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New-look Central holds National League's biggest question marks



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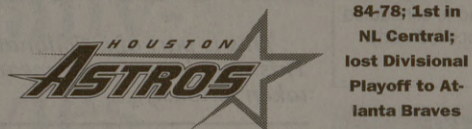
CENTRAL
Part 2 in a 7-part series



ST. LOUIS CARDINALS
73-89; 4th in NL Central

nis Eckersley; 1B Dmitri Young.
Projected Record: 90-72; 1st in NL Central.

HOUSTON ASTROS



84-78; 1st in NL Central; lost Divisional Playoff to Atlanta Braves

The Astros won the NL Central last year by being the only team with a winning record. But with the surge of St. Louis and the additions of the Cubs, Houston may find itself having to have a better record this year to make the playoffs, let alone win the division.

1998 ASTROS

	AVG.	HR	RBI	SB
C-Brad Ausmus	.266	4	44	14
1B-Jeff Bagwell	.286	43	135	31
2B-Craig Biggio	.309	22	81	47
3B-Bill Spier	.320	4	48	10
SS-Tim Lincecum	.249	4	30	4
LF-Moises Alou*	.292	23	115	9
CF-Richard Hidalgo*	.306	2	6	1
RF-Derek Bell	.276	15	71	15
SUB-Dave Clark*	.301	5	32	1

*Alou with Marlins; Hidalgo in 19 games with Astros; Clark with Cubs

	W-L	ERA	IP
RHP Shane Reynolds	9-10	4.23	181
LHP Mike Hampton	15-10	3.83	223
RHP Chris Holt	8-12	3.52	209.2
RHP Ramon Garcia	9-8	3.69	158.2
LHP John Halama*	13-3	2.58	171

RHP Billy Wagner 7-8 23 2.85
RHP Jose Cabrera 0-0 0 1.17

*Halama with AAA New Orleans; Cabrera in 12 games with Astros

The Astros added some pop to their already powerful lineup, but lost some key figures from the mound.

The closer's role will be entrusted to Billy Wagner, after sharing the honor with departed John Hudek last season. The Astros' ace, Darryl Kyle, is also gone, leaving that hole for Shane Reynolds or Mike Hampton to fill.

Houston lost a ton of outfield prospects and veterans but did add Moises Alou to fill the void.

In the end, Houston will be as good as last season, but that won't be good enough to challenge for a playoff berth.

Important Additions: OF Moises Alou; LHP Pete Schourek.

Big Losses: OF Luis Gonzalez; RHP John Hudek; OF Bobby Abreu; OF Thomas Howard; OF Chuckie Carr; OF James Mouton; RHP Darryl Kyle.

Projected Record: 84-78; 2nd in NL Central.



CHICAGO CUBS

68-94; 5th in NL Central

Talk about a team on the rebound. Chicago has done the most retooling in the division after a dismal 1997 campaign that left them tied for the worst record in the National League.

The Cubs went out and acquired some veteran players with World Series experience in Jeff Blauer and Mickey Morandini to fill the middle of the infield and be the heart of the team.

Sammy Sosa will return as one of the most feared hitters in the game and will join Mark Grace and Henry Rodriguez to lead the Cubs' power attack.

The surprisingly effective rotation from last year returns and the addition of Rod Beck to the closer's spot gives Chicago a solid pitching staff throughout.

The Cubs will have to cut down on the strikeouts this season. Sosa tallied 174 Ks last season and Rodriguez fanned 149 times. Those two are too important to the Cubs' attack to whiff that many times this season.

If the Cubs get the same pitching they did last season, they will be in the hunt for

1998 CUBS

	AVG.	HR	RBI	SB
C-Scott Servais	.260	6	45	0
1B-Mark Grace	.319	13	78	2
2B-Mickey Morandini*	.295	1	39	16
3B-Kevin Orie	.275	8	44	2
SS-Jeff Blauer*	.308	17	70	5
LF-Henry Rodriguez*	.244	26	83	3
CF-Lance Johnson*	.303	4	15	5
RF-Sammy Sosa	.251	36	119	22
SUB-Sandy Martinez*	.224	4	29	7

*Morandini with Phillies; Blauer with Braves; Rodriguez with Expos; Johnson in 39 games with Cubs; Martinez with AAA Syracuse (Toronto)

	W-L	ERA	IP
RHP Kevin Tapani	9-3	3.39	85
RHP Mark Clark*	6-1	2.86	63
RHP Steve Trachsel	8-12	4.51	201.1
RHP Jeremi Gonzalez	11-9	4.25	144
RHP Kevin Foster	10-7	4.61	146.1

RHP Rod Beck* 7-4 37 3.47
RHP Terry Adams 2-9 18 4.62

*Clark in 9 games with Cubs; Beck with Giants

the playoffs come September. The hitting will be there this season.

