

Improved Padres best in National League West



Damian Leffler/Daily Nebraskan

Analysis by Ward W. Triplett III
This is the fourth in a series previewing the major league baseball season.

The time has finally come. One division, the NL West, just might produce such an ultimate parity that the winner could be decided by just who chokes and who doesn't down the stretch. Oh sure, that's been the case many times before, but in the National League West this season, all six teams could be within a series reach of the top spot come September.

Reason is, the best team in the division, the Los Angeles Dodgers, did little to improve themselves over the winter. If anything, they took a downward slide by releasing veterans without really making sure the gap could be filled. The next best teams, the Houston Astros and the Atlanta Braves, pretty much stood pat, while the three lower teams added, subtracted and multiplied their strengths to cover obvious weaknesses last year. All told, even with a two-day sneak preview, it's too close to call.

SAN DIEGO PADRES

I predict the Padres will win, not because their talent will overwhelm anybody else. No do I do it, because after 12 long, long years as a Padres fan, I finally don't have to apologize for it. But the Padres should sneak this out by one or two games because of a pitching edge.

Eric Show (15-8 last season) went seven innings Tuesday to defeat the Pirates, and he was only the best the team had in the waning days of last season. The real ace, Dave Dravecky, is in the bull pen, and budding all-star, Tim Lollar is healthy. The remaining starters Andy Hawkins and Ed Whitson won't scare anyone, but the addition of Goose Gossage to a bullpen that already had Luis DeLeon and Sid Monge will make some mistakes easier to override.

HOUSTON ASTROS

To the Astros' credit, they maintained the strong lineup they ended with last season despite a swirl of trades. The Astros made a serious title run despite a lack of general speed and the quality pitching they thought they had. With Jerry Mumphery looking for that big year he was supposed to have had every year, Nolan Ryan chalking up more records and Dickie Thon going on as simply the best all-around shortstop in the business, this is the best single unit returning.

LOS ANGELES DODGERS

The Dodgers had every opportunity to crash and burn last season. They were unable to beat San Diego or San Francisco and certainly proved that major league fielding wasn't the clockwork art it was supposed to be. Still, they won. Made no sense whatsoever, but they won.

Dusty Baker is gone and the Dodgers ended up feeling the loss of Steve Garvey after Greg Brock hit .224. But expect Brock to have a make-or-break season, since the Dodgers farm system, far and away the best in the majors, has plenty of suitors on hand in case Brock proves he can't do the job. The same is true at the other eight positions as well. Jack Fimple, R.J. Reynolds and German Rivera, all of whom contributed for the Dodgers late last season, got tickets to Albuquerque or to the far end of the bench.

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

The Giants spent a jolly time last year whipping up on the league's top finishers. But when they stooped to play people like Chicago and New York, they took a thumping.

Part of that problem not winning the little ones is due more to youth and inexperience than lack of talent. So the Giants went out and landed Al Oliver from the Expos, Dusty Baker from the Dodgers and Manny Trillo from Cleveland.

CINCINNATI REDS

It was a fast fall to the bottom and it looks like a very slow climb back to the top for the Reds. Except for Mario Soto, the pitchers are erratic, and the fielding and hitting are an adventure after the great youth experiment. But there is a bright spot when some of those youth are people named Gary Redus and Nick Esasky.

While there are a bit too many holes to realistically consider the Reds a contender this season, particularly if they should have any injuries among the top nine, it's also a mistake to totally count them out.

ATLANTA BRAVES

I don't think this is as strong a team as it was last year. Dale Murphy is a superstar, but Rafael Ramirez, Claudell Washington, Chris Chambliss and yes, even Bob Horner, all seem to play in streaks that can make the Braves very, very good or very, very bad. This season, they won't even have the top-of-the-line pitching they sometimes turned up with, now that Pascual Perez and Phil Niekro are gone.

But the major reason the Braves could finish last is that the once formidable lineup of Horner and Murphy back-to-back has been equalled, if not surpassed, by the other five teams in the division. I hope they finish last strictly because of WTBS.

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Riegel . . .

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"I think it was between Nebraska's gymnastics and UCLA's sun and beach," he said. "I just never would have been in the gym at UCLA. But with two years to the Olympics, I thought now was the time to put it in full gear."

Riegel said he's entertained thoughts of quitting gymnastics throughout his training, but never to a serious degree.

"I've always thought about it at different stages of my growing up," he said. "When I was little, about 8, 9 or 10, I didn't want to go to the gym, and I used to cry, because I was scared of Moyer."

"Then, around 13, 14, 15, getting into high school, I just wanted to get out and be a normal kid and go play," he continued. "That was just kind of naive, immature thinking."

Riegel underwent wrist surgery last June, which also created a kind of "crisis in confidence" for the gymnast.

"When I'm hurting or sore or injured, which I was for a year with my wrist, it plays a big part on you mentally and physically," he said. "I've never been injured like that before. It just messes you up in your head — I wanted to start working out again so hard, but mentally, you think you can't do it, you're not ready yet."

Riegel said his parents pushed him into training to an extent, but always left the decision to quit up to him.

"I can remember one time, I think I was 12 or 13, and I just didn't want to go," he said. "And my dad said, 'See all those trophies? You want to give them all up, you don't want any more? It's up to you, you can quit.' So I said, 'OK, I'm quitting' — for a day — I went back because I missed it."

As might be expected, Riegel said his parents, Larry and Mary, shared his dream of making it to the Olympics.

"Now they're real excited. They've been waiting 15, 16 years to go to the Olympics," he said. "That's their biggest dream also, seeing me in the Olympics, at the opening ceremonies."

With the Olympics only two months away now, Riegel said he doesn't regret the effort he's invested in his career.

"I feel very satisfied that it's paid off — all the training and pain and hours and sacrifice," he said. "It just makes me work all that harder — it's a really good feeling."

A broadcasting major, Riegel said he intends to pursue some modeling offers in California when his collegiate career is over.

But for now, he still has that ultimate goal to accomplish, about which he's experiencing a variety of feelings.