

From the Bullpen

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NEBRASKA
Hot Stove League



2006 Season

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Gentlemen,

Thanks to all of you for participating in our 22nd Annual Hot Stove League Draft on Saturday last, and for your enthusiasm and diligence as we convert to a new scoring system. God knows how we middle aged men resist change, and so everybody deserves a little pat on the back for their patience and perseverance. Special thanks to Big Guy and his task force for identifying Yahoo! as our new stats provider, and for taking the laboring oar on finding a way for us to keep this wonderful organization viable. Thanks also to Tirebiter for his extra efforts in lining up food for the hungry masses in light of B.T.'s unavoidable conflict, and for getting our PHEB War Room ready to go for Draft Day.

It will take all of us a while to get used to our new system of free agent drafting, but I am confident that with everyone's sense of fair play, we will be able to make the transition without any major disasters. To confirm our agreement, we will not make any attempts to draft free agents until after midnight on Sunday, April 2, after the first game of the season has taken place that day.

GUEST WRITING

As we discussed, we have agreed that each member of the league will be responsible for one guest column during the 2006 season, and we will plan to post these guest writings every other week on the website. By virtue of the power vested in me by, well, myself, I have arbitrarily assigned Underbelly as our first guest writer for the 2006 season, and his offering will be due to Linda on Wednesday, April 5, 2006. I have also assigned Itchie his customary post-Trip reporting duties for the week in June after we return from St. Louis. As for the rest of you, please check the website for your assigned writing duties.

PREDICTIONS

As agreed, please post your own predictions for the twelve different placement spots on the Message Board by the end of this week. I will then run the numbers and provide you with the consensus.

Without further delay, I now provide you, in order of last year's finish, my predictions for the 2006 season, the much-anticipated, eagerly-awaited, greatly-heralded and highly-acclaimed

SKIPPER'S PICKS 'N' PANS

1. OMAHA SKIPJACKS

Manager: John *Itchie* Thielen

- Greatest Strength: Dynamite infield, with All Stars at every position and tandem studs (Pujols and Hafner) at 1st.
- Most Glaring Weakness: How do you spell relief? Decidedly not T-I-M-L-I-N in the 17th as your top reliever.
- Shrewdest Pick: Soriano in the 4th, if he decides to play, or Rolen in the 3rd, if he's healthy.
- Most Laughable Blunder: Waiting until Round 17 to take a relief pitcher. Saves = points, dummy.
- It's Just My Opinion: For all of the whining and po-boying that Itchie did on Draft Day, he has once again picked one whale of a team. If things go right for Itchie this season -- and when haven't they lately -- the Skipjacks could be the first defending champion to repeat since Big Guy's glory years in the late '80s.
- Predicted Order of Finish: **2nd.**

2. OMAHA REDBIRDS

Manager: Jim *Tirebiter* Buser

- Greatest Strength: Left side of infield with A-Rod and Jeter, outfield depth.
- Most Glaring Weakness: First base and catcher.
- Shrewdest Pick: Getting Ichiro in the 5th round one year after he went in the 1st round is a steal.
- Most Laughable Blunder: Taking Jake Peavy in the 2nd when Oswalt and Carpenter were available was a serious lapse of judgment.

It's Just My Opinion: Tirebiter has again drafted a solid team which could definitely put him in contention for a money finish, but the 2006 version of the Redbirds does not have championship quality stamped on it. Look for the Crimson Chirpers to drop a rung or two down the ladder.

Predicted Order of Finish: **4th.**

3. OMAHA SENATORS

Manager: Dave Skipper Ernst

Greatest Strength: Starting pitching with Santana, Willis, Lee and Mulder.

Most Glaring Weakness: No studs in the Senators outfield, for about the 11th consecutive year.

Shrewdest Pick: Getting Carlos Degaldo in the 4th should prove to be brilliant with the potent hitting lineup around him.

Most Laughable Blunder: V-Mart in the 2nd might have been a smidge early, but dadgummit, I really wanted him.

It's Just My Opinion: Always the eternal optimist about my own team, I couldn't help humming Mac Davis' song, "Oh, Lord, It's Hard to be Humble . . ." as I walked out of the office on Draft Day, believing that I had once again drafted the top team on paper this season. Like last year, my boys may not have enough in the power department to carry me to the title, but if pitching means anything, the Senators will definitely be in the hunt.

Predicted Order of Finish: **3rd.**

4. LINCOLN CHIEFS

Managers: Scott B.T. Krause and Jeff Screech Bechtolt

Greatest Strength: Stellar outfield with Vladdy, Beltran and Crawford.

