

Strike Zone

Strike Zone - NL Team-by-Team Notes

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We're back to team-by-team notes for the foreseeable future. You'll forgive the lack of an intro in exchange for a 6,000-word column, right? To read the AL version of these notes [click here...](#)

National League

Arizona - Diamondbacks manager Bob Melvin is set to go with [Craig Counsell](#), [Orlando Hudson](#), [Chad Tracy](#) and [Luis Gonzalez](#) at the top of the order. That's three left-handed hitters and a switch-hitter, Hudson, who has been dreadful versus southpaws throughout his career. Melvin will probably switch it up so that [Eric Byrnes](#) hits second against lefties, but the D'Backs are still going to be very vulnerable to southpaw starters and relievers. ... As you may remember I was pretty high on Hudson a year ago because he was going to hit second for the Jays, an arrangement that didn't last long. Well, I'm fairly optimistic again this year. Hudson's capable of reaching 15 homers and steals, and playing in the NL's No. 2 park for offense will do him some good. ... [Claudio Vargas](#) looks like the fifth starter by default as a result of the [Brad Halsey](#) trade. While he's always had upside, I don't think he has much chance of posting an ERA under 4.00 with Chase Field posing problems. He's barely a dollar pick. ... [Juan Cruz](#)'s talent was worth the roll of the dice for new GM Josh Byrnes. NL-only leaguers could also grab the right-hander, either out of the free-agent pool or for a buck in late drafts. He'll likely work in middle relief initially, but the opportunity will be there for him to step into the rotation if he pitches up to his ability. He also has plenty of vulture-win potential.

Atlanta - [Joey Devine](#) has made a big statement with his 17 strikeouts this spring, but he won't pass [Chris Reitsma](#) prior to Opening Day and manager Bobby Cox might also prefer not to use him in the eighth inning right away. Instead, [Oscar Villarreal](#) could be second in line for saves until Devine clearly establishes himself as the Braves' best reliever. At this rate, it has a real chance of happening by Memorial Day. ... [Kelly Johnson](#)'s elbow troubles have taken him out of competition for a starting job, leaving [Ryan Langerhans](#) and [Matt Diaz](#) to platoon in left field. I prefer Johnson's offensive upside to Langerhans' superior defense, but it doesn't make a big difference either way. Langerhans comes in at \$7 for now. Hopefully, he'll do at least a little running this year. Langerhans swiped as many as 25 bases in a minor league season, but he was down to five in his final year in Triple-A and he went without a steal while spending all of 2005 in the majors. Especially since he'll hit at the bottom of the order, Langerhans won't make a big contribution in any category. ... [Blaine Boyer](#), at least temporarily over his shoulder issues, remains a sleeper in the Atlanta pen. Other than Devine, he probably has the most upside of any member of the current group.

Chicago - If the Cubs follow through with their old plan to dump [Todd Walker](#), [Jerry Hairston Jr.](#) could be one of the NL's better bargains. He'd likely hit second in the lineup, which might help him get back to 25 steals. Of course, [Neifi Perez](#) would get too many at-bats while filling in at second base, but that might serve to help keep Hairston healthy for the entire six months. Hairston has played in 125 games only once in his career. ... I remain a believer in [Jerome Williams](#), but he's not throwing as well now as he did in the second half of last season. Even though the Cubs' injuries would seem to guarantee him a rotation spot through April at least, he may not be worth using in NL-only leagues. ... I don't see any of the Cubs' fifth-starter candidates as being worth adding for the short-term. [Sean Marshall](#) is pitching the best, and while I'm a big fan, it's likely that he's still a year away. [Angel Guzman](#) looks like the best bet of the group for the early stages of the season.

Cincinnati - The Reds will eventually regret giving up Wily Mo Pena for a middle-of-the-rotation starter, but [Bronson Arroyo](#) could be the club's best pitcher. I'm optimistic mostly because I think his strikeout rate will bounce back in the NL. That the Reds have one of the game's worst defenses will make it tough for him to amass a sub-4.00 ERA, but he can still be an asset in WHIP. Should he get the offensive support, he'll do enough good in three categories to become an \$8-\$10 pitcher. ... It looks like [Edwin Encarnacion](#) will hit fifth against right-handers and maybe fourth against lefties. 90-100 RBI would be within reach if he stays in the heart of the lineup all season long. ... [Austin Kearns](#), on the other hand, could start off batting seventh, making it difficult for him to contribute in runs and RBI. Still, there's no way he'll stay there if he plays up to his ability. ... Since [Jason LaRue](#) requires minor knee surgery, [Javier Valentin](#) is likely to spend the first week or two as the Reds' starting catcher. ... [Kent Mercker](#) is too weak against right-handers to be a legitimate candidate for more than five saves. [David Weathers](#) will be the primary choice in the ninth inning early on. [Todd Coffey](#) remains just as good of a bet in fantasy leagues, and [Ryan Wagner](#)'s impressive spring should at least serve to keep him in the majors at the start of the year.

