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Major trade lifts Indians over White Sox

CLEVELAND INDIANS

The big trade Tuesday put Cleveland here and not behind Chicago in the Central. The Indians' core of young talent from the early '90s was supposed to bring a championship to Cleveland, but now those pieces of the puzzle are gone. Carlos Baerga, Albert Belle and now Kenny Lofton no longer wear the Wahoo, but there is enough talent left to put another division winner in Jacobs Field.

David Justice will bring his outstanding defense to an outfield severely in need of it. Marquis Grissom will take Lofton's place in center, but they aren't exactly interchangeable at the lead-off spot. Manny Ramirez is the only player left in the outfield from last year's Central champs. Newcomer Matt Williams was signed to replace Belle's power numbers and improve the defense at third. Omar Vizquel will stay at short while Jim Thome moves to third with Sandy Alomar staying at catcher, at least until he gets hurt again. Second base and designated hitter will be some combination of Tony Fernandez and Julio Franco at second and Franco, Kevin Mitchell, Chad Curtis and Kevin Seitzer at designated hitter.

The starting rotation is still stellar. Charles Nagy, Orel Hershiser, Jack McDowell and Chad Ogea will be the top starters, while Albie Lopez and Brian Anderson should split time as the No. 5 guy. Jose Mesa and his crooked hat remain the stopper with Eric Plunk, Paul Shuey and Paul Assenmacher filling the bullpen. The loss of Alan Embree in the blockbuster trade with Atlanta hurts the staff as Em-

bree was probably the premier AL left-handed reliever and a probable future closer.

The big difference from last year's team is attitude, although the improved defense won't hurt either. If Williams can stay healthy and the two former Braves can adapt to the AL, Cleveland will be there in October.

Projected Record: 96-69

Key Series: May 26-27 @ Chicago White Sox; The Indians' first look at Albert Belle in a White Sox uniform and their first look at serious divisional competition.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX

Chicago has been glowing all winter after signing Albert Belle — too bad the party's over. After the big four-player swap this week, Chicago finds themselves in the shadow of their division foe again, not to mention Robin Ventura's season — and possibly career-ending dislocation, compound fracture, ligament and tendon damage to his right ankle. So what if Frank Thomas hits 85 home runs? With Belle in front of him, Chicago is just not as good as everyone thinks.

The outfield will have Belle in left, Dave Martinez in center and Tony Phillips in right. Danny Tartabull, Darren Lewis and Lyle Mouton are there to back up the outfielders, and Mouton should spend a little time at designated hitter along with Tartabull and Harold Baines.

Chris Snopce is filling in for Ventura at third with Ozzie Guillen, Ray Durham and Thomas around the horn. Ron Karkovics returns at catcher.

Jason Bere will miss at least half the season after having elbow surgery. That will open the door for Mike Bertotti or Mike Sirotko to join newcomers Doug Drabek and

Jamie Navarro in the starting rotation. Wilson Alvarez and James Baldwin are the only starters left from last year's second-ranked pitching staff. The middle relief is fairly young, with Tony Castillo, Jeff Darwin, Matt Karchner and Alan Levine getting most of the work. Roberto Hernandez is back as the closer and should have another great year.

The White Sox won't be able to recover from the loss of Ventura. They need another left-handed bat in the lineup behind Belle and David Justice isn't on the market anymore. Chicago will have to wait 'til next year to buy a champion.

Projected Record: 93-69

Key Series: April 18-21 vs. New York Yankees; Chicago thinks they've put the best team in baseball together this winter. Now they get a chance to prove it against last year's champs.

MINNESOTA TWINS

There are enough teams in the AL with a chance to win the Wild Card to make this season a very exciting year. Minnesota is another one of those pesky squads that will be in the hunt come August.

The Twins are going to give people some problems with Marty Cordova in left, Rich Becker in center and Roberto Kelly in right. There is another crew of young Twins waiting in the wings to back these three up. Paul Molitor returns as the league's best overall designated hitter, and Terry Steinbach will catch in his home state. The question for this team will be at the corners. Rookie Todd Walker will move to third from his natural position of second, and Scott Stahoviak will get the call over Ron Coomer and Denny Hocking at first. The invaluable Chuck Knoblauch will remain at second with Pat Meares at short.

