

Braves ready to make another run

Club heads south aiming for 14th straight division title

By Mark Bowman/MLB.com

ATLANTA – Granted upwards of 1,000 guesses just a few weeks ago, there would have been few, if any, Braves fans to have predicted their team would be heading to Spring Training with Brian Jordan and Raul Mondesi pegged for the corner outfield spots.

Likewise, thoughts of replacing John Smoltz in the closer's role with an All-Star right-hander from Milwaukee named Dan Kolb might have been almost as far-fetched as thoughts of replacing the Jaret Wright-Russ Ortiz combo with the duo of Smoltz and Tim Hudson at the top of the rotation.

Yet as the Braves head to Cracker Jack Stadium at Disney's Wide World of Sports for Spring Training, all of this is a reality. Such was the Braves' offseason reloading the plan led by Braves general manager John Schuerholz, who obviously sees financial restraints as just another challenge.

"I thought this was [Schuerholz's] most creative job ever," Braves veteran third baseman Chipper Jones said.

While Schuerholz's decision to grab a guy like Mondesi, who had fallen off everybody's radar, might seem creative, the reason was simple: to give the Braves a chance to win an amazing 14th consecutive division title.

Schuerholz is now left to see just how these pieces fit together. It appears he has another strong pitching staff, anchored by an excellent rotation. The starting infield returns intact from last year's division winner. The biggest questions coming into camp focus on the moves made to fill his corner-outfield slots.

However, even with these questions and the significant improvements made throughout the NL East, the Braves are still considered by some to be the favorites to win the division yet again.

"I hear people talking up the Marlins and the Mets," Jones said. "But I really feel good about our ballclub this year. I really think we have another team that is going to give us a chance to make it to the postseason this year – and not just make it there but make it past the first round in the playoffs. Who knows what will happen after that?"

Before the Braves can even begin to think about the playoffs, they first must address some of their needs in camp. Mondesi will attempt to prove his personal and health problems are behind him, and Smoltz must prove that he is indeed capable of being one of the game's top starters again.

The most heated competition at Spring Training this year will come in left field, where Jordan is confident he can play on a consistent basis. But the former NFL safety, who played for the Braves from 1999-2001, has appeared in just 127 games over the past two years because of a bad left knee. Jordan's knee necessitates a backup plan.

Ryan Langerhans, who is coming off a breakout season at Triple-A Richmond, seems to be the favorite to either serve as Jordan's backup or fill a platoon role. The 25-year old Langerhans has always been considered a great defensive player, but in hitting .298 with 20 homers last year, he further proved his offensive capabilities as well.

Others fighting Langerhans and Jordan for time in left field will be Billy McCarthy and non-roster invitees John Barnes, Roosevelt Brown and Esix Snead.

"We're happy to have Brian back," Schuerholz said. "But just because we've signed him, we haven't announced to those young guys to be any less aggressive. They're going to be trying to take a job away from somebody."

Another battle in comp will involve Wilson Betemit, Pete Orr and Nick Green as they fight for two utility infield roles. With the experience he gained while being a productive replacement for Marcus Giles last year, Green has pretty much assured himself one of the two utility infielder positions.

One factor complicating Green's situation is that he's out of options, as is Betemit. If these guys don't make the big league roster out of camp, they'd be placed on waivers where they would likely be claimed by another team.

Betemit was once considered the top prospect in the Braves' organization. Three mediocre seasons in Richmond has dimmed that star. Now the 24-year-old shortstop has one more chance to prove himself.

With Hudson and Smoltz heading the rotation, the Braves aren't overly concerned about the starting staff that also includes Mike Hampton, John Thomson and Horacio Ramirez. One item of interest will be the progress of Ramirez, who believes his left shoulder is healthy again.

There will also be plenty of eyes on Hudson as he makes the transition to the National League and serves as the ace for an organization he's always dreamed of playing for.

Schuerholz's creativity made that a reality. The overall value of this creativity will be better know as Spring Training progresses and this new-look Braves team begins its quest for another postseason with a number of new faces.

"We have a chance to have a great team this year," Hudson said. "I'm just excited to be a part of it. Hopefully I can just add something and win a few games for them."