

Title:

2006 Washington Nationals Preview

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Summary:

Contenders for much of 2005 before finishing .500, Frank Robinson's Washington Nationals (formerly the Montreal Expos) were the talk of the National League East prior to the all star break.

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Article Body:

2005 Overview:

Contenders for much of 2005 before finishing .500, Frank Robinson's Washington Nationals (formerly the Montreal Expos) were the talk of the National League East prior to the all star break. The D.C. community embraced the "Nats" as the team was happy to find a permanent home stadium after splitting much of their games in 2004 between two different stadiums in Montreal and Puerto Rico. Despite holding onto first place in the National League East through the month of July, Washington fell quickly finishing their 2005 season with an 81-81 record and ended their year 9 games behind the first place Atlanta Braves.

The 2005 starting lineup was led by the newly acquired outfielder Jose Guillen (.283 24 76) and 1st baseman Nick Johnson (.289 15 74). Outfielder's Brad Wilkerson (.248 11 57) and Preston Wilson (.261 10 43) joined catcher Brian Schneider (.268 10 44) to provide the team with the rest of their offense.

Starting pitchers Livan Hernandez (15-10 3.98) and former NY Yankee Esteban Loaiza (12-10 3.77) joined John Patterson (9-7 3.13), Tony Armas (7-7 4.97) and closer Chad Cordero (2-4 1.82 47 saves in 74 games) to stabilize the 2005 pitching staff as the team greatly improved on their losing 67-96 2004 record.

Off Season Moves:

The "Nats" lost Esteban Loaiza to the Oakland Athletics and traded away Brad

Wilkerson for Alfonso Soriano (.268 36 104) to help improve their offensive production which was the lowest in baseball in 2005. Washington also traded for San Diego's Brian Lawrence (7-15 4.83) and the signed free agent Ramon Ortiz (9-11 5.36) in order to help bolster their rotation. The Nationals will also have a newcomer at third since Vinny Castilla (.253 12 66) was traded to the Padres in the deal for Lawrence. Veteran Mike Stanton (3-3 4.64) was also added to help strengthen the bullpen as he was signed as a free agent late in the off season.

2006 Analysis:

The loss of Loaiza will hurt the team's starting pitching. He provided the Nationals with 217 innings in 2005 and the Washington has yet to make any significant moves that will replace those innings. While Washington did acquire two additional starting pitchers there is little chance that either will prove as reliable as Loaiza did last season. Brian Lawrence had a terrible 2005, despite pitching in pitching friendly Petco Park, and Ramon Ortiz was released by Cincinnati Red who became frustrated with his ability to deliver any quality innings. Soriano should prove to be a great pickup, but he will not go quietly into the outfield with José Vidro (.275 7 32) or newly acquired free agent Marlon Anderson (.264 7 19) expected to start the season at 2nd base.

The Nationals' bullpen was very good last season with Chad Cordero establishing himself as one of the game's best young closers last year after compiling 47 saves. Stanton should also be a nice addition. The starting pitching is weak but Washington should be expected to score more runs in 2006.