Important Additions: OF Henry Rodriguez; RHP Rod Beck; SS Jeff Blauer; 2B Mickey Morandini.

Big Losses: OF Doug Glanville; 2B Ryne Sandberg.
Projected Record: 83-79; 3rd in NL Central.



MILWAUKEE BREWERS

78-83; 3rd in AL Central

In the first National League season in Milwaukee since the Braves skipped town for Atlanta in 1965, no one really knows what to expect from the Brewers. Manager Phil Garner has experience coaching in the NL, and some of Milwaukee's key players have spent time on the senior circuit, but the Brewers still have a team full of DH-like players such as John Jaha and Bob Hamelin.

Marquis Grissom was acquired from Cleveland in a deal for pitcher Ben McDon-

1998 BREWERS

	AVG.	HR	RBI	SB
C-Mike Matheny	.244	4	32	0
1B-John Jaha	.247	11	26	1
2B-Fernando Vina	.275	4	28	8
3B-Jeff Cirillo	.288	10	82	4
SS-Jose Valentin	.253	17	58	19
LF-Dave Nilsson	.278	20	81	2
CF-Marquis Grissom*	.262	12	66	22
RF-Jeremy Burnitz	.281	27	85	20
SUB-Bob Hamelin*	.270	18	52	2

*Grissom with Indians; Hamelin with Tigers

	W-L	ERA	IP
RHP Cal Eldred	13-15	4.99	202
LHP Scott Karl	10-13	4.47	193.1
RHP Jose Mercedes	7-10	3.79	159
RHP Jeff Juden*	11-5	4.22	130
RHP Jeff D'Amico	9-7	4.71	135.2

RHP Doug Jones 6-6 36 2.02
RHP Bob Wickman 7-6 1 2.73

*Juden with Expos

ald (who has since been returned to the Brewers this spring) to add some spunk to an offense that failed to support the league's No. 4 pitching staff in one-run games, losing 32 of 56 in that situation.

The Brewers should be better off in the NL, especially in a division where their record last season would have had them in the hunt for the NL Central crown. But St. Louis should run away with the title leaving Milwaukee, like the other members of baseball's only six-team division, fighting for the Wild Card spot.

Important Additions: RHP Ben McDonald; OF Marquis Grissom; RHP Jeff Juden.

Big Losses: RHP Mike Fetters; DH Julio Franco; RHP Pete Harnisch; OF Gerald Williams.

Projected Record: 81-81; 4th in NL Central.

PITTSBURGH PIRATES

79-83; 2nd in NL Central



What a season 1997 was for the Pirates. With their tiny payroll and no-name players, they surprised everyone in baseball, probably even themselves. But if Pittsburgh is to repeat its storybook season and prove to the league that they were not a fluke, its young, budding stars need to have All-Star years.

Al Martin, Tony Womak, Jason Kendall and Jose Guillen are the future of this franchise. Last season they turned some heads and now they must carry a team with outside pitching hopes.

The pitching staff has much the same story. They will have grow up quickly and give Pittsburgh's offense a chance to win games.

The improvements of the Cardinals and Cubs hurt Pittsburgh, as does the addition of another question-marked team to the league's most competitive division. If the Pirates truly want to win, they are going to have pay a few players to join their squad next season.

Important Additions: 3B Dough Strange. **Big Losses:** SS Kevin Elster; SS Shawn Dunston; 3B Joe Randa.

Projected Record: 79-83; 5th in NL Central.

1998 PIRATES

	AVG.	HR	RBI	SB
C-Jason Kendall	.294	8	49	18
1B-Kevin Young	.300	18	74	11
2B-Tony Womack	.278	6	50	60
3B-Dough Strange*	.257	12	47	0
SS-Lou Collier*	.135	0	3	1
LF-Al Martin	.291	13	59	23
CF-Turner Ward	.353	7	33	4
RF-Jose Guillen	.267	14	70	1
SUB-Jermaine Allensworth	.255	3	43	14

*Strange with Expos; Collier in 18 games with Pirates

	W-L	ERA	IP
RHP Francisco Cordova	11-8	3.63	178.2
RHP Jon Leiber	11-14	4.49	188.1
RHP Jason Schmidt	10-9	4.60	187.2
RHP Esteban Loaiza	11-11	4.13	195.1
RHP Jose Silva*	2-1	5.94	36.1

RHP Rich Loiselle 1-5 29 3.10
LHP Ricardo Rincon 4-8 4 3.45

*Silva in 11 games with Pirates

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