Most Glaring Weakness: Infield seems subpar, although a healthy Roberts will go a long ways towards a cure.

Shrewdest Pick:	If Roberts is healthy and returns to 2005 form, getting him in the 14th was grand larceny.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Nothing jumps off the page here, but if Gagne isn't healthy, backing him up with the superannuated Trevor Hoffman may be costly.
It's Just My Opinion:	After years of being second-guessed by the meddling founder of the Chiefs franchise, Screech finally was able to shuck off the shackles of oppressive ownership and pick a team that is the odds-on favorite to capture Screech's first title.
Predicted Order of Finish:	Your 2006 HSL Champion.

5. OMAHA BRONX BOMBERS

Manager: Mike *Mouse* Morris

Greatest Strength:	Mouse's Ruthian outfield of ManRam, Sheffield and Matsui will flourish in this new age of no homer caps. Look out.
Most Glaring Weakness:	After Carpenter, the Bombers are frightfully thin at starting pitching.
Shrewdest Pick:	If he is healthy and returns to form, getting Thome (or was it Teixeira?) in the 8th was a Borsheim's basement bargain.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Señor Garcia in the 7th was mucho prematuro.
It's Just My Opinion:	While he has a solid team that will put up some extraordinary offensive numbers, it doesn't look like Mouse's pitching staff has the stuff of champions. While this team could finish anywhere between 4th and 10th, it looks like the Bombers' 2005 visit to the Upper Division was only temporary.
Predicted Order of Finish:	7th.

6. SIN CITY REDS

Manager: Mitch *Curbie/Tricko* Pirnie

Greatest Strength:	Plenty of hitting up and down the lineup card, with Teixeira, Bay, Rollins, Burrell and Giles anchoring a powerful hitting team.
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Most Glaring Weakness:	Starting pitching is suspect, without a proven ace to be found.
Shrewdest Pick:	Getting Josh Beckett in the 4th could be monumental, if he likes his new home in Beantown and is able to stay healthy all year.
Most Laughable Blunder:	No major gaffes in the first 10 rounds, but taking Chad Cordero in the 5th must mean that Magpie assumes he will repeat last year's stellar performance as the Nationals' closer, which assumption bears close scrutiny.
It's Just My Opinion:	Since Tricko is darned near giddy about his team, I am reluctant to rain on his parade by ranking them too low, but as one of our game's great arbiters once said, <i>I calls 'em as I sees 'em</i> . Second Division.
Predicted Order of Finish:	8th.

7. OMAHA TIGERS

Manager: Rick *Big Guy* Drews

Greatest Strength:	Years and years and years of experience and guile on the starting pitching staff, with RJ, Clemens and Schilling.
Most Glaring Weakness:	An outfield to die with (not for).
Shrewdest Pick:	If Clemens shelves his retirement plans and still has the same right arm he had last year, taking him in the 14th round will prove to be the work of a madcap genius. If not, most 14th rounders blow anyway, so the risk was minimal.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Wasting his 7th round pick on a used-up Schilling.
It's Just My Opinion:	This team isn't nearly as bad as Eeyore had us all thinking on Draft Day. With some adroit management, and giving to the fact that Big Guy is the only one who understands our new rules system, I see this team edging its way into the Upper Division if only one or two members of his nursing home pitching staff can stay healthy.
Predicted Order of Finish:	6th.

8. OMAHA WAHOOS

Manager: Ted *Possum* Bridges

Greatest Strength:	Possum's ability to bend our new rules system like Kreskin mind-melding a dinner fork. In terms of his players, the 'Hoos sport a potentially impressive pitching staff.
Most Glaring Weakness:	An outfield that could actually make my team's OF look productive by comparison.
Shrewdest Pick:	Lance Berkman in the 4th. If he is completely healed up, look for a monster year from Sir Lancelot.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Taking Carlos Zambrano in the 2nd was at least a round early, no doubt a panic pick after Possum saw Halladay, Peavy, Oswalt, Carpenter and RJ get picked ahead of him in the 2nd round.
It's Just My Opinion:	In this zero sum game, Magpie's gain from his new seating spot at the Draft may have been Possum's loss. While Possum almost always picks a team that is in contention, as Thurston Howell III would say, "I don't like the cut of this team's gib." There are simply too many players who have to have come-back years (Berkman, Kent, Schmidt, Edmonds, Drew) and too many pitching question marks for this team to seriously contend. Look for a drop from this team.
Predicted Order of Finish:	10th.