Rick Aguilera and Bob Tewksbury will be the main starters. Frankie Rodriguez and Brad Radke are a pair of budding stars who will join either Greg Swindell or Scott Aldred to round out the rotation. Mike Trombly, Dave Stevens, Dan Naulty, Eddie Guardado and Rich Robertson will be the committee in charge of handling relief responsibilities.

The Twins need their young pitchers to step up if they are going to have any chance at the Wild Card. If they do that and Todd Walker develops into the next young star from Minnesota's farm system, the Twins will be around in the end.

Projected Record: 85-77

Key Series: June 20-22 @ Chicago White Sox; June 23-25 @ Cleveland Indians; June 26-29 vs. Chicago White Sox; If the Twins have any visions of postseason play, they're going to have to survive this stretch of 10 games in 10 days against the Central's two

best teams.

KANSAS CITY ROYALS
And now we come to an interesting team. Kansas City 40-37 in the second half of the season. To win the Wild Card, they need to win about 85 games.

The acquisition of Jeff King (first) and Jay Bell (shortstop) huge. They will join Jose Offerman (second) and Craig Paquette (third) in the infield with Mike Maroth behind the plate. Johnny Damon, Tom Goodwin and Bip Roberts probably start in the outfield. Jon Nunnally and Michael Tucker will get some playing time. Chris Davis will give it one more go designated hitter.

Kevin Appier and Tim Lincecum are certain to have good years. The rest of the rotation is suspect. Jose Rosado, Jim Pittsley, Gary Rusch and Chris Haney will fill holes in the rotation and spin in the bullpen.

Jeff Montgomery is coming out of shoulder surgery and returning his worst year as a closer. Jason Bluma, Bob Scanlon, Jason Lee and Mark Huisman round out the middle relief.

Pitching is the key for KC. They aren't a big-time powerhouse, but will be able to manufacture runs. The pitching staff consistently hold opponents to around four runs per game, the AL Wild Card rate. **Projected Record: 83-81**

Key Series: July 4-6 @ Cleveland Indians; With this year's All-Star Game festivities being held in Jacobs Field July 7-8, the crowd will be turning its focus on Cleveland in this series. This is the Royals' chance to show everyone they're for real.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS

It will be an uneventful summer in Milwaukee. The Brewers aren't terrible, but they aren't good either.

Around the horn are John Lyle (first), Fernando Vina (second), Jose Valentin (short) and Jeff Cirillo (third) with Mike Metheny doing the catching. Dave Nilson will split time with Jaha at designated hitter and first.

Marc Newfield, Gerald Williams and Jeromy Burnitz will roam the outfield with Chuck Carr available on the bench.

The starting rotation is OK, with Ben McDonald and Cal Eldred leading the way. Scott Kair, Tim Lincecum, Steve Sparks and Jeff D'Amico will duel for the last three spots. Mike Fetters will return as the closer and lead a bullpen of Doug Jones, Ron Villone, Bryce Florie and Bob Wickman through the season.

The Brewers will occasionally break out and score a lot of runs and will throw a shutout every now and then. But they really are the only team in this division that doesn't have a chance to compete for the playoffs.

Projected Record: 77-85

Key Series: Sept. 26-28 vs. Baltimore Orioles; Playing the playoff-bound Orioles in the last series of the year is as close as the Brewers get to the postseason in 1997.

N. Carolina, Arizona meet again Saturday

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Dean Smith will not let North Carolina watch tape of its loss to Arizona. A victory does not mean Wildcats coach Lute Olson will be showing it either.

Despite a freshman at guard and no seniors in the starting lineup, Arizona had little trouble with North Carolina in the season opener in November, beating the Tar Heels 83-72. But both teams have come a long way since, and Olson says there is no point in looking back.

"It's not even the same team that we're facing," he said Wednesday during a conference call of Final Four coaches. "At that point, as

young as they were, they were searching for what their roles were."

The Arizona game was not the end of North Carolina's struggle. The Tar Heels, also untested, lost three sophomore starters and a freshman point guard, lost their three Atlantic Coast Conference games for the first time.

But as many were writing them off as a rebuilding year, North Carolina was pulling things together.

North Carolina has a 16-game winning streak, and on Saturday the Tar Heels play Arizona again this time for a spot in the NCAA tournament.

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