



FROM THE BULLPEN

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Brethren,

The holiest day of the year is now behind us, and it is time to move on with the business of managing our respective teams. As always, Draft Day was exciting, challenging, nerve-wracking and thoroughly fun.¹

Most would agree that the teams that were drafted this year seem to be about as even as they have ever been, and it was especially difficult to make the customary placement predictions. It appears that parity has been fully visited upon the Hot Stove League in 1999.

That said, there are those of us who do have opinions about how the different teams will perform this year, and about how each owner did on Draft Day in picking his team. Now, therefore, in accordance with the revered and time-honored custom in the Hot Stove League, and in response to the clamor of the crowd and the hue and cry of the commoner, I give you now, for about the twelfth or thirteenth consecutive year:

Skipper's Picks, Pans, Predictions and Potshots

1. Blues

Strength (S):

Starting pitching is outstanding, with Clemens, Smoltz and Neagle.

¹ More fun for some than for others, however. For example, it was quite clear that SloPay was having a marvelous time picking up bargains such as Barry Bonds at the tail end of the 2nd round and Juan Gonzalez at the toe end of the 3rd. On the other hand, Jon "Dead Man Walking" Blongewicz did not seem to be having quite as giddy an afternoon, as the weight of the universe bore down on his narrow shoulders while he attempted to draft a team that might defend his crown.

Weakness (W):

Infield is "soft," to be kind; manager's nerves are already frazzled.

Savviest Pick (SP):

Taking former 1st rounder Chuck Knoblauch in the 4th will prove to be brilliant.

Biggest McBlunder (BM):

Shannon Stewart in the 5th. *Who?* Precisely the point.

The Skinny (TS):

Evidently McGloat had his 5th round pick mixed up with Shawn Green, a colleague of Stewart's in the Blue Jay outfield. (Never mind that Stewart is African-American and Green is white and Jewish – it could have happened to anyone.) This embarrassing gaffe sent McBlunder spiraling downward for the balance of the Draft, as the voices in his head chided and berated him for his mistake for the next 21 rounds.

Look for McBlunder's beloved Blues to drop out of the money in '99.

Predicted Order of Finish (POF): 7th.

2. Chiefs

S: Starting pitching; willingness to spend whatever it takes to buy a contenda.

W: Infield – only of marginal quality; no depth whatsoever.

SP: Brian Jordan in the 8th. Jordan is ready for a bust-out year for his new team.

BM: Dean Palmer in the 6th. I wouldn't be hanging my hat on this career .260 hitter, but then what do I know.

TS: As much as it pains me, the more I look over this team, the more I like B.T.'s chances for another title. It may not rank up there with the greatest HSL teams of all time – the '97 Senators, for example – but it is definitely a team that should be firmly in the hunt for the title come September. Not to jinx the boy, but my honest assessment is

that B.T.'s Chiefs are the odds-on-favorite that the rest of us must set out sights on.

POF: 1st.

3. Senators

Ss: Infield; catcher; relief pitching; overall depth.

W: Starting pitching. But pitching's never important in this league, anyway.

SP: The Robby-Bobby Show (Alomar in the 4th, Higginson in the 9th – where were the rest of you clowns when I was pulling off these two heists?).

BM: I hope I'm wrong, but I'm looking at Tom Glavine in the 2nd. He's coming off a probable career year, an undeserved Cy Young, and I've never really liked this arrogant Player's Union stalwart. Judging by Opening Day, he's probably going to stick in my craw all year long.

TS: Despite some admitted shortcomings in the starting pitching department, and a lack of established superstars at first base and in the outfield, the overall depth of this team combined with Skipper's surfeit of managerial moxie make it likely that the Senators will be a force to be reckoned with yet again in 1999.

POF: 4th.

4. Cubs*

S: First base, with McGwire and Bagwell.

W: Starting pitching, after Maddux; and lack of outfield superstars.

SP: Bagwell in the 3rd. How did the rest of us let this happen, anyway?

BM: Matt Stairs in the 7th was a smidgen early, and Jay Bell as your starting shortstop has to be cause for alarm.

TS: The Cubs* had as solid a draft as they have ever had in the fifteen years of existence in this league, and former boy scout dropout Shamu* (motto: *Be prepared – if you have no other choice*) may be a serious threat to eliminate the asterisk from his team name. Go, Cubs.

POF: 3rd.

5. Redbirds

S: Outfield. Griffey in the middle would make any outfield look good, though.

W: Starting pitching (just who is the ace of this staff?); and infield (at least at the corners).

SP: Not much to choose from here, but let's make the guy feel good and say Dustin Hermanson in the 8th (I did want him in that round, damn it).

BM: David Wells in the 5th. Most pigs don't do encores, and this one won't either.

TS: The cocky little pilot of the Crimson Chirpers thought he could just roll out of bed, throw on his 'Birds lid, grab his draft form, and pick a contender, and forgot the three most important things to remember on Draft Day: Preparation, preparation, preparation. He didn't, and it shows. These sickly 'Birds might be near the front of the flock for now, but as the season wears on, they will drop to the back of the pack. No way does this team contend with this staff.

POF: 10th. Sorry, Rubella. Not now. Not ever.

6. Tigers

S: Superior catching and closer, solid infield.

W: Starting pitching, after the Big Unit.

SP: R.J. in the 1st. His health is always a bit of a gamble, but when he's on, there's nobody better.

BM: Rick Reed might have lasted a little longer than 7 rounds, but former scabs are few and far between.

TS: Big Guy looks for a return to glory for the Tigers, and while a big year from R.J. and bust-out years by Cruz, Jr., J.D. Drew and Tatis will go a long way toward accomplishing this, I look for the Tigers to stay in the middle of the pack.

