

Moseley: New teams will only make pitching worse

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you get the idea.

With muscle-bound behemoths like St. Louis' Mark McGwire, the White Sox's Frank Thomas and Texas' Juan Gonzalez trading moonshots with pure hitters like Ken Griffey Jr. and Barry Bonds, home run records are sure to fall. Expect the Mariners to break their year-old record for homers by a team, and at least one player to shatter Roger Maris' 37-year-old mark of 61 in a season.

Tip No. 1: April 7-9 in Colorado. McGwire, who hit a near-600-foot bomb off the Mariners' Randy Johnson last season, visits Coors Field for the first time in his career. Former Astro Darryl Kile is the Rockies' new ace, but his money pitch is the curveball, and that spells trouble. If Kile hangs a curve against McGwire, we could see history's first 900-foot home run.

And if McGwire doesn't do it in April, someone is sure to over the All-Star break, when Coors Field hosts the Home Run Derby, which this season should be better than the All-Star game itself. The introduction of baseball to the mile-high air of Denver has allowed fans to see more runs than a toilet in a Mexican restaurant.

The catalyst for all that offense isn't just the stadiums, but poor pitching as well. The American League had the worst pitching in the history of the game last year and should break that record this year with the addition of 11 more hurlers who should be either retired or in Triple-A. The reason? Expansion, in the form of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays to the Eastern Division, with the Arizona Diamondbacks of the NL West joining as well.

One positive for the expansion teams — especially Arizona — is the deep pockets of the new owners. By signing marquee free agents, such as Andy Benes and Jay Bell in Arizona and Wilson Alvarez and Roberto Hernandez in Tampa Bay, both teams should be competitive. Which leads us to ...

Tip No. 2: At least one of the ex-

pansion teams will finish out of last place. It'll be a tough task for the Devil Rays, who join the best division in baseball. The Yankees and Orioles are both legitimate World Series contenders, while Toronto and Boston are both among the top 15 teams in the game. Arizona has an excellent chance to avoid the cellar, however, as the Giants should be unable to repeat their miracle finish of last season and will occupy the basement of the West this season.

Another intriguing story in the NL West is that of the Padres' Tony Gwynn and his annual pursuit of the elusive .400 batting average. No one's done it since Ted Williams in 1941, and that should continue this season. While hitting a home run once every three games isn't too much to ask of a guy like McGwire, getting two hits in every single game will be impossible, especially considering the avalanche of media attention a guy like Gwynn would receive should he be close to .400 late in the year.

Tip No. 3: Saturday, May 9, Atlanta. If the Braves' five-man rotation stays true to form, this will be the first showdown of the season between Gwynn, easily the best contact hitter of our generation, and Atlanta ace Greg Maddux, winner of four Cy Young Awards and the greatest right-handed pitcher of the last 30 years. The smartest hitter in the game vs. the smartest pitcher. Expect Gwynn to go 1 for 3 with a walk.

Finally, some predictions. Pedro Martinez and Curt Schilling will win Cy Youngs, Mike Piazza and Mo Vaughn will win MVPs before signing fat contracts in the offseason, and Ben Grieve and Todd Helton will be rookies of the year.

And give me the Yankees over the Braves in the Series.

But don't bet on it.

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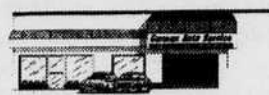
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