9. LINCOLN BEARS

Manager: Dennis *SloPay* Bontrager

Greatest Strength:	Youth, vigor, unlimited potential.
Most Glaring Weakness:	Starting pitching really, really blows.
Shrewdest Pick:	Johnny Peralta in the 7th. This guy will soon be going in the first two rounds of the Draft.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Assuming that Chase Utley wouldn't be available in the 3rd of 4th rounds.

ble Blunder: But then, SloPay has always been a "must have" kind of guy.

It's Just My Opinion: There's no question in my mind that Denny's new-age Bears will compete for the Hot Stove League Championship. Circa 2009, that is. He has selected one heck of a good young team, but not one that has a prayer of competing in '06. I didn't realize it on Draft Day, but Denny didn't select his first starting pitcher until taking Doug Davis in the 9th round. Ouch. Doesn't this guy listen to U-Bob when he raves about the importance of starting pitching on their drive from Lincoln? Guess not.

Predicted Order of Finish: Sorry, Denny. **Dead-ass last.**

10. LINCOLN TRIBE

Manager: Bob Underbelly Hurlbut

Greatest Strength: I'm stumped on this one. Let's go with starting pitching. Yeah, that's it, strong starting pitching.

Most Glaring Weakness: No superstar hitters, team looks short on power.

Shrewdest Pick: According to Ted, it's Brad Wilkerson in the 8th. Jeez, give it a rest, already. Personally, I like Carlos Lee in the 5th. The guy puts up solid numbers every year.

Most Laughable Blunder: Taking somebody named Felix in the 1st round. Not a single Felix in the Hall of Fame. While all of us had Felix high on our list, there is no doubt that he would still have been available in the 3rd round, and maybe even the 4th. Another "must have" misfortune.

It's Just My Opinion: I really, truly thought that this was going to be Underbelly's year, but I was wrong. Derek Lee is unlikely to match last year's numbers, and the rest of the hitting lineup lacks the sizzle needed to put a team into contention. If things go right for Bob, his team could be contending for the bottom of the Upper Division or the top of the Lower Division, but if his Tribesmen do their usual Sandhills crane migration south, U-Bob could find himself going toe-to-toe with his comrade in arms to avoid the cellar spot. We'll give him the benefit of the doubt.

Predicted Order of Finish: **9th.**

11. DES MOINES CUBS*
Manager: Chuck Shamu Sinclair

Greatest Strength:	Strong infield, dynamic duo (Helton and Konerko) at 1st base.
Most Glaring Weakness:	Aged and infirm pitching staff more likely to spend time on the disabled list than off.
Shrewdest Pick:	Magglio Ordonez in the 13th was savvy if he remains healthy, brilliant if he returns to prior form.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Getting Francisco Cordero as his top relief pitcher. Insiders say his future is in the past.
It's Just My Opinion:	There is a lot to like about Shamu's 2006 Cubs* team, but never has one manager relied so much on so many oft-injured pitchers. With Pedro, Smoltz, Pryor, Livan and Clement in his rotation, the Cubs* will have exhausted their health insurance deductibles by the 1st of June. Throw in the fragile Izzie and Foulke on the relief side of the ledger, and you've got a MASH unit in the making. If Shamu has enough band-aids and Bengay to keep them pitching all summer, look out. If not, look out to the third power.
Predicted Order of Finish:	5th.

12. KANSAS CITY BLUES
Manager: Jon Stretch McBlunder Blongewicz

Greatest Strength:	Strong starting pitching with Colon, Pettitte and Buehrle.
Most Glaring Weakness:	Other than David Wright, this infield is strictly Double A (Molina, Giambi, Biggio, Renteria).
Shrewdest Pick:	Mark Buehrle in the 6th. This guy is at the top of his game, and lasted way too long in the Draft.
Most Laughable Blunder:	Bobby Abreu in the 1st over Halladay, Peavy, Oswalt and Carpenter? Tsk, tsk. Haven't you been listening, Stretch?
It's Just My Opinion:	I hate to break bad news to the new and improved Mr. Sunny-side Up of our

Opinion: league, but the team that he has selected this season is a bit of a stinker. If everybody on the team stays healthy and has their career year, the team could contend for the Upper Division. Of course, that's exactly what happened in 1998, and the Blues actually won the darned thing. So anything's possible. But in my line of work, we deal with probabilities, not possibilities.

Predicted Order of Finish: Probably **11th**.

And there you have it, boys. Skipper's forecast for 2006, which in summary is as follows:

1. Chiefs
2. Skipjacks
3. Senators
4. Redbirds
5. Cubs*
6. Tigers
7. Bronx Bombers
8. Reds
9. Tribe
10. Wahoos
11. Blues
12. Bears

As always, the best of luck to each and every one of you, and may the best team win in 2006.

Skipper