

Strike Zone

Strike Zone - AL Team-by-Team Notes

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American League

Baltimore - Unable to find the right inferior hitter to slot in behind [Brian Roberts](#), manager Sam Perlozzo is leaning toward moving [Melvin Mora](#), [Miguel Tejada](#) and [Jay Gibbons](#) up one spot. Mora, who seems disgruntled about everything this spring, is less than thrilled, even though he's hit .326/.407/.525 in 734 AB as a No. 2 hitter the last three years. It's clearly the best setup for the offense as a whole. ... If the Orioles really want to forgo having [Nick Markakis](#) under control for 2012 just to have him up for an extra month or two this year, then the team is in even worse hands than I've assumed. Maybe Markakis is ready after just 124 at-bats above A ball, but the Orioles better be absolutely positive. With [Luis Matos](#) and [Corey Patterson](#) around, they don't have to look far to see what happened to a couple of other outfielders who were rushed to the majors. ... There have been no rumors to suggest it, but if the Orioles do opt to carry Markakis, they could always choose to release Patterson this week. Since he was an arbitration-eligible player, his \$2.8 million salary wasn't guaranteed. If he's cut before Wednesday, the Orioles would owe him \$700,000.

Boston - I had Wily Mo Pena down for 37 homers before the Reds decided that, sure, they'd be just fine with [Scott Hatteberg](#) as a regular. In Boston, I'm optimistically projecting him to get 350 at-bats and finish with 24 homers. That a higher percentage of those at-bats will be against lefties will aid his rate stats. It doesn't appear that he'll get any reps at first base this spring, but since he has played the position in winter ball, he could be an alternative there later on. ... Of course, the Red Sox added more insurance for first base last week by picking up Rotoworld fav Hee-Seop Choi off waivers. Fenway isn't an ideal park for him -- cheap homers immediately down the right-field line can be had, but it takes better swings to hit balls out to right-center. Still, he was well worth the claim. [Mike Lowell](#) hasn't flashed 2003 form this spring, and if his struggles linger into May, the Red Sox will need to think about going with Choi at first and [Kevin Youkilis](#) at third. Until then, Choi will get regular at-bats in Triple-A. ... [Keith Foulke](#) is healthy, but his velocity isn't all the way back yet. ESPN's Peter Gammons reported that he was at 85-86 mph last week. That may be fine for [Trevor Hoffman](#), but Foulke probably needs to be closer to 88-89 mph if he's going to succeed. [Jonathan Papelbon](#), now officially in the pen, should emerge as the favorite for saves if Foulke struggles.

Chicago - [Bobby Jenks](#)' struggles in camp could create early save opps for [Neal Cotts](#). [Dustin Hermanson](#) is out of the mix because of his back problems, so it really is between the two youngsters. I see Cotts being the more effective pitcher this year, but Jenks remains the far better bet for saves. Frankly, I think it's more likely that Jenks hurts his arm again than it is that he'll be ineffective for any length of time. The safe strategy would be to pair the two. ... So, it now looks like [Tadahito Iguchi](#) will go back to batting second and [Juan Uribe](#) will occupy a spot in the bottom third of the order. Was it Ozzie Guillen's plan all along? Hitting Uribe second was a means to encourage him to show more discipline, but Guillen had to know that Iguchi was a better choice there. Because of the news, I upped Iguchi by \$2 and dropped Uribe by the same amount last week. It could be a larger swing than that if both players occupy the current spots all year long.

Cleveland - With just one bullpen spot, the backup catcher job and one more place on the bench up for grabs, the Indians have been rather boring to follow this spring. [Danny Graves](#) has emerged as the favorite for the bullpen spot, with one of my deep sleepers, [Andrew Brown](#), already being eliminated. [Einar Diaz](#) has outproduced [Kelly Shoppach](#) in the competition to play behind [Victor Martinez](#). As few at-bats as that player is going to get, I think it should be Diaz's job, at least for the first couple of months. The other bench spot will likely go to [Ramon Vazquez](#). [Brandon Phillips](#) should get traded this week, and it will be a good thing for his career. ... [Ben Broussard](#)'s .227/.306/.318 line this spring doesn't seem to have the Indians considering alternatives at first base. Not claiming Choi off waivers before he got to Boston could go down as a mistake, but the team needs to have [Ryan Garko](#) playing regularly at first in Triple-A. Likewise, the Indians probably won't be first in line for Carlos Pena.