Colorado - That I have [Clint Barmes](#) ranked eighth among shortstops this season is far more about Coors Field and the No. 2 spot in the order ahead of [Todd Helton](#) than any sort of belief that he'll be an above average

regular. However, given the way he's struggled in both winter ball (.216/.256/.288 in 125 AB) and spring training (.220/.289/.268 in 41 AB), it's time to start getting worried. The Rockies certainly won't be replacing him, but they could always move him down in the order at some point. It's my guess that Barmes will be a long-term utilityman, but with Coors Field helping him, he can still hit .290-.300 with 18-20 homers. If for some reason his power just isn't going to come back after last year's broken collarbone, it could be a long year. ... [Yorvit Torrealba's](#) shoulder issues will likely make [Danny Ardoín](#) the Rockies' primary catcher early on, but it should be a temporary arrangement. I have Torrealba at \$7 and Ardoín at \$1. ... [Choo Freeman](#) appeared to be on his way to winning a bench spot even before it was known that [Jorge Piedra](#) would begin the season on the DL with plantar fasciitis. Freeman could get starts in both center and right field against left-handers, but he's probably not good enough of a hitter to capitalize. ... Since [Ryan Shealy](#) is Triple-A bound, [Eli Marrero](#) figures to be the usual right fielder against left-handers. When he eventually becomes catcher eligible, he's going to be handy to have around in NL-only leagues.

Florida - Here's my best guess: Lineup -- SS [Hanley Ramirez](#), RF [Jeremy Hermida](#), 3B [Miguel Cabrera](#), 1B [Mike Jacobs](#), LF/C [Josh Willingham](#), 2B [Dan Uggla](#), C [Miguel Olivo](#)/LF [Chris Aguila](#), CF Reggie Abercrombie. Rotation -- [Dontrelle Willis](#), [Jason Vargas](#), [Brian Moehler](#), [Sergio Mitre](#), [Scott Olsen](#). Closer -- [Joe Borowski](#). Setup Men -- [Matt Herges](#), [Kerry Ligtenberg](#), [Chris Resop](#). ... [Travis Bowyer](#), who was expected to contend for saves after being acquired from the Twins in the [Luis Castillo](#) deal, was sent down on Sunday, making Resop the young sleeper in the Florida pen. Still, it seems likely that Herges or Ligtenberg, whoever is pitching better, would get the first chance to close should Borowski stumble. Bowyer will be back eventually, and it's entirely possible that he'll have fantasy value when it happens. ... Willingham now seems likely to get more playing time in left field than behind the plate, which is just more good news for his value. [Michael Barrett](#) is the only NL catcher I have him ranked behind, and even that's a close one. ... I'd be stunned if Abercrombie lasted the season as a regular, but he has enough power and speed to be an intriguing pick in NL-only leagues. A hot start is a real possibility. Eventually, the league will figure out that he can be retired exclusively on offerings more than a foot outside the strike zone.

Houston - I wasn't really viewing him as being in the mix anyway, so [Jeff Bagwell's](#) decision to undergo shoulder surgery didn't have much an effect on my rankings. The 37-year-old's Hall of Fame career is likely over. ... With Bagwell already officially on the DL, the Astros are prepared to enter the season using a lineup of: 2B [Craig Biggio](#), CF [Willy Taveras](#), 1B [Lance Berkman](#), 3B Morgan Enberg, LF [Preston Wilson](#), RF [Jason Lane](#), SS [Adam Everett](#) and C [Brad Ausmus](#). It's a group that will disappoint in the run-scoring department, especially if Enberg's decline is substantial at all. Color me pessimistic about Berkman's chances of putting up big RBI numbers behind a pair of guys who finished with .325 OBPs in 2005. Also, Lane is going to be hurt by the sixth spot. Wilson is another member of the .325-OBP club, and neither Everett nor Ausmus is going to drive in a lot of runs. ... [Wandy Rodriguez](#) is certain to be in the rotation barring a late acquisition, but he's someone to stay away from in NL-only leagues. It's also unlikely that the fifth starter, whether it's Taylor Buchholz, [Carlos Hernandez](#) or [Fernando Nieve](#), will be of any use. [Ezequiel Astacio](#), the favorite for the spot going in, has already been demoted to Triple-A.

