

# Closers On Parade

## ■ Mark Ratajczak

**T**he instability of major league closer jobs has greatly increased in recent seasons, and last year was no exception. There were 136 pitchers that recorded a save in 2004, and 45 of those pitchers had at least five saves. A handful of saves is all it takes to make the difference between winning and losing your fantasy league, so it's a tremendous advantage to know which players will get the call if a closer stumbles. We'll take a look at the bullpen situation for each team and examine every closer, from the rock-solid (*Eric Gagne*), to the not-so-solid (*Jose Mesa*). We'll identify the biggest injury risks, and we've even thrown in a few potential closers of the future for those of you in keeper leagues.

## AL EAST

### Baltimore Orioles

After two straight seasons of improving his command and strikeout rate, B.J. Ryan has passed the shaky Jorge Julio as the frontrunner for saves in Baltimore. Although most teams shy away from lefty closers, it's hard to ignore a guy like Ryan when he posts a 12.7 K/9 ratio. Julio is still the next in line for saves, but his continued inability to throw strikes might prevent him from being considered a long-term solution.

### Boston Red Sox

Keith Foulke returns as the closer for the World Champs after a solid season in which he posted 32 saves with a 2.17 ERA and 0.94 WHIP. He had a career-high seven blown saves, but the Sox actually ended up winning five of those games. Foulke has proven to be very durable, as he's now had six straight seasons with 65 or more appearances. That durability will make it difficult for anyone else to see many save opportunities. Matt Mantei was signed as a setup man for Foulke, and he would likely be next in line. Mike Timlin had another decent year as a low-WHIP fantasy roster filler and could get a save or two this season.

### New York Yankees

Even at age 35, Mariano Rivera showed no signs of slowing down last year, racking up 53 saves and posting a 1.95 ERA and 1.08 WHIP. After dealing with shoulder problems in 2002 and a groin injury in 2003, Rivera stayed healthy in 2004 and avoided the disabled list. Tom Gordon had the stats of an elite closer last year, with 96 strikeouts in 89 innings. He'll be Rivera's backup once again, picking up a few saves on nights when Rivera is unavailable. The Yankees also have Mike Stanton, Paul Quantrill, and Felix Rodriguez in the bullpen as possible options, but if Rivera and Gordon both go down, the Yankees will likely bring in an established closer to fill the void.

### Tampa Bay Devil Rays

Danys Baez had a solid season in his first year as the closer for the Devil Rays. He returns in 2005, but his upside will likely be limited by the lack of save opportunities in Tampa. Jesus Colome should be the top setup man and first in line if Baez falters. Colome posted a

3.27 ERA and 1.11 WHIP last year before being shut down with shoulder tendinitis in September. There was no structural damage, and Colome should be fine for 2005. Lance Carter also remains an option for stray saves, and closer of the future Chad Orvella should arrive in the majors early this year.

### Toronto Blue Jays

Once again the Blue Jays start the year with an unsettled closer situation. Justin Speier is the favorite to grab the job after a strong finish last season. Six of Speier's seven saves came in September and October, when he posted a 2.84 ERA. Brandon League, the closer of the future for the Jays, will compete with Speier. League's fastball can reach triple digits, and he recorded 90 strikeouts in 104 innings of Double-A ball last year. Jason Frasor, who was the closer for much of 2004, also remains in the mix for the job.

## AL CENTRAL

### Chicago White Sox

Shingo Takatsu enters the season as the closer for the White Sox after converting 19 of 20 save chances last year. Takatsu racked up 260 saves in 10 seasons in Japan, and he made a smooth transition to the majors last year with a 2.35 ERA and 0.98 WHIP. However, pitching coach Don Cooper expressed his doubts about Takatsu's ability to close over the course of an entire season because he's a "contact closer" and not a "swing-and-miss" guy. If Cooper's doubts persist, then Dustin Hermanson may get the call. Hermanson converted 17 of 20 saves for the Giants last year and will open the season as the setup man for Takatsu. Damaso Marte has recorded at least half a dozen saves each of the last three years, although he did have six blown chances last year. The Sox also picked up Luis Vizcaino in the Carlos Lee/Scott Podsednik deal, and Vizcaino is long overdue for a shot as a closer.

### Cleveland Indians

After undergoing Tommy John surgery in 2002, Bob Wickman returned last July, and by the end of the month had reclaimed his job as the Tribe's closer. The Indians re-signed him for one year, although the 36-year-old Wickman did consider retirement during the offseason. Bobby Howry made a strong comeback from elbow surgery and has passed David Riske and Rafael Betancourt in the bullpen pecking order. Howry had a 2.74 ERA and a 1.15 WHIP last year and will be the fall-back option after Wickman. Both Riske and Betancourt failed in their opportunities as closers last year, but either one could get another shot this year.

### Detroit Tigers

While Ugueth Urbina managed to convert 21 of his 24 save opportunities, he had a lot of shaky appearances, and his 5.33 BB/9 is not the control ratio of a solid closer. With that in mind, the Tigers went out and signed Troy Percival to a two-year contract. The 35-year-old Percival is still a solid pitcher when healthy, but he has spent time on the DL in four of the last five seasons, so it is likely that Urbina will get save chances at some point this year. After Urbina and Percival, there is no clear candidate for saves. One-time prodigy Franklyn German remains in the picture, but he is quickly running out of chances.