

Boston Red Sox

by Ben Jacobs of The Hardball Times

2008 Projections

Record: 97-65

Division Rank: 1st, by four games

Runs Scored: 850

Runs Allowed: 690

2007 in a Nutshell

The Red Sox couldn't have scripted the first half of the season any better. While the Yankees struggled out of the gate, Boston could hardly lose over the first two months. At the end of May, the Red Sox were 36-16, 10 games ahead of second-place Baltimore and 13.5 games ahead of the last-place Yankees.

The Red Sox hit some speed bumps the rest of the season while the Yankees recovered, and the division lead dwindled almost to nothing at times in September. But the Red Sox ultimately kept the Yankees at bay and held the lead in the AL East from April 18 through the end of the season to win their first division title since 1995.

Boston easily swept the Angels in the first round of the playoffs and took the first game from Cleveland in the ALCS before things went south and the Indians took three in a row. A gem from Josh Beckett got the Red Sox back on track, and they used their own three-game streak to win the pennant before going on to sweep the Rockies for their second World Series title in four years.

The biggest key to the season for the Red Sox was the trade they made with the Marlins the year before. In 2006, Beckett wasn't the ace he was supposed to be, struggling to a 5.01 ERA while Mike Lowell helped salvage the trade a little by posting an .814 OPS. Lowell was even better in 2007, posting an .879 OPS and setting career highs in RBIs, batting average and on-base percentage. This time, Beckett held up his end of the bargain as well, going 20-7 with a 3.27 ERA to finish second in the Cy Young voting.

As good as they were, however, the Red Sox did have some disappointments. Boston spent a bundle of money in the offseason on free agents Julio Lugo and J.D. Drew, and neither of them played up to expectations. Lugo played solid defense but had an anemic .643 OPS while Drew posted a .796 OPS and became the player Red Sox fans loved to hate until his key grand slam in the sixth game of the ALCS.

General Comments

Team Strengths

The Red Sox were very balanced in 2007, allowing the fewest runs in the AL while scoring the third most. The biggest strength was the bullpen. Jonathan Papelbon and Hideki Okajima handled the last two innings of most close games and combined for a 2.05 ERA in 127.1 innings. Manny Delcarmen, Mike Timlin, Javier Lopez and Kyle Snyder were also solid for the Red Sox out of the bullpen.

The starting pitching (particularly Beckett and Curt Schilling) was mostly very good, and the lineup had one great hitter (David Ortiz) and several good hitters (Kevin Youkilis, Dustin Pedroia, Lowell and Manny Ramirez).

Team Weaknesses

If the Red Sox had a real weakness, it was that the team lacked the home run power that had made the offense so scary in recent seasons. After averaging 213 homers per season from 2003-06 (with a low of 192 in 2006), the Red Sox hit only 166 in 2007. Ortiz led the team with 35 and nobody else hit more than 21. Those 56 homers from Boston's top two power hitters paled in comparison to the numbers Ortiz and Ramirez posted in 2006 (89 combined homers), 2005 (92) and 2004 (84).

The General Manager is Known for...

At this point, Theo Epstein is known more as the man who helped turn the Red Sox into one of baseball's elite franchises than as the guy who was the youngest GM in baseball.

He looks for bargains where he can find them, particularly with hitters, but he is more than willing to dip into Boston's deep bank account to sign the players he thinks he needs. He tends to build his bullpens in bulk, signing a bunch of guys to one-year deals and then seeing who works out, rather than committing several years to one reliever he really likes.

The Manager is Known for...

With two championships under his belt, Terry Francona is starting to get much more respect as a manager. He's a player's manager who generally seems to have a good grasp of how to keep guys happy and performing well. He's certainly not a master strategist, but he