

Closing Time

Pittsburgh Pirates

After barely testing free agency, 38-year-old Jose Mesa signed on for another year in Pittsburgh after saving 38 games in 45 chances last year. However, his strikeout rate of 4.8 K/9 marked a fourth straight year of decline. That doesn't bode well for continued success. Salomon Torres, who posted a 2.64 ERA and 1.19 WHIP last year, will get the first shot if Mesa fails. The Pirates also have lefty Mike Gonzalez, who had 55 strikeouts and only six walks in 43 innings. Gonzalez is the better pitcher, but GM Dave Littlefield all but anointed Torres the next closer before Mesa re-upped.

St. Louis Cardinals

Jason Isringhausen underwent hip surgery in November, but he should be fine for the start of the season. Isringhausen continued to perform as one of the better closers in the league, collecting 47 saves to go along with a 2.87 ERA and 1.04 WHIP. Julian "Pine Tar" Tavarez will be punching out hitters as the top setup man, and he could close games if Isringhausen goes down. Cal Eldred, who saved eight games in 2003, remains a candidate to step into the closer role if necessary.



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Arizona Diamondbacks

Greg Aquino finished the season as the Diamondbacks closer and is the frontrunner to continue in the role in 2005. Aquino was an effective closer last year, converting 15 of his 18 save opportunities. However, his control is a problem, as he walked 4.8 batters per nine innings between Triple-A and the majors. That means that Aquino will likely have to compete with Jose Valverde for the job in spring training, and he could be on a short leash if he wins the job. Valverde has a similar issue with walks, but he makes up for it with strikeouts, posting K/9 rates of 12.7 and 11.5 in 2003 and 2004, respectively. He's a much better long-term closer prospect than Aquino. Rookie Brian Bruney finished strong last year and could also be in the mix at some point.

Colorado Rockies

Chin-Hui Tsao finished the season as the Rockies closer after Shawn Chacon failed in the role. Chacon posted a 7.11 ERA last year to go along with nine blown saves, all of which resulted in losses for his team. The Rockies openly expressed their desire to pursue an experienced closer in the offseason, but they will likely open the season with Tsao closing games. Tsao certainly has the stuff for the job, as he had 49 strikeouts in 45 IP between the majors and minors last year. Brian Fuentes got a brief shot at closing in 2003 and could be the first in line to get another shot this year. Allan Simpson and Scott Dohmann both get lots of strikeouts and could figure into the equation at some point.

Los Angeles Dodgers

Eric Gagne had another sensational year and is indisputably the best closer in the game. After Gagne, the Dodgers have 24-year-old Yhency Brazoban, who emerged last year and was Gagne's top setup man after Guillermo Mota was traded to Florida. In 31 games, Brazoban collected six wins to go along with a 2.48 ERA and 1.22 WHIP. Giovanni Carrara and Duaner Sanchez could also be candidates for saves.

San Diego Padres

Trevor Hoffman came back strong last year after missing most of 2003 recovering from shoulder surgery. Hoffman saved 41 games in 45 chances and will be the closer for the Padres again in 2005. Akinori Otsuka is next in line. He had an extremely successful career in Japan, and last year's transition to the majors saw virtually no change in his stats, as his 10.1 K/9 ratio was just a shade below his career average. Otsuka is an experienced closer and would likely get the job done if the chance presented itself. Scott Linebrink is another option for the Padres. He's coming off a breakout season in which he posted a 2.14 ERA, 1.04 WHIP and 8.9 K/9 ratio.

San Francisco Giants

The Giants signed Armando Benitez to a three-year contract during the offseason, and he will handle the closing duties after converting 47 of 51 save chances for the Marlins last year. While Benitez's strikeout rate of 8.1 K/9 marked a sixth straight year of decline, he is still one of the most underrated closers in the game. Jim Brower returns as the primary setup man and should be first in line for stray save chances. David Aardsma is considered to be the club's closer of the future. Aardsma struggled in brief stints in the majors last year but had a 9.3 K/9 ratio with 11 saves at the Triple-A level. Matt Herges had 23 saves (and awful numbers in every other category) before losing the job last July. Hopefully, we've seen the last of him in the closer role. ♦