

Nationals Preview

By Barry Svrluga



Five Story Lines for Spring Training



BY JOHN MCDONNELL — THE WASHINGTON POST



BY RICKY CARIOTI — THE WASHINGTON POST

1 WHO'S ON FIRST? When the Nationals arrived in Viera a year ago, **Dmitri Young**, right, was a troubled, overweight afterthought, and **Nick Johnson**, left, was supposed to be back from a broken leg by, say, June 1. A year later, Young has recast himself as the NL comeback player of the year and signed a two-year, \$10 million extension, and Johnson has yet to play. Now, Johnson, whose 2006 on-base percentage of .428 can transform the lineup, is out to prove he's healthy. Young, whose .320 average was the highest of his 12-year career, is out to prove '07 wasn't a fluke. Neither can play another position. What gives?



BY CHRIS O'MEARA — ASSOCIATED PRESS



BY TONI L. SANDYS — THE WASHINGTON POST



BY WILFREDO LEE — ASSOCIATED PRESS



BY JOHN MCDONNELL — THE WASHINGTON POST

2 TROUBLED CHILDREN? The Nationals traded for two outfielders with enormous potential and turbulent pasts. Lastings Milledge, 22, cut an inappropriate hip-hop song and ranted veteran teammates with the Mets. **Elijah Dukes**, 23, has a history of arrests and accusations of domestic violence. Milledge, once the primary bait in what would have been a blockbuster deal for Boston's Manny Ramirez, will get a shot to be the center fielder. Dukes, who homered 10 times in his first 148 major league at-bats, is a backup for now. If they mature on — but especially off — the field, both could be mainstays in Washington.

3 LIVIN' LA VIDA LO DUCA When the Nationals traded C Brian Schneider (and OF Ryan Church) to land Milledge, they filled the gap by signing veteran **Paul Lo Duca** to a one-year, \$5 million deal. Two problems: In December, Lo Duca appeared prominently in the Mitchell report on performance-enhancing drug use, and he has not yet addressed that situation. In January, he tore the meniscus in his left knee while working out, and likely won't be ready until March. His silence and his injury will make his arrival at spring training an event.

4 MUDDLED MIDDLE When the Nationals reported to spring training last year, Cristian Guzman was the shortstop, **Felipe López**, left, the second baseman, and **Ronnie Belliard**, right, was unemployed. Now, Belliard is coming off a solid season in which he hit .290. Guzman must rebound from a thumb injury and López, with a putrid .308 on-base percentage, must right himself. The club is saying Belliard will start at second, Guzman at short, and López must fight for time. Will that be true on Opening Day?

5 GROWTH ON THE FARM Now that the Nationals have taken steps to revitalize their long-moribund farm system — their 2007 draft was rated as the best in the majors by Baseball America — the focus soon will turn to when that system will produce stud major leaguers. Though most of the best prospects — first baseman Chris Marrero, outfielder Michael Burgess, and left-handed pitchers Jack McGeary and Josh Smoker — remain years away, pitchers such as **Ross Detwiler** and Collin Balester could arrive sometime this year.

Nationals Enter New Season Looking Good on Delivery

NATIONALS, From D1

the field of potential starting pitchers has been whittled to a fraction of what it was last year at this time. Though three dozen pitchers still will assemble, the club, like Chico, has a better idea of what to expect. The random cast of retreads largely is gone. The forlorn and the forgotten have been replaced by what the Nationals hope are a few pieces of the future.

"It's a big difference," second-year manager Manny Acta said by telephone last week. "We're not out there looking for a whole pitching staff."

Acta is careful not to get into the "five-guys-ying-for-four-spots" type of game with the rotation, because there still is a competition to come. But he knows now what he didn't know a year ago: If they are healthy — and the "if" should be simultaneously marked in bold and ALL CAPS and italics — Hill, Chico, Jason Bergmann, John Patterson and Tim Redding all can pitch in the majors. He knows if they break down, a young group of arms that includes John Lannan, Collin Balester, Tyler Clippard, Garrett Mock and eventually even Ross Detwiler, last year's first-round pick, is developing with varying degrees of promise. The talent,

the Nationals believe, is more concentrated. "I know I have at least five to six guys that went out there and pitched for us last year and didn't embarrass themselves," Acta said. "Every one of them that pitched regularly for us had an ERA below 5. I know I have those guys there. We're not searching for them."

But culling better performances — Washington's starters pitched the fewest innings of any team in the National League last year — still will be a challenge. This is, to be sure, a tenuous bunch, one marked by fragility and inexperience. Take Chico. While no NL rookie made more than his 31 starts or tossed more than his 167 innings in 2007, he also allowed the most homers, earned runs and walks, going 7-9 with a 4.63 ERA.

"I'm fighting for a spot," Chico said by phone. He's just doing it a bit differently. "Now, having the confidence of knowing he can pitch up here," Hill said of his teammate, "he can just go out and pitch and not worry about the nonsense, about what reporters are saying and all that. He knows he can do it. If you just do your job properly, everything will take care of itself."

Though Acta is not giving away spots in the rotation, he says of Chico, "How can you tell guys that led our team in innings pitched

and strikeouts he's coming to spring training to compete for a spot?" Still, each of the pitchers has questions to go along with his potential. In fact, the pair with perhaps the most raw talent — Hill and Patterson — also have perhaps the most to prove given recent injuries.

