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Divisional Outlook – AL West

By Jay Nault

The AL West is shaping up as a division that will come down to the wire. Every team is lumped together in the standings, as the separation between first and last place as of this writing is only 5.5 games. None of the teams have been extremely hot lately, and everyone sits near .500 for the season. As of now, this race is way too early to call, and this will probably be the case throughout the season. It's going to be a very interesting season in this division.

Texas Rangers

Currently: The Rangers are slowly but surely building a solid team that appears to be geared to contend for the long-term. So far this season, the team has made its mark with consistent hitting. The Rangers rank 3rd in the AL in team BA and in total hits, and their nucleus of Michael Young, Hank Blalock and Gary Matthews, Jr. are all in the prime of their careers. The Rangers are "gnats" in regards to their offense, though, as they rank in the bottom half of the AL in power numbers. Their pitching has been solid if not spectacular, as they rank in the middle of the pack in the AL in nearly every statistical category.

Outlook: The Rangers are a team that appears to be built against long-term slumps, as they tend to manufacture runs rather than rely on power, and their pitching may get an enormous boost if they can land the "big" free agent that's available in Roger Clemens. The Rangers will be around all season.

Oakland A's

Currently: The team credited with inventing the "Money Ball" model is going about the 2006 season in much the same way as they have in recent years. There are no real "stars" on this team, as not one of their regulars is hitting over .300. The closest thing to it is young LF Nick Swisher, who is in the top ten in the AL in HR, R, OPS, RBI and SLG. On the pitching side, no one is dominating either, although collectively, the staff ranks 4th in the AL in ERA.

Outlook: Regardless of the dearth of "sexy" statistics, the A's simply hang in there with overachieving young players and consistently solid pitching and defense. There is no reason to think that their

approach, or results, will change, so A's fans can look forward to another pennant race this fall.

Seattle Mariners

Currently: The Mariners are just below .500, and even though that's mediocre on its face, the team is slowly rebounding from a disappointing 2005. Their offense as a whole is not setting the world on fire, but Ichiro Suzuki is up to his old tricks with 57 hits in his first 45 games and a .367 OBP. A young star may be developing before fans' eyes, though in 22-year-old Jose Lopez, who is nearly keeping pace with Ichiro in terms of number of hits and BA. The pitching overall has been middle of the pack, but the staff is 5th in the AL in BAA and 3rd in K/9.

Outlook: If the Mariners can continue to develop their younger players like Lopez and their pitching comes around, the team will contend. Ichiro will no doubt keep up with his current pace, and no one in the division has the look of potentially running away and hiding in the standings.

Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim

Currently: The Angels have hit the skids lately, but their roster is as talented as any in baseball. Other than Vladimir Guerrero, who remains as feared as any batter in the AL, the team's offense has been non-existent. Their team BA ranks 2nd from last in the AL, and their recent slump has only exacerbated that problem. Although the pitching staff is adept at fanning opposing batters, ranking 2nd in the AL in both K/9 and K/BB, the team's ERA is in the bottom half of the AL.

Outlook: This team has struggled out of the gate, to be blunt. However, they are as talented as any team in the league, and if any of their offensive players turn it around, their pitching statistics by logical results will improve, as will their record. No one will overlook the Angels this season, and despite an awful start, they are far from out of it at this point.

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Which Division Will Provide The Best Football Tickets In 2006?

By Jay Nault

Divisional Outlook – AI West

Even though we are entrenched in the NFL's "Age of Parity," fans around the league still want to know what they're getting when they buy their football tickets. As we look at the divisional breakdown, it becomes apparent that certain divisions are deeper than others. That's why we're going to break them down individually by way of "Divisional Power Rankings." These rankings could change throughout the season, but now is a good time to take our first look.

1. NFC East

The NFC East, top-to-bottom, is the toughest division in football right now. Any one of the four teams could realistically qualify for the playoffs, and the final standings could shake out in just about any way and no one would be really surprised.

2. NFC South

The NFC South contains a Super Bowl contender in the Panthers, two solid playoff-level teams in the Buccaneers and Falcons, and perhaps the most improved team in the league, the Saints. This division will be brutal, and the winner will definitely be battle-tested.

3. AFC West

The AFC West is almost as difficult, as the Broncos have Super Bowl aspirations, the Chiefs are expected to at least make the playoffs, the Chargers are talented and the Raiders could be scary if they ever put all their talent together. The rivalries in this division also make every game a battle.

4. AFC North

The AFC North contains the defending champions, and they didn't even win the division last year. The Bengals did, but they have question marks surrounding QB Carson Palmer and off-field distractions. Baltimore is much-improved and the Browns are getting better.

5. AFC East

The East has the rivalries, but only two good teams in the Patriots and Dolphins. The Jets and Bills, whether they admit it or not, are rebuilding. Regardless, fans of every team are extremely loyal, so football tickets sales will be high for any of these divisional battles.

6. AFC South

The South contains one potential juggernaut in the Colts, one fringe playoff team in Jacksonville, and two teams in the Texans and Titans that are in full rebuild mode. The Colts-Jaguars games will be entertaining, but the Texans and Titans are definitely a notch below as of now.

7. NFC North

The NFC North has one established playoff team in the Bears, one likely playoff team in the Vikings,

one team that could be a surprise in the Packers and the Lions, who seem to constantly be rebuilding. The best thing going for this division is the level of intensity present every time any of these two teams meet.

8. NFC West

Yes, the Seahawks got all the way to the Super Bowl last season, but after that there isn't much. The Rams could make a push this year, but they're still a year or two away. The Cardinals could surprise as well, but they've been perennial disappointments, and the 49ers need time to restock their roster with talent, so they're not going anywhere anytime soon. There are intense rivalries in the division, however, and football tickets are always hard to find for a Seahawks – Rams game.

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