodome, being a reknown hitters' park, has had a tremendous impact on the Twins' statistics. That is, the Twins are not quite the offensive force they have been built up to be. As a matter of fact, their offensive performance was rather poor last season. The flip side to this coin is that Minnesota's pitching staff was not as bad as its numbers would have us believe. The bottom line is the Twins are a mediocre team mired in the middle of a less than powerful division.

Last season the Twins had the worse team ERA in the American League (4.77). Regardless, the Twins possess a respectable starting core whose numbers suffer due to the high home run frequency of their home base. Leading the way is Bert Blyleven whose 17-14, 4.01 ERA was truly outstanding for the Metrodome. Minnesota also has the widely coveted Frank Viola (16-13, 4.51)

Mike Smithson (13-14, 4.77) and Mark Portugal (6-10, 4.31).

A major albatross for the Twins last season was relief pitching, as the team registered a pathetic 24 saves, dead last in the league. The Twins major off-season acquisition, Jeff Reardon (7-9 3.94, 35 saves), is the supposed solution to this long standing problem but his statistics contain some worrisome trends. Reardon's strikeout to walk and hits to innings pitched ratios have been steadily declining over the past couple of seasons. The hard throwing righthander also thrived in the spacious confines of Olympic stadium. Being a pitcher who as a penchant for giving up home runs, Reardon may be in for a rude awakening in the Homerdome.

For the Twins to have a shot at contention they must drastically improve on the 741 runs they scored last season. To that end, first baseman Kent Hrbek (.267, 29, 91) must rebound from the average year he had last year and third Baseman Gary Gaetti (.286, 34, 108) must maintain the high level of performance he established last season. The middle of the twin infield is notably weak, with erratic fielding Greg Gagne (25 errors) at short and weak hitting Steve Lombardozzi (.227, 8, 33) at second. Another problem area is catching with mediocre Mark Salas (.233 8, 33 in 258 at bats) holding the inside track for the job.

Minnesota's most encouraging area is the outfield. Kirby Puckett (.328, 31, 96) is coming off a tremendous season. He is flanked by Tom Brunansky (.256, 23, 75) and new addition, Dan Gladden.

Minnesota's offence seems to be weighted toward power at the expense of high on base percentage players. Certainly building an offence on power is sound logic, but in the Twins case, their power is not nearly as good as their numbers suggest. Their failure to address this weakness guarantees the franchise's continuing second division standing.

Oakland

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The Oakland A's are a franchise on the verge of a major turnaround.

cont'd on p. 26



WHO'S GOT IT? A trio of Yankees crash to the ground.

GARY HERSHORN