

Phil's Rose likely to bloom NL East

By L. Kent Wolgamott

Strong pitching staffs, necessary to compliment good offensive lineups, seem to be missing in the National League East and all six teams are trying to find the right combination of pitchers for the upcoming season.

The two Pennsylvania ball clubs, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, are a cut above the remaining teams in the division and should battle for the championship.

Most experts give Philadelphia a slight advantage over the Pirates, based primarily on their addition of Pete Rose.

But, the Phillies' aging pitching staff must have a strong season to keep the team in contention. Philadelphia's ace, Steve Carlton, is 34 and two others starters, Jim Lonborg and Jim Kaat are even older and may have seen their better days on the mound.

However, Philadelphia has one of the strongest bullpens in the major leagues, with Warren Brusstar, Ron Reed, and Tug "You've gotta believe" McGraw available to put out fires in the late innings.

Schmidt at second

The Philadelphia lineup is strong and the addition of Rose should make it stronger, but they may be hurt defensively if Ted Sizemore is benched at second in favor of Mike Schmidt.

But, count on the Phillies to be in contention all summer long, barring injuries.

The Pittsburgh Pirates will be a much stronger team this year than last with Willie Stargell and Rennie Stennett healthy and ready to compliment National League MVP Dave Parker at the plate.

The Bucs only question on the field is the choice of third baseman, with Phil Garner expected to get the nod.

The Pittsburgh pitching staff should also improve with John Candelaria returning from back problems to join Bert Blyleven and last year's rookie sensation Don Robinson in the starting rotation.

Pirate relief help should be sufficient with iron man Kent Tekulve, who appeared in 91 games last year, anchoring an improved staff.

Pirates in September

If manager Chuck Tanner can mold the Pirates into a smooth working unit, they should battle the Phillies into September.

The other four teams in the division do not seem to have the personnel to challenge for the championship.

The Chicago Cubs are the strongest of the four remaining teams, but they have too many question marks to be a contender.

The Cubs are dependent on high-priced power hitter Dave Kingman to lead their offense and are hoping he doesn't lead the league in strikeouts again.

In order for the Cubs to challenge, they need strong years from the slumping Bobby Murcer and Bill Buckner along with consistent performances from their starting pitchers to take part of the load off reliever Bruce Sutter.

But, expect a late season swoon from the Cubs, their traditional behavior.

The Spaceman

The Montreal Expos acquired baseball's most infamous free spirit, Bill "Spaceman" Lee, to shore up a weak pitching staff, but his addition will itself not be enough to shape up the staff.

On the field the Expo's have one of baseball's best outfields with Cromartie, Dawson and Valentine, joining veterans Tony Perez at first and Dave Cash at second in providing an adequate lineup.

But, if you can't get the opponents out, you don't get to the plate.

The St. Louis Cardinals faltered last year and should continue to dwell near the cellar this summer.

Bright spots on the team include Garry Templeton at shortstop and Pete Vuckovich who was a surprise on the mound last year.

But, the Cardinals need to find an outfield and pitching staff before they can move up in the division.

A sidelight in St. Louis: veteran basestealer Lou Brock only needs 20 thefts to break the all-time stolen base record set by Billy Hamilton in 1888-1901, during "old-time" baseball.

Mets in the cellar

The New York Mets have returned to their home, the league cellar and have virtually no chance for improvement.

Catcher John Stearns, first baseman Willie Montanez and centerfielder Lee Mazzilli will provide most of the excitement at Shea Stadium this summer, but manager Joe Torre should consider bringing "Marvelous" Marv Thronberry back to entertain the fans.

In my mind, the final National League East standings shape up like this: Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago, Montreal, St. Louis, New York.

The race will be close and should come down to the final few weeks in the season, and if Pittsburgh is close to the Phillies at the first of August, a stronger pitching staff should carry the Pirates to the division crown.

Next week: the National League West

Tracksters...

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Fluitt said running the relays gives Nebraska a chance to bring home eight gold medals instead of one or two.

"We definitely have a good shot at the relays," he said. Notre Dame will be Nebraska's toughest competition in the event. Vilanova and Tennessee will be the teams to beat in the two-mile relay, Fluitt added.

Dunnigan said he thought the two-mile relay team would need a time of 7:26 to

win the event. Nebraska's best in the event this year was 7:33.5 on Jan. 20 at Eastern Tennessee.

Railsback said a new Nebraska record would win the event for the Cornhuskers.

Although he qualified for the mile run at the NCAA Championships, Dunnigan said the relays may let him come home a winner.

"I think it is fine not competing as an individual. The relays give me a better chance," he said.

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