

last year, and you have a potential recipe for disaster. That's where Chris Reitsma comes in. Reitsma saved 12 games for the Reds in 2003 and was called on for a couple of saves last year when Smoltz was unavailable. While Reitsma's numbers are more closer-worthy than Kolb's, they still aren't particularly impressive.

### Florida Marlins

With Armando Benitez out of the way, perennial closer-in-waiting Guillermo Mota should get his first crack at a full-time closing job. Mota's control regressed a bit from his stellar 2003 campaign, but he still turned in a solid season, with a 3.07 ERA and 1.16 WHIP. He definitely has the goods to close. He'll have to hold off free-agent acquisition Antonio Alfonseca, who will get a look as a possible alternative. Although Alfonseca hasn't saved a game since 2002, he did have 113 saves from 1999-2002, and most came in his first stint with the Marlins. Tim Lincecum missed all of 2004 while recovering from Tommy John surgery, but he'll be back in 2005 and should compete for saves when he's fully healthy.

### New York Mets

Braden Loper had a solid first season with the Mets, converting 29 of 34 saves and posting a 2.70 ERA and 1.22 WHIP. Although he struggled down the stretch last year, his job is secure for 2005. Mike DeJean is the setup man and first option to close after Loper. DeJean struggled to a 6.13 ERA with the Orioles last year but was salvaged by Mets pitching coach Rick Peterson. After he was acquired by the Mets in a midseason trade, DeJean posted an excellent 1.69 ERA over the balance of the year. DeJean's season was ended by a fractured tibia in September, but he'll be fine for 2005.

### Philadelphia Phillies

After staying relatively healthy for several seasons following his 2000 elbow surgery, Billy Wagner made two trips to the DL in 2004 with groin and shoulder injuries. When healthy, Wagner was spectacular, fanning 59 in 48 innings and posting a 2.42 ERA and 0.77 WHIP. Wagner should have a clean bill of health heading into 2005, but the Phillies have a solid backup plan in Tim Lincecum.



JASON ISRINGHAUSEN

Worrell saved 38 games while stepping in for Robb Nen in 2003, and he saved 19 last year while replacing Wagner. Ryan Madson could also get a save chance or two if he doesn't move into the rotation.

### Washington Nationals

Chad Cordero returns as the closer for the Nationals after converting 14 of 18 saves last year. Cordero struggled to a 7.50 ERA in August but finished the season strong with a 0.54 ERA in September and October. Luis Ayala is next line. Ayala doesn't have the strikeout rate of a closer but does have excellent command. He posted a 2.69 ERA and 1.19 WHIP last year. Lefty Joe Horgan might see some situational saves and could step in for Cordero in a pinch, if necessary.

### NL CENTRAL

#### Chicago Cubs

LaTroy Hawkins blew nine saves last year, and Joe Borowski missed much of the season with a shoulder injury. Now, the Cubs are left in search of a solid candidate to close ballgames. They will try to fill the void by signing a free agent during the offseason or making a trade in spring training, but if they fail to land someone, Ryan Dempster is the leading candidate to fill the role. Dempster proved effective in relief last year, but his lack of command might prevent him from ever being a solid closer. After Dempster, Borowski would be the next in line, assuming he's healthy. Borowski is currently recovering from a torn rotator cuff, and may not be ready for the start of the season. Hawkins could also contend for the role again this year, but the Cubs would prefer that not be necessary.

#### Cincinnati Reds

Danny Graves recorded a career-high 49 saves last year and returns as the closer for the Reds. Graves has a very low strikeout rate, but with five solid seasons as the team's closer under his belt, his job is secure. Joe Valentine is the next option after Graves, but his control problems (25 walks in 28 IP) may preclude him from being considered a long-term solution. Ryan Wagner entered last season as the team's closer of the future, but he had a terrible year and needs to regain his stuff and rebuild his confidence.

#### Houston Astros

Brad Lidge was the most dominant reliever in baseball last season, posting a 1.90 ERA and 0.92 WHIP with an eye-popping 14.9 K/9 ratio. He didn't assume the closer role until Octavio Dotel was traded on June 24 and still finished with 29 saves in 33 chances. Lidge also had a phenomenal postseason and now has one of the most secure jobs in the league. The situation behind him, however, is quite murky. Chad Qualls and Dan Wheeler are probably next in line, and Chad Harville could also compete for leftover saves. However, none of these guys has the ability to be a full-time closer.

#### Milwaukee Brewers

After trading away Danny Kolb, Brewers GM Doug Melvin named Mike Adams as the closer for 2005. Adams had a solid rookie year with a 3.40 ERA and 1.21 WHIP. While Adams doesn't have the strikeout rate one would hope for from a closer (6.6 K/9), he does have good command and has a chance to be serviceable in the role. Justin Lehr is probably the first option behind Adams. Lehr had a 5.24 ERA and a 1.50 WHIP as a rookie for Oakland last year, but his Triple-A numbers (2.65 ERA, 4.0 K/BB) were quite impressive.