Los Angeles - I was concerned about whether [J.D. Drew's](#) power would come back right away, so it's encouraging that he has managed to slug .613 while returning from wrist and shoulder injuries this spring. ... The Dodgers were probably just happy to get rid of Hee-Seop Choi without taking on any termination pay. [Cesar Izturis](#) becomes the team's [Nomar Garciaparra](#) insurance, assuming that Nomar can just stay off the DL until mid-May. Izturis, who has progressed much faster than anticipated in his recovery from Tommy John surgery, would play second and [Jeff Kent](#) would switch to first if Garciaparra gets hurt. ... [Eric Gagne](#) is working consistently in the low-90s, and while that's hardly his best velocity, it should be plenty good enough to make him an effective closer for the Dodgers. ... [Yhency Brazoban](#) is fighting for a bullpen spot with the Dodgers likely keeping 11 pitchers initially. Because of his sore shoulder, Brazoban, though, might head to the DL rather than begin the season at Triple-A Las Vegas. ... I'm only becoming a bigger [Hong-Chih Kuo](#) fan. He's struck out 12 and allowed just four hits in 10 innings this spring. He could be one of the NL's top fantasy setup men while healthy.

Milwaukee - Not only is [Ben Sheets](#) going to miss at least the first two weeks, but [Doug Davis](#) and [Chris Capuano](#) both have 9.00 ERAs this spring. [Tomo Ohka](#) would also, if not for the fact that seven of the 20 runs he's allowed have been unearned. Since it is Arizona, there's probably no reason for doom and/or gloom just yet. I think Capuano is in for a decline, but Davis seems safe enough and Ohka has pitched quite a bit better in his last two appearances. Also, [David Bush](#) has had an outstanding spring and seems poised to establish himself as Milwaukee's third-best starter. ... While things have gone poorly on the pitching side, the Brewers have to be pleased about a lot of their hitting performances, most notably those of [Corey Koskie](#) (.370/.420/.739) and [J.J. Hardy](#) (.378/.410/.757). If those two keep it up, the Crew is going to be about as solid one-through-eight as any team in the league. Koskie's fantasy upside is rather limited since he'll sit in favor of [Bill Hall](#) against lefties, but he has the power to be a \$12-\$13 player. Hardy's going to need to overtake [Rickie Weeks](#) or find another way to move up in the order if he's going to emerge as a force in NL-only leagues.

New York - Barring a [Tony Graffanino](#) acquisition, the Mets will have [Anderson Hernandez](#) replace the injured [Kaz Matsui](#) at second base. It might even be Hernandez's job for good, though that would require some level of production. Hernandez has hit .260/.275/.280 this spring, and not much different should be anticipated during the regular season. All he's ready to do is deliver the occasional single. ... Should the Mets make the unfortunate decision to send him to the pen, [Aaron Heilman](#) would drop from \$7 to \$4 in the rankings. [Brian Bannister](#) could

be an adequate fifth starter, but after he goes through the league once, he'll have more difficulty keeping hitters off balance. Those NL-only leaguers in need of pitching should look at adding him if he replaces Heilman. ... It doesn't look like [Billy Wagner](#)'s finger injury is going to have any long-term ramifications. Feel free to bid away.

Philadelphia - It appears that the other notable reliever making the jump to the rotation, [Ryan Madson](#), is assured of his spot. ... While [Pat Burrell](#) nursed a strained calf, [Ryan Howard](#) may have overtaken him in the Philadelphia lineup. I see the fifth spot as being crucial for fantasy purposes, because one of the two is going to have a very good hitter behind him and the other clearly will not. Plus, there's going to be quite a few more RBI opportunities for the No. 5 hitter. Ignoring matchups, Howard is the superior choice. However, he'd combine with [Bobby Abreu](#) and [Chase Utley](#) to give the Phillies three straight lefties in the middle of the order. If it's going to be Howard's spot against righties, I'll be moving him up in the rankings this week and dropping Burrell. ... There's also some mystery about whether [Aaron Rowand](#) will hit second. He was back in that spot the last couple of days after hitting seventh for much of the week. Charlie Manuel's eventual choice will have a large impact on Rowand's fantasy value. It might be that Rowand will hit second when [David Bell](#) is in the lineup and seventh when Abraham Nunez is playing third base, with Nunez taking the second spot.

Pittsburgh - Opening Day starter [Oliver Perez](#) could be a bust once again if he doesn't get his velocity back into the low-90s at least. He's been working in the high-80s most of the spring, and while that's fine for most left-handers, he doesn't possess the command to make it work. ... [Nate McLouth](#)'s big spring temporarily opened up the competition in center field once again, though it still seems to be safe to assume that it's going to be [Chris Duffy](#)'s job. Duffy is the better defender of the two, and he's turned it on offensively over the last few days. His 25- to 30-steal potential remains worthy of an investment in NL-only leagues. McLouth's hopes of winning a bench spot hinge on a [Craig Wilson](#) trade. ... With no teams all that anxious to add a starting outfielder, the bidding for Wilson has been less than spirited. Rumor is that the Braves would give up [John Thomson](#) for him, but they'd also want [Salomon Torres](#), a likely deal-breaker for the Pirates. A Wilson-[So Taguchi](#) offense-defense platoon in St. Louis would make a lot of sense, but the Cardinals are unlikely to add \$3.3 million in salary. The Pirates might need to hold on to Wilson until July.