Detroit - Releasing him now leaves Pena in a much worse situation than he would have been had the Tigers non-tendered him in December. Unless the Reds decide to ante up -- and they should -- Pena likely will open the season as a reserve. ... Manager Jim Leyland has settled on a lineup of CF [Curtis Granderson](#), 2B [Placido Polanco](#), C [Ivan Rodriguez](#), RF Magglio Ordonez, DH [Dmitri Young](#), LF [Craig Monroe](#), SS [Carlos Guillen](#), 1B [Chris Shelton](#) and 3B [Brandon Inge](#). The reverse would probably just as productive. Until changes are made -- I'm optimistic Shelton will spend a good chunk of the season hitting third -- Guillen and Shelton lose value and

Pudge gains. ... I don't see [Joel Zumaya](#) being worth using in AL-only leagues while working in middle relief. The potential is certainly there, but command and inconsistency figure to plague him for the short-term. ... I have [Justin Verlander](#) at \$5 in a 5x5 AL-only league, \$4 in a 4x4. Although I rank him as the game's best pitching prospect, I expect that consistency is a year away. I'd still take [Francisco Liriano](#) over him for 2006.

Kansas City - Even with [Mike MacDougal](#) sidelined and [Ambiorix Burgos](#) closing for at least the first month of the season, the Royals felt they could shift [Jeremy Affeldt](#) back into the rotation. It could be a short-term arrangement. [Mark Redman](#) is due back from knee surgery in late April, and although [Denny Bautista](#) is being labeled the fifth starter now, he'll get an opportunity to stick. Affeldt certainly hasn't inspired much confidence with his 7/7 K/BB ratio in 18 1/3 IP this spring. ... [John Buck](#) and [Doug Mientkiewicz](#) are the only Royals regulars who have yet to miss time due to injury this spring. [Reggie Sanders](#), [Mike Sweeney](#), [Mark Grudzielanek](#) and [David DeJesus](#) are particularly noteworthy health risks going forward.

Los Angeles - [Dallas McPherson](#), who was stripped of his starting job with the move of [Darin Erstad](#) to center field before spring training started, now appears to be Triple-A bound. Given that his approach doesn't fit in with the Angels' philosophy at all, he may be just a few months away from change-of-scenery time. I'm going to keep him at \$6 in AL-only leagues. He doesn't need to be up for a full season in order to pop 25 homers. ... [Juan Rivera](#) apparently will have the DH spot -- or left field, depending on the status of [Garret Anderson](#) -- mostly to himself initially. One of [Tim Salmon](#) or [Kendry Morales](#) will be around, probably the former, but Rivera shouldn't have much to worry about unless he gets off to a poor start. .280-20-90 would be within reach with 550 at-bats. ... As for Anderson, well, he seems to be aging at a rate three times that of a typical human. He'll figure out a way to drive in 90-100 runs anyway, but I don't view him as anything more than a \$15 player in AL-only leagues.

Minnesota - [Scott Baker](#) looks to have locked up a rotation spot with a 3.18 ERA, but the Twins are now reconsidering the plan to send [Francisco Liriano](#) back to Triple-A if he wasn't going to be a starter. Liriano could have considerable value in AL-only leagues as a reliever, and he'd also be worth using in shallow mixed leagues until he eventually claims a rotation spot. With any luck at all, he'll end up with at least \$15 starts, allowing him to become at least a \$12-\$15 pitcher in AL-only leagues. ... Injuries to [Michael Cuddyer](#) and [Jason Bartlett](#) have added additional confusion to Minnesota's playing time battles. Cuddyer, who was hitting .500 before suffering a strained oblique, seemed well on his way to becoming the everyday right fielder. Defense was the concern with Bartlett, who is hitting .382/.500/.441. The Twins seem to be focusing on his miscues, rather than his above average range. As things stand now, both should have starting jobs if healthy. Bartlett's hamstring problem is the greater concern.

New York - The big matter left to be decided in Yankees camp is how [Jason Giambi](#), [Hideki Matsui](#), [Alex Rodriguez](#) and [Gary Sheffield](#) will be deployed behind [Johnny Damon](#) and [Derek Jeter](#). Last year's results seem to suggest that it'd be best to go: Giambi, A-Rod, Sheffield and Matsui. However, Sheffield is the most likely to pout if dropped in the order and he's grouchy enough already. Sheffield third, followed by A-Rod and the two lefties, in either order, is my best guess. Manager Joe Torre won't be afraid to mix them up as time goes on, so I'm not going to make significant rankings adjustments based on his initial picks. ... Torre will announce his rotation on Tuesday. Though the official line all spring has been that [Jaret Wright](#)'s competing for a spot, it's been obvious throughout that [Chien-Ming Wang](#) and [Shawn Chacon](#) will follow [Randy Johnson](#) and [Mike Mussina](#). The Yankees would need a fifth starter just once before [Carl Pavano](#) is due to return on April 29. Wright could draw that assignment if his back is OK. With [Aaron Small](#) joining Pavano on the DL, [Scott Proctor](#) is the alternative.