Patterson, who turned 30 last month, has been limited by a series of nerve ailments in his right arm over the past two seasons, when he combined to make only 15 starts. Long gone is 2005, when he occasionally looked dominant in starting 31 times and posting a 3.13 ERA. Where does that leave the Patterson of '08?

"A healthy John Patterson, if you look back at 2005, is a potential number one or number two guy," Acta said. "But it's been three years now. First, we have to see if he's healthy."

Patterson intends to display his health immediately. Since having surgery to relieve pressure on the radial nerve in his right arm in September, he has progressed according to plan, he said. Last week, at home in Texas, he threw 100 pitches in a workout session — fastballs, curveballs and sliders.

"I feel like I'm healthy," Patterson said by phone, before revising the statement. "No, I don't feel like it. I know I'm healthy."

Hill, 26, said he is 100 percent cleared to participate in drills following two minor surgeries in October. He draws even more internal praise when he's healthy.

"If he can make 30 starts, he'd win a Cy Young," Chico said. "He's got that kind of potential."

This about a guy who has made 25 starts in his major league career. But Hill's baffling sinker — which opponents have, unsolicited, compared to that of Arizona's Brandon Webb — makes him seem rife with potential. In going 4-5 with a 3.42 ERA in 16 starts last year, he gave up more than three earned runs just twice.

The Nationals believe even the unfamiliar commodities — such as Clippard, acquired in an offseason trade with the New York Yankees — have more promise than the group of unknowns last year. Thus, to this point they haven't aggressively pursued the remaining free agents on the market, a group that includes Liván Hernández, their Opening Day starter in 2005 and '06. "We want to see how these young players develop," General Manager Jim Bowden said.

How they do will determine not only much about 2008, but some aspects of 2009 — and beyond.

Space Coast Stadium

Opened: 1994.
Seating capacity: 8,100.
Dimensions: 340 feet to the left and right field fences; 404 feet to center.
Address: 5800 Stadium Pkwy., Viera, Fla. 32940.
Ticket prices: Batter's box, \$24; box seats, \$20 (lower deck) and \$17 (upper deck); bleacher, \$10; berm \$8.
How to get tickets: www.nationals.com, 888-632-6287.



BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSEY — THE WASHINGTON POST

Key Dates

Saturday
First workout, pitchers and catchers.

Feb. 21
First workout, full squad.

Coaches

Manager Manny Acta
Bench Pat Corrales
First Base Jerry Morales
Third Base Tim Tolman
Hitting Lenny Harris
Pitching Randy St. Claire
Bullpen Rick Aponte

Spring Training Schedule

FEB./MARCH				27	28	29	1
Sites in Florida except final game; all times p.m. Home games shaded				FLORIDA Jupiter 7:05	GEORGETOWN Viera (Exhib.) 11:30 a.m.	FLORIDA Viera 1:05	BALTIMORE Viera 1:05
2 BALT. , 1:05 Ft. Lauderdale	3 ST. LOUIS Viera 1:05	4 L.A. , 1:05 Viera L.A., 7:05 Vero Beach	5 ST. LOUIS Jupiter 1:05	6 N.Y. METS Viera 7:05	7 FLORIDA Jupiter 1:05	8 HOUSTON Kissimmee 1:05	
9 CLE. , 1:05 Viera	10 DETROIT Viera 1:05	11 ATLANTA Lake Buena Vista	12 LOS ANGELES Vero Beach 1:05	13 FLORIDA Viera 7:05	14 CLE. , 1:05 Viera CLE. , 7:05 Winter Haven	15 LOS ANGELES Viera 1:05	
16 BALTIMORE Ft. Lauderdale 1:05	17 N.Y. METS Viera 1:05	18 DETROIT Lakeland 1:05	19 HOUSTON Viera 7:05	20 N.Y. METS Port St. Lucie 1:10	21 N.Y. METS Port St. Lucie 1:10	22 ATLANTA Viera 1:05	
23 FLORIDA Jupiter 1:05	24 DETROIT Viera 1:05	25 ST. LOUIS Jupiter 1:05	26 ATLANTA Lake Buena Vista 1:05	27 BALTIMORE Viera 1:05	28	29 BALTIMORE Nationals Park 6:05	

Depth Chart Probable starters pictured at each position

 FIRST BASE Dmitri Young Nick Johnson Aaron Boone	 LEFT FIELD Wily Mo Peña Elijah Dukes Rob Mackowiak	 STARTING PITCHERS Shawn Hill Jason Bergmann John Patterson Tim Redding Matt Chico John Lannan Tyler Clippard Collin Balester*
 SECOND BASE Ronnie Belliard Felipe López Pete Orr*	 CENTER FIELD Lastings Milledge Elijah Dukes Ryan Langerhans	 CHICO
 SHORTSTOP Cristian Guzman Felipe López Ronnie Belliard	 RIGHT FIELD Austin Kearns Elijah Dukes Rob Mackowiak	 CORDERO Chad Cordero Jon Rauch Luis Ayala Saul Rivera Jesus Colome Ray King* Ryan Wagner Chris Schroder Katsuhiko Maekawa* Joel Hanrahan Mike Bacsik*
 THIRD BASE Ryan Zimmerman Aaron Boone Ronnie Belliard	 CATCHER Paul Lo Duca Johnny Estrada Jesus Flores	

* Not on 40-man roster, but will be in major league camp