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**Divisional Outlook For June – NL East**

**By Jay Nault**

It's been quite a month in the NL East. What looked like a competitive race during our last review has become a runaway at the top and a surprising look from the bottom. The Mets have been on fire lately, and it appears that the Braves' incredible streak of postseason appearances could be coming to an end.

New York Mets

Currently:

The Mets are surging, and are pushing their division lead towards double digits. They went 19–9 over the past month, and that includes an eight–game winning streak and a sweep of their biggest challenger for the title, the Phillies. David Wright and Paul Lo Duca continue to be pests on the base pads, and Carlos Delgado and Carlos Beltran are continuing in their roles of bringing them home. Not to mention, the pitching staff is leading the NL in team ERA.

Outlook:

There's no reason, barring injury or an unforeseen slump, to foresee the Mets stumbling at this point. If they simply hold their lead, they'll win the division.

Philadelphia Phillies

Currently:

The Phillies have stumbled lately, going only 11–17 over the past month, and that includes a six–game losing streak, with three of those losses coming in a damaging sweep at the hands of the Mets. Their offense has been pretty good, with Ryan Howard sitting in the top five in the NL in home runs, RBI's and SLG. The problem in Philadelphia has been the pitching, as the staff is near the bottom of the NL in team ERA.

## Divisional Outlook For June – NL East

### Outlook:

The Phillies need to fix their pitching problems now, or they'll continue to fall further behind the Mets and never catch up.

### Washington Nationals

#### Currently:

The Nationals quietly had a decent month, going 18–12 in their last 30 games. They have been a bit streaky though, as they had both a five–game winning streak and a five–game losing streak. The problem is that the Mets are playing so well that the Nationals haven't made up any ground. Alfonso Soriano and Jose Vidro are continuing their strong seasons, but their offense still sits near the bottom of the NL in BA. The pitching staff continues to have issues, sitting near the bottom of the NL in team

ERA.

#### Outlook:

Despite their statistical problems, the Nationals are winning games. All they can do is continue their hard play and hope for the Mets to stumble.

### Florida Marlins

#### Currently:

The Marlins have also quietly been playing well, going 18–9 over the past month, and they're currently on an eight–game winning streak. They've been doing it with timely hitting and strong pitching. The Marlins have lowered their team ERA to 4.29, which ranks fifth in the NL.

#### Outlook:

If Miguel Cabrera can continue his big offensive season and Dontrelle Willis can keep his stuff after a strong turnaround, the Marlins could wind up having a successful season for a young team.

### Atlanta Braves

#### Currently:

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. When was the last time we saw the Braves sitting in last place this late in the season? The Braves have gone 9–20 in the past month, and are currently mired in an eight–game losing streak. How has this happened? Because both their hitting and pitching has been spotty. Edgar Renteria is the only position player who could still be considered as having a strong season, and the pitching staff has given up the second–most runs in the NL.

Outlook:

The Braves unbelievable streak of winning is not talked about as much as it should be. Baseball is perhaps the most difficult sport to reach the postseason, and the Braves have been doing so every year for over a decade. Perhaps it's time to reload with young prospects and work towards next year.

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## **Which Division Will Provide The Best Football Tickets In 2006?**

**By Jay Nault**

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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