

Kansas City Royals

The Royals have finally realized that Jeremy Affeldt doesn't belong in the rotation, and he will enter 2005 in the closer role. Affeldt started eight games in April and May last year before moving to the bullpen and picking up 13 saves in 17 chances. He seemed to put his blister problems of 2003 behind him, but he spent time on the DL with an oblique injury. The Royals have no solid candidates to fill the void if Affeldt goes down again. Seven other relievers picked up saves in Affeldt's absence last year. D.J. Carrasco, Shawn Camp, Nate Field, and Mike MacDougal could all be candidates to back up Affeldt, but none of those guys is likely to be a reliable option.

Minnesota Twins

Joe Nathan exceeded all expectations last year, converting 44 of 47 save chances and posting a 1.62 ERA and 0.98 WHIP. After rehabbing from shoulder surgery throughout most of 2001 and 2002, Nathan learned to strike guys out. He had K/9 rates of 9.5 and 11.1 in 2003 and 2004. He clearly has the stats of an elite closer, and last year's performance can't be dismissed as a fluke. Jesse Crain looks like the closer of the future, although with Nathan's success, that future may be a long way off. While Crain's major-league numbers last year weren't all that promising (14 K and 12 BB in 27 IP), his minor-league numbers remained solid (64 K and 17 BB in 51 IP). Juan Rincon and Grant Balfour are also options for the Twins.

AL WEST

Anaheim Angels

Now that Troy Percival has departed in search of greener pastures (or whatever the Detroit equivalent of a pasture might be), Francisco Rodriguez becomes the full-time closer in Anaheim.



BILLY WAGNER

Don't be fooled by his seven blown saves last year - six out of seven were in tough situations where K-Rod had to deal with either a slim one-run lead or errors by his teammates. The only numbers you need to know are his strikeout and walk ratios: 13.2 K/9 and 1.8 BB/9. They indicate that he'll be a solid closer for years to come. Brendan Donnelly should be next in line after Rodriguez. Donnelly didn't notch any saves last year, but he did post solid numbers after missing the first half of the season with a broken nose and elbow tendinitis. He remains a solid low-ERA, low-WHIP guy regardless of his save count. Scot Shields was the only other reliever to record a save last year, and he should once again have a solid season with a handful of saves.

Oakland A's

Although he blew nine saves last year, Octavio Dotel still posted great stats, and he had a sensational strikeout rate of 12.9 K/9. Dotel returns as the closer, and newly-acquired Juan Cruz could be the top setup man if the A's decide not to plug him into their rotation. Cruz had a breakout season last year with Atlanta, posting a 2.75 ERA and striking out 70 in 72 innings. He has the talent to be either a quality starter or late-inning reliever. Kiko Calero is another candidate for a pivotal role in the A's bullpen. Calero had a 2.78 ERA and 0.82 WHIP in 45 innings for the Cardinals last year. Finally, the A's have 2004 first-round pick Huston Street, who is considered their closer of the future. Street will be given a chance to earn a bullpen job this spring and could play a big role for the A's this year.

Seattle Mariners

Eddie Guardado missed much of 2004 with a torn rotator cuff, and he's attempting to rehab the injury rather than undergo surgery. Early reports have been positive, and he expects to be ready for spring training. If Guardado is unable to bounce back from his injury, then J.J. Putz will get the call. Putz collected nine saves last year to go along with a 4.71 ERA and 1.43 WHIP. Those stats are a bit misleading, as Putz pitched much better once he settled into a defined role. Shigetoshi Hasegawa is another possibility, but he'll be on the outside looking in after last year's struggles. Lefty specialist George Sherrill is a dark-horse candidate after striking out 62 with only nine walks in 50 innings at Triple-A last year.

Texas Rangers

Francisco Cordero had a sensational season in 2004, converting 49 of 54 save chances and posting a 2.14 ERA and 1.28 WHIP. The Rangers signed Cordero to a two-year extension in July, and he'll be their closer for the next couple of years. Frank Francisco has completed his suspension stemming from last year's chair-throwing incident. He could be next in line for saves, assuming he's not pitching in the California Penal League. Carlos Almanzar is also a top candidate to step in if something happens to Cordero.

NL EAST

Atlanta Braves

The Braves gave up a promising young prospect to acquire Danny Kolb as their new closer. The deal allows John Smoltz to move back into the rotation. Kolb saved 39 games in 44 chances last year, but his low strikeout rate and history of arm problems has led many to speculate that he'll have a hard time repeating that success. Kolb underwent Tommy John surgery in 2000 and missed significant time in 2001 and 2002 with a torn forearm muscle and partially-torn rotator cuff. He also had problems with shoulder soreness last spring. Combine that history with only 21 strikeouts in 57 innings