

## National League Preview – 2020

The NL looks to have 6 and possibly 7 playoff contending teams this year, which promises to feature a dogfight pretty much every series, as every game will be important. Only the LA Dodgers figure to be out of the race even before it starts, which is ironic in that LA has been one of the most successful NL teams in recent history, as they come into the 2020 season with a streak of 10 consecutive playoff appearances, including 2 World Series appearances in the past 3 years.

Our analytics experts sat down and rated each and every NL team based on every aspect of the game – from starting pitchers, to closers, to set-up men, and, even long relief. On the hitting side, we analyzed power, on-base, defense, speed, as well as defense at critical positions – up the middle (2<sup>nd</sup>, SS, and CF), and catcher. Lastly, we rated the Managerial abilities. The results were that there are 3 teams who could all realistically take 1<sup>st</sup> place – Pittsburgh, Montreal, and Arizona. Philadelphia is the unknown here – their roster is as talented if not more than any of the big boys, but they have had a ton of ability on paper in previous years but have never lived up to that promise. Right now, the only non-playoff teams are LA and San Diego.

The truth is, once you read the below team capsules, you will realize what we have – that pretty much every team has the talent to win the division. There are very few differences between the teams. For example, Cincinnati has a very surprising offense, loaded with dynamic hitters, but their pitching staff especially their starters, are not championship caliber. The Phillies are loaded, but will that translate into wins. Pittsburgh, Montreal, and Arizona seem to be loaded at every position, yet one of these teams will finish in 3<sup>rd</sup> place. Here is the team by team breakdown:

### **Pittsburgh Pirates – 1<sup>st</sup> place – 47-32**

It's not only that they have a very strong roster from top to bottom, but the Manager's abilities certainly take them over the top. Pete's teams have consistently over-produced year after year, so there is no reason to assume 2020 won't be the same. Pittsburgh ranks as the second best pitching staff in the NL to Montreal's, but just by a hair. They sit 3<sup>rd</sup> in starting pitching, and 2<sup>nd</sup> in bullpen. But overall, that places them a close 2<sup>nd</sup> to Montreal. The irony is that Pittsburgh came into the Winter Meetings with just 2 starters, but plucked themselves rookies Mike Siroka, Dakota Hudson, and Zack Plesac, to go with co-aces Stephen Strasburg and Shane Bieber. And in the pen, they feature 3 closers, including the dominant Aroldis Chapman, plus a closer-in-waiting, so their short relief will be outstanding. They just need 5 innings from their starters. Pittsburgh's one weakness is long relief...should a starter get knocked out in the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, Pittsburgh doesn't really have anyone who can come in and restore order, and give the outstanding offense a chance to catch up.

On offense, Pittsburgh has the second-most power in the NL, right behind the Phillies. They have a power hitter at every position, including the skill positions like catcher, SS, and 2b. A guy like Mitch Garver is a huge bonus, while the offense will revolve around Freddie Freeman, while unheralded Gio Urshela could wind up being the key guy who puts this offense over the top. If there is one weakness to this team, it is their inability to get on base at a decent clip, as they are ranked a distant 6<sup>th</sup> in team on-base. Guys like Javy Baez and Jonathan Schoop drag down the team on-

base. This could become a potential scoring issue if most of their home runs seem to come with no one on base, something that will be interesting to follow.

## **Montreal Expos – 2<sup>nd</sup> place – 46-31**

This one may come as a surprise to some, but the Expos have assembled a very strong lineup themselves. A big part of their strength comes from the #1 rated pitching staff. Montreal is loaded with depth everywhere. We all know about Max Scherzer and Zack Greinke, but no-names like Zack Davies, Anibal Sanchez, and even Mike Leake should be able to keep the Expos in the game for at least the first 4-5 innings, which is really all the Expos need given their #1 ranked bullpen. They too feature 3 former or current closers in their pen, and also perhaps the game's best set-up man in Seth Lugo. And should an opponent manage to knock out an Expos starter in the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning? Their reward would be 3 innings of Steven Matz.

It's the offense that could hold back Montreal from finishing as high as 2<sup>nd</sup> place. They do not rank very high in either team power or team on-base. That said, like any Mike T club, they have a lot of gimmicks and gadgets to employ, depending on the situation and the opposing pitcher, a strategy that served them well last season as they cruised to 1<sup>st</sup> place. But they also have their main guys – Alex Bregman will be a beast to try to get out with men on base. Question will be how Mont assembles their batting order, whether they opt to place their best hitters ahead of Bregman so that he has base runners on each time up, or whether he opts to use some of the strong hitters behind him as protection, and use Bregman as a table-setter instead. We know Lorenzo Cain will lead off, and you have guys like Francisco Lindor and Yuli Gurriel who will be threats.