St. Louis - The stress fracture in [Larry Bigbie](#)'s left foot will likely make Taguchi the Cardinals' Opening Day left fielder. Bigbie didn't make much of an impression before getting hurt, so he'll probably have quite a bit of trouble breaking into the lineup after returning in mid- to late April. ... Despite an ugly spring, [Junior Spivey](#) remains the odds-on favorite at second base. [Hector Luna](#)'s had about as much trouble offensively, and [Aaron Miles](#) has been hurt. Combined, the three players have totaled three extra-base hits in 123 at-bats. St. Louis is another team that should be taking a long look at Graffanino. Boston likely would pick up a good chunk of his salary for the right prospect ([Tyler Johnson](#)?) in return. ... I'm steadily becoming a believer in [Sidney Ponson](#), in no small part because of Dave Duncan's past work with veteran reclamation projects. Ponson won't have as much value in 5x5 leagues as he will in those that don't count strikeouts, but he should be owned in all NL-only leagues.

San Diego - Since [Josh Barfield](#) seems to have the second base job locked up, manager Bruce Bochy's big decision this week will focus on the rotation. More specifically, he needs to choose whether to bump [Chris Young](#), [Woody Williams](#) or [Chan Ho Park](#) to make room for a rejuvenated [Dewon Brazelton](#). Young's had a miserable spring, but he's a flyball pitcher in Arizona. Sending him to the pen before he even gets a peak inside Petco would be the height of stupidity. I'm still far higher on Young than either Williams or Park. [Shawn Estes](#), too, for that matter. Brazelton in the rotation and Park in the pen appears to be the best solution. Park was throwing 93 mph as a reliever for Korea in the WBC. Considering that it's been five years since his last quality season, a change hardly seems inappropriate. ... Barfield looks like a \$6-\$7 player in NL-only leagues. Petco should keep him under 15 homers and lead to mediocre run and RBI numbers, so if he's going to be a quality fantasy second baseman, he'll have to swipe 15-20 bases. It's something he might not feel comfortable doing as a rookie.

San Francisco - [Ray Durham](#) has been mostly hitting sixth since the announcement that [Randy Winn](#) would return to leading off. That makes it a mystery who will occupy the third spot in front of [Barry Bonds](#). Manager [Felipe Alou](#) has usually put [Steve Finley](#) in that spot, but Finley's just the fourth outfielder. It wouldn't be shocking to see [Lance Niekro](#) there, especially against lefties. I'm not optimistic that Niekro will hit enough against right-handers to justify a lineup spot, but if he bats third -- and Bonds remains healthy -- it'd be tough for him not to put up solid numbers. ... Niekro's big spring has guaranteed that [Mark Sweeney](#) won't get many starts against right-handers through April at least. ... [Jamey Wright](#) seems close to being named the Giants' fifth starter. He's capable of posting a decent ERA, but it will come with a crummy WHIP and a practically non-existent strikeout total. No fantasy value.

Washington - Now that [Alfonso Soriano](#) has deemed left field worthy of his presence, the Nationals only have to settle on a center fielder. GM Jim Bowden seems to prefer [Ryan Church](#), whereas Frank Robinson is intrigued by having a pure leadoff hitter in [Brandon Watson](#). A Church/[Marlon Byrd](#) platoon would be quite a bit more productive than Watson, though it wouldn't quite measure up defensively. Even if Church gets the job, his fantasy potential would be lessened by batting leadoff. He'll steal only a handful of bases, and RBI will be tough to come by, at least on days when [Livan Hernandez](#) isn't pitching. ... Robinson hasn't ruled out batting [Royce Clayton](#) second, but it's far more likely that [Cristian Guzman](#)'s replacement will occupy the eighth spot behind catcher [Brian Schneider](#). Obviously, that'd be for the best. ... [Jon Rauch](#) is going to return to a middle relief role to start the year, but I'm not sure he isn't the Nationals' third-best starter. He's looked better than either [Ramon Ortiz](#) or [Pedro Astacio](#) this spring. Also, keep an eye on [Billy Traber](#), who seems to have turned the corner in his

return from Tommy John surgery. He'll begin the year at Triple-A New Orleans.

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