Oakland - It looks like [Frank Thomas](#) (ankle) will be in the Opening Day lineup, making [Jay Payton](#) the odd man out initially. Thomas, though, probably won't be an everyday player, and since [Milton Bradley](#) and [Mark Kotsay](#) are also good bets to miss time with injuries, Payton won't be forcing his way off another team anytime soon. ... Because seven starters weren't enough, the A's sent [Juan Cruz](#) to Arizona for [Brad Halsey](#) on Sunday. Halsey will probably be in the rotation at Triple-A Sacramento, though the A's could give him a look as a left-handed reliever at some point. Since he possesses just one above average pitch -- a curveball -- Halsey's upside is pretty limited. Still, with such a quality defense behind him, he'd likely be a league-average starter should the need arise. ... Oakland's next deal could involve either [Keith Ginter](#) or [Freddie Bynum](#). Both belong in the NL. Ginter would make sense in Florida, Colorado or even St. Louis. Bynum's speed and versatility should lead to a long career as a reserve in the [Damian Jackson](#) mold. He's out of options and isn't expected to clear waivers.

Seattle - [Jeremy Reed](#)'s broken wrist is going to be especially costly since the Mariners apparently won't be moving [Ichiro Suzuki](#) to center. [Joe Borchard](#), the lesser of two evils, looks like the top candidate to start in center, even though Ichiro can and probably will run circles around him. The abysmal [Willie Bloomquist](#) is the alternative, and though I suppose he is worth picking up in an AL-only league, his .261/.308/.341 line in 666 career at-bats is ample proof that he has to be viewed strictly as a 25th man to be an asset. [Matt Lawton](#) had deteriorated into an awful corner outfielder by the end of last year, so he's probably not going to be viewed as an option after returning from his 10-game steroids suspension. Unless the Mariners go outside the organization, Borchard could be good for a homer per week until Reed returns, probably in late May or early June. ... I have become more optimistic about [Adrian Beltre](#)'s chances, not of matching his 2004 totals but of putting together a .290-28 HR season. I have him in a dead heat with [Troy Glaus](#) as the AL's No. 4 third baseman behind A-Rod, [Hank Blalock](#) and [Eric Chavez](#), though that's mostly because he's projected for 80 more at-bats than Glaus.

Tampa Bay - Just when I was becoming convinced that the Rays were really going to put him back at third base,

[Aubrey Huff](#) committed five errors in three games over the weekend. I believe that it'd make more sense to use [Russell Branyan](#) at third base and keep Huff in the outfield, though that's hardly being considered. It's probably going to be [Sean Burroughs](#) at third base if Huff moves back to right. It's still more likely that the Rays' experiment lasts into the season, giving [Joey Gathright](#) fairly regular playing time in right field. Burroughs might as well be released, as he offers no versatility off the bench. ... I liked [Seth McClung](#) and [Casey Fossum](#) as sleepers even before the Huff switch. Since both are flyball pitchers, they'd be even better bets pitching in front of a [Carl Crawford-Rocco Baldelli](#)-Gathright outfield.

Texas - The Rangers were only willing to guarantee [John Thomson](#) \$6.5 million over two years before the Braves swooped in and signed him in Dec. 2003. Now the Rangers are interested in taking on his \$4.75 million salary for 2006 and giving up a quality piece or two to get him back. Assuming that none of the Rangers' top pitching prospects will be on the table, [Joaquin Benoit](#) and [Juan Dominguez](#) are two of the names that figure to interest Atlanta the most. ... Even though [Phil Nevin](#) cooled rapidly following a quick start this month, he's probably going to be the primary DH initially. Buck Showalter has even been hitting him cleanup, though it's hard to imagine that lasting. [Erubiel Durazo](#) might only have a roster spot initially because of [Gary Matthews Jr.](#)'s pending DL stint. As for [Laynce Nix](#), his status might depend on [Brad Wilkerson](#)'s shoulder. It's clear the plan is for an outfield of [David Dellucci](#) in left, Wilkerson in center and [Kevin Mench](#) in right. [Mark DeRosa](#) would likely be Dellucci's platoon partner until Matthews gets back, clearing the way for D'Angelo Jimenez to make the team as a utilityman.

Toronto - Alex Rios started hammering the ball immediately after showing up at camp and is seemingly poised for a breakthrough season. However, since he might be nothing more than the right-handed portion of a right-field platoon with [Eric Hinske](#) at the beginning of the year, I've been struggling with where to rank him throughout the spring. Even if Hinske takes well to his new position, Rios is going to be the far superior defender. I'm still surprised no team targeted him as a potential center fielder in trade talks over the winter. Rios lacks star potential, but he's on his way to becoming a 15- or 20-homer guy, and though they've been otherwise displeased with his production, fantasy owners have had to appreciate the 29 steals over the last 1 2/3 seasons. Probably not much should be expected early on, but either through an injury or a trade, Rios figures to spend a good chunk of the season as a regular. I have him at \$13 right now. ... [A.J. Burnett](#) took only five days off from throwing after reportedly breaking up scar tissue in his elbow on March 18. If the Blue Jays begin to arrange it so that he'll miss more than two regular-season starts, it has to be taken as a sign that something more significant is wrong.

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