In addition, they do possess the best team defense in the NL. They possess 5 Gold Glove fielders in their 9 man starting defense, including their entire infield of Gurriel, Kolten Wong, Lindor, and Bregman, something that will make their dominant pitching seem unhittable at times. The gap between Montreal and Arizona on our point system is non-existent, which means the deciding vote comes down to managing skills. Mike T has been through the wars, knows how to win, and also knows how to win ugly.

## **Arizona – 3<sup>rd</sup> place – 44-33**

The Diamondbacks have some very strong aspects to their team...but also some weaknesses. Pitching is a perfect example, as our experts rated Arizona's starting staff the best in the NL, but their bullpen ranked middle of the pack. The rotation is very solid, as their top 3 of Jack Flaherty, Luis Castillo, and Clayton Kershaw is maybe the best threesome in the league. But again, the compliments also come with a caution – 3 of Arizona's 5 starters are left-handed (Kershaw, Chris Sale, and Ryan Yarbrough) and we have all seen the struggles that even the best southpaws in the game have endured. The bullpen is where Arizona will lose some winnable games, in situations where their starter gets knocked out early, or, where their thin short relief corps is tired and unavailable in a close game. They have Hansel Robles to close, and Giovanny Gallegos and Colin Poche to set-up when the situation calls for them, but beyond that, nothing else of much value. This will likely cost them at least 3-5 wins in the season.

On offense, Arizona is just a tad below Pittsburgh and Philadelphia in the team power department, and has a better team on-base than both Pitts and Mont. They also have some neat platoon combinations that will serve them well against savvy Managers like Mike T and Pete who really know how to utilize a bullpen. It will be interesting to see which of their 3 catchers get the most playing time between Gary Sanchez (who was supposed to be the next Babe

Ruth), Manny Pina, and rookie Tom Murphy. Their best power threats are Josh Donaldson, Charlie Blackmon, and Trey Mancini.

Concerns include the team defense, which is merely average. Although late in games, they have the ability to have a Gold Glove at 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and SS. But where their defense really hurts is in the outfield, where Mancini and Blackman will struggle, and even CF'er Starling Marte is no sure thing.

In terms of managerial ability, Allan has seen his rating strengthen in recent years as he has led teams to Division crowns, and has shown an ability to get more out of a team than its roster would indicate. Yet, to get rated with the big boys, he needs a Championship trophy to his resume.

### **Philadelphia – 4<sup>th</sup> place – 42-35**

This seeding has nothing to do with the roster and everything to do with its Manager. We have all witnessed Neil repeatedly managing stacked teams, only to continually finish 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup>, or in some cases, miss the playoffs entirely. This year's Phillies may be the best team of all of them, so there is unlimited upside to how high this team can finish if Neil starts pushing all the right buttons.

Our analytics experts rated the Phillies near the top in pretty much every category, beginning with their starting rotation, where they ranked tied for 1<sup>st</sup> with Arizona. It all starts with the best starter in the NL in Jake DeGrom, and continues with Patrick Corbin, Mike Clevinger, Zack Wheeler, and even rookie Griffin Canning can be dominant at times. The pen ranked near the top as well, but lost points due to the lack of a long man in the pen. But the Phils did beef up the pen on the short end, which almost seems like overkill given how strong the rotation is and figures to pitch deep into most games. But, when they do need relief, they have it in bunches. But if you knock their starter out early, they will be forced to either use their excellent set-up men in a long relief role, and thereby tire them out for the next game, or, just give up that game.

As strong as the pitching is, the offense is lights-out! Their power is near the top, while their team on-base is projected at a hefty .366! That should equal a lot of 3-run homers. They easily have the most potent bats in the NL, led by Mike Trout, Rafael Devers, Michael Conforto, Austin Meadows, Xander Bogaerts, and even aging rookie Ji-Man Choi will be frustrating to pitch to. The only concern is a near-automatic out in Dee Gordon at 2<sup>nd</sup> base. The other strong contenders have power at every single position on the field.

But, weaknesses include their team defense, which is ranked near the bottom. Meadows and Conforto in the OF will be a hold your breath situation on balls hit out to them, and same for Devers, while guys like Bogaerts and Choi are mediocre at best. Even Trout is no longer a sure thing in center.

All in all, you can make a case for this team finishing as high as 1<sup>st</sup> place, and a case for finishing lower than 4<sup>th</sup>. On the one hand, just by writing in the same lineup and using zero strategy, that pitching staff guarantees they will be comfortably in the playoffs. But on the other hand, it isn't far fetched to imagine a scenario where other teams take advantage of some of the Phillies weaknesses and push them closer to the Cincinnati's and San Francisco's, and in a dogfight for a playoff spot. Time will tell.