POF: 6th.

7. Bronx Bombers

S: Starting pitching; relief corps.

W: SS, 2B, C, CF. This team is definitely weak in the middle.

SP: Erstad in the 5th, Clark in the 6th, Mendoza in the 12th and Gwynn in the 13th are all outstanding.

BM: Al Leiter in the 2nd was way, way early. Does Mouse realize that he could have had Cone, Castilla, Walker, Chipper, Bonds, Bagwell, Gonzalez, Sosa or Thomas in that slot? He does now.

TS: Mouse is to be congratulated for sucking it up and taking pitchers in three of the first four rounds, and this team may be better than it first looks on paper. For my money, though, you have to have more at short and second than we see on the Bombers' roster to have a truly competitive team. Look for the Bombers to drop a few positions this year.

POF: 11th.

8. Red Sox

S: Outfield. Fabulous and deep.

W: Relief pitching (yeesh!); infield.

SP: Bernie this late in the 3rd was a steal, but getting Omar in the 11th on an excellent Indians team is absolute grand larceny.

BM: Helton in the 6th was way early, and Glaus in the 9th was similarly premature.

TS: With Piazza behind the plate and the Red Sox' stellar outfield, this team will crank out plenty of hitting points. But conventional wisdom says that you have to have a good reliever and at least three solid starters to at least vie for a title. Don't think so, O'Possum.

POF: 8th.

9. Skipjacks

S: Starting infield is dynamite, especially at the corners.

W: Starting pitching. This is beginning to sound like a broken record, but facts are facts. With Ashby the Human Blowtorch and Reynolds, Wakefield, Hampton and Moyer on this staff, there will definitely be some negative-point outings in the Skipjacks' future. Can the already flesh-domed Itchie afford to tear out any more hair? We may be calling him Kojak by year's end.

SP: Dmitri Young in the 12th. How can he not have fun watching this circus freak on *Baseball Tonight*?

BM: The aforementioned Ashby in the 8th. Maybe Itchie forgot about that little implosion during the World Series?

TS: By picking Belle, Castilla and Thome in the first three rounds, Itchie has assured himself that his team will reach the homer limit by the middle of May. This may get the 'Jax out of the box in a hurry, but come mid-summer there will be some serious moonwalking going on with this team.

POF: Dead-ass last.

10. Tribe

S: Infield. With E-Mart, Offerman, Jeter and Cirillo starting, backed up by Nilsson, Walker, Tejada and Hernandez, this is easily the bestest and deepest infield in the league.

W: Starting pitching. When Tomko and Arrojito are your aces – in a manner of speaking – you are in a world of hurt. The Hurt Locker. HurtoRama.

SP: Offerman in the 7th is looking mighty good right now. Bichette in the 6th might be even better.

BM: Waiting until the 5th round to take a pitcher, and then waiting until the 9th to take a starting pitcher was – to be blunt -- foolish. It's not the *economy*, it's *pitching*, Stupid!

TS: Love his every-day players, hate his pitching staff. If there's a staff that's weaker than the Senators, and there is, it's probably the Tribe. And while U-Belly has cleverly poised himself in

dead-last for this Sunday's upcoming Free Agent Draft, I don't see any Kerry Woods out there this year, but maybe I'm wrong.

POF: 9th.

11. Reds

S: Infield. With Kendall, Palmeiro, Boone, Garcia-parra and Chipper Jones in the starting slots, this is one hellacious infield. Even better than the Tribe's infield, so ignore the comments above.

W: Are you ready for this? *Starting pitching*. Maybe I'll be surprised, but I don't think that Dreifort, Schmidt, Hernandez, Carpenter and Osborne look like a champion pitching staff.

SP: 3rd round sounds a little early, but O-Hernandez is going to have a great year.

BM: Jeff Fassero in the 8th. Magpie forgot that you only need to have a lefthander on your roster for the first day.

TS: Moving far away from Possum for the Draft was the best thing that Magpie could have done, as he was able to get his mind right and pick a darned good team. Don't know if it has the mark of a champion, but I look for the Reds to move up to the Upper Division this year, where they rightfully belong.

POF: 5th.

12. Pirates

S: Outfield; starting pitching. Well done, SloPay.

W: Shortstop, middle relief. Not many holes on this team.

SP: Either Bonds at the end of the 2nd or Gonzalez at the end of the 3rd. You make the call.

BM: Carlos Delgado in the 4th was probably a little early, and likewise Jorge Posada in the 7th. But who knows?

TS: Damned if SloPay didn't pick himself one helluva squad. I liked it on Draft Day, I like it even more today. No glaring weaknesses anywhere, solid starting pitching, terrific outfield, passable infield. If U-Belly doesn't screw this team up for Denny during the season, we're looking at a money finish for the Pirates. Look for the end of one damned long dry spell.

POF: 2nd. Go, Buccos!

SKIPPER'S 1999 PREDICTIONS - RECAP

1. Chiefs
2. Pirates

3. Cubs*
4. Senators
5. Reds
6. Tigers
7. Blues
8. Red Sox
9. Tribe
10. Redbirds
11. Bronx Bombers
12. Skipjacks

EPILOGUE

There you have it. My best shot at assessing the 1999 Draft. I may be right, I may be wrong, but at least I'm on record. Your comments, questions and contrary opinions are welcomed, but keep any criticisms to yourself.

NEXT WEEK

Results from Week 1; Kansas City revisited; the Trip; Top Ten List of Things that B.T. Does Not/Did Not/Would Not Have a Backup Plan For.

Enclosure: Your typed and permanent version of the 1999 Draft, courtesy of Linda K.

Thanks for the great Draft. See you next week.

Skipper

