

# 'Experienced' Dodgers are team to beat in National League West

**Editor's note:** This is the first of a four-part series predicting the outcome of the 1983 major league baseball season. All four stories will be the opinion of the author.

By Ward W. Triplett III

The Atlanta Braves won their first 13 games and honestly won the National League West last year. Barring another miracle, the same shouldn't happen again this year as "America's Team" rested a little on the laurels this summer while their three closest competitors improved.

**LOS ANGELES:** The Dodgers finally did some housecleaning over the winter, shipping off longtime cornermen Steve Garvey and Ron Cey. All-star outfielder Pedro Guerrero will replace Cey at third, but Greg Brock and Mike Marshall will more than make up for Garvey's absence. Both clubbed multitudes of home runs for the minor league's best team Albuquerque.

The Dodgers have the distinct advantage of playing in what is probably the youngest conference in baseball. As last season's stretch drive fell short, the Dodger experience still shone through. With Fernando Valenzuela still yet to approach his prime (19-13) and Jerry Reuss, Dave Stewart, Steve Howe and Burt Hooten providing experience again on the pitching side, and mainstays Guerrero, Steve Sax, Ken Landreaux and Derrel Thomas still around, the Dodgers are unlikely to repeat last season's first-half bumbling. Look for the Dodgers to take over first from either San Diego or San Francisco in July, and take it from there.

**SAN DIEGO:** There are those who say that if Tim Lollar (16-9 3.13) Ruppert Jones (.283) and Sixto Lezcano (.277) had stayed healthy during August, the Padres might have very well won the West. Instead, those injuries, among many others, forced the Padres to fall not only to the Dodger comeback, but also to the resurgent San Francisco Giants in September.

This season, the Padres, on paper, are loaded. Lollar returns, as do Eric Show and John Montefusco from the right-hand side and lefty Dave Dravecky. The Padre bullpen boasts top rookie Luis DeLeon, who is backed by Gary Lucas, Floyd Chiffer and former starter Chris Welsh.

Terry Kennedy returns as catcher after collecting 42 doubles and batting .294. Juan Bonilla, who sat out most of the year because of a wrist injury, has won his second base job back from Tim Flannery, who batted .264 as a regular. Shortstop Gary Templeton and third baseman Luis Salazar, both of whom have lifetime averages over .290, batted poorly but lived up to their reputations in the field, and the Padre outfield of Gene Richards (.284) Jones and Lezcano is one of baseball's best. Behind them, stolen base leader Alan Anthony Wiggins, late season star Tony Gwynn, veteran Jerry Turner and Joe Lefebvre wait for playing time, as will minor league star George Hinshaw.

While the Padres should have plenty of weapons, particularly if the pitching holds up, they still need a consistent home run threat. Garvey might be the answer, but the former Dodger, who will give the Padres their first everyday first baseman since Nate Colbert, may not be enough to take over the Dodgers... yet.

**SAN FRANCISCO:** There was no predicting the Giants last year. After stumbling early, the Giants appeared to be on their way to battling Cincinnati for last place in the West and giving Frank Robinson a ticket to retire for good. Instead, behind two crafty veterans in Joe Morgan and Reggie Smith and impressive pitching by former Omaha Royals Bill Laskey and Atlee Hammaker, the Giants were suddenly back in the thing, and actually had a shot at the Braves before falling to that team in a late season series.

This season, Morgan has joined the Geritol kids at Philadelphia, and Smith has flown to Tokyo, leaving Robinson with two important holes to fill. Laskey, Hammaker and former Philly Mike Krukow are around, though, and Chili Davis is still showing signs of potential

superstardom. Tempermental Jack Clark is still around too. The overall lack of proven talent might make it difficult for the Giants to hang on through the stretch.

**CINCINNATI:** While the Reds seem to be written off by most this season, it would be hard to believe that, given a new start, the Big Red machine would let last year's disasters strike again. Count on Cesar Cedeno and Johnny Bench to improve on weak showings last year, and the Reds pitching staff to mature enough to move the Reds ahead of the Astros and Braves. That should be the extent of it.

**ATLANTA:** Atlanta played well over their heads last year, and were summarily dusted off by the Cardinals in post-season play after an emotional finish. While the Braves showed tremendous tenacity in September, they also took advantage of the Dodgers' poor play early and the Padre injuries. Except for Bob Horner, the Braves played an almost injury-free season. If that happens again, and if the Braves get off to a spectacular start to reinforce their confidence, then this might very well be a four-team race again. But the Braves will likely end up on the short end of any race due to a lack of pitching power behind Phil Niekro (is he really that good still?), Steve Bedrosian (no, he's really not that good) and Gene Garber. Atlanta added sorely needed left-handed pitching by wooing Terry Forster and Pete Falcone. Nuff said.

**HOUSTON:** I'd like to see the Astros improve on last year's shabby performance, but the best of the Houston ballplayers showed definite signs of losing it last season. Nolan Ryan, Vern Ruhle, Craig Reynolds, Jose Cruz and a few others sparkled at various times, but none lived up to expectations. As a result, the Astros fell, and should fall again. Former Pirate Omar Moreno should shore up a shaky outfield, but he and proven All-Star Ray Knight will not be enough.

Tomorrow: National League East

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