## **Cincinnati – 5<sup>th</sup> place – 39-38**

Where the Reds are weak this year is in their pitching, which is unusual for them as usually they excel in the pitching and defense. But this year their starting pitching is just okay, and their closer will be a nightly adventure. Guys like Kyle Hendricks, Brandon Woodruff, Max Fried, German Marquez and Joey Lucchesi will be competitive but not dominant. The pen is very solid, other than “closer” Edwin Diaz, who will struggle to nail down 1-run leads.

On the hitting side, the Reds are projected to have the highest team-on base in the NL, pushing the .370 mark. This should have them in the middle of rallies pretty much every inning, and therefore they will never be completely out of a game. On base machines like Yasmani Grandal, Joey Votto, Anthony Rendon, Jeff McNeil, and George Springer will constantly be on base. But the power is middle of the pack, so they will collect multiple-run homers which can be difference-makers. They also rank as the team least affected by lefty or righty pitchers, given their platoons and bench.

Manager March A has watched his managerial rating drop down to the pack, as he has not exhibited his uncanny ability to grab victories from the jaws of defeat in recent seasons. He has been resting on his past laurels for a while now, but our experts have noticed and have penalized him accordingly.

## **San Francisco – 6<sup>th</sup> place – 36-41**

It would be a shame if the defending World Series Champs did not qualify for the playoffs to defend their title. Our experts have them in a dogfight for a playoff spot, and in fact predict it could come down to a one-game playoff with Cincinnati. The Giants biggest weakness is in their starting pitching, ranking near the bottom of the league. Their #5 starter is their biggest weakness, as this spot projects to be the worst #5 starter in the NL. Yet Noah Syndergaard, Anthony Desclafani, and Julio Teheran should be competitive. But, SF counters with a very strong and deep bullpen, one which ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> right behind Pitts and Mont. We count at least 6 bona fide mlb-caliber set-up men on this roster, and likely 8 in total. How over worked will their pen be by game 60?

The offense is not as strong as Cincinnati's, but the superior team defense makes up for that to an extent. However, SF does have fewer dynamic players than the Reds do in the battle for 5<sup>th</sup> place. DJ Lemehieu, Eugenio Suarez, Mookie Betts, and Paul Goldschmidt are as good as anyone, but it does drop off significantly from there. And on days when SF opts to start defensive catcher Mike Zunino, there will be a few easy outs in the lineup between him, Andrelton Simmons, and the platoon of Ian Desmond and Alex Gordon. As for Managing, Menas has now reached the levels of Mike T and March A with his WS win, and has proven he can hold his own against any Manager.

## **San Diego – 7<sup>th</sup> place – 33-44**

The 2020 Padres will answer the burning question, can a powerful offense overcome a shitty pitching staff. San Diego used the WM's to assemble most of their pitchers, as the cupboard was barren. And as you can imagine when one is forced to buy in quantity instead of quality, the depth suffers as well as the overall product. Guys like JA Happ, Chris Bassett, Danny Duffy, JA Happ, and Andrew Cashner just won't cut it as a playoff rotation, even with promising rookie Sandy Alcantara in the mix. This team will give up a lot of runs, so the key will be hoping the blowouts take place in games where the offense is struggling anyway, and then hope the pitching holds in games where the offense is clicking. The worst thing that could happen is for the Padres to be losing games 8-6 on a consistent basis, as there won't be any answers for that.

San Diego's team power ranks #1 in the NL. There will be a lot of dingers, but, what could hold their offense back is a pedestrian team on-base of .345. They have MVP-candidates in Cody Bellinger, Bryce Harper, and Gleyber Torres in the middle of their line-up. Also, SD does have a couple of platoon deficiencies which will be exploited. Does Max Kepler start vs lefties with his power and defense, or is he replaced. SD will lead the league in home runs, but will they lead the lead in runs scored? Not likely, and depending on how low in the rankings of scoring runs they fall, that will have a direct effect on their wins and losses.

Its really too bad, because this is an offense to be celebrated, but it appears it will be wasted on a team that cannot prevent any runs...

### **Los Angeles – 8<sup>th</sup> place – 20-57**

Compared to the other 7 NL squads, this lineup looks like a triple A team. LA did the wise thing and opted to dive full on into a rebuild, and if done right, they could be strong again in 2021. After all, they do have the makings of a strong rotation next season, if veterans like Cory Kluber, Garret Richards, and Sean Manaea rebound from injuries, and Masahiro Tanaka returns to his strong pitching following surgery to remove bone spurs from his elbow. But they will need youngsters like Austin Reilly, Yandy Diaz, and rebounds by Manny Machado and Ender Inciarte. But 2020 will certainly be a very, very long season for this bunch.