



## 2000 Toronto Blue Jays Preview

By Brian J. Kelley, Sports Network Baseball Correspondent

### 1999 Finish (84-78) - Third Place (AL East)

**Southampton, PA (Sports Network)** - After a tumultuous spring training that saw five-time American League Cy Young Award winner Roger Clemens dealt to the New York Yankees and Jim Fregosi replace the beleaguered Tim Johnson as their manager, the Blue Jays jumped out to a 12-4 start last season and looked to make serious noise in the AL East early on in 1999. However, they soon fell back to the middle of the pack as a result of a 3-11 stretch in late May and early June. Toronto lost a season-high seven in a row and nine-of-10 in mid-August and dropped seven straight and nine-of-11 in September to dash any hopes the team had of catching the Boston Red Sox for the AL wild card spot. During the offseason, the Jays traded rising star outfielder Shawn Green to the Los Angeles Dodgers and received malcontent -- but talented -- rightfielder Raul Mondesi in return. Toronto also shipped 1996 AL Cy Young Award winner Pat Hentgen and reliever Paul Spoljaric to the St. Louis Cardinals in exchange for catcher Albert Castillo and hurlers Lance Painter and Matt DeWitt. The Blue Jays seem to think they have enough talent in place to make a run for the AL wild card spot again, but questions abound nonetheless.

### INFIELD

Toronto's infield is anchored at the corners by slugging first baseman Carlos Delgado and Tony Batista, who will move over from shortstop to third base with the departure of veteran Tony Fernandez. Delgado, who turns only 28 in June, led the Jays last season in homers (44) and RBI (134) with a batting average of .272 and slugging percentage of .571 in 152 games. He will most likely be Toronto's cleanup hitter, following Mondesi and preceding Batista in the order. Batista, a defensive improvement over the aging Fernandez at third, came over to the Jays in a trade with Arizona during last season and finished the year with a surprising 26 home runs, 77 RBI and .285 average. Alex Gonzalez, whose 1999 campaign was limited to just 38 games because of injury, returns at shortstop. He was batting .292 with two homers and 12 RBI before he got hurt last season. Homer Bush, one of the players acquired from the Yankees in the Clemens trade, again mans second base for the Blue Jays. Despite his free-swinging ways (82 strikeouts and just 21 walks), Bush still managed to hit a stunning .320 and steal 32 bases last season. He will bat out of the two-spot in the lineup.

### OUTFIELD

The big change in the outfield is Mondesi replacing Green in right field. Mondesi started off the 1999 season on fire for the Dodgers, but he soon started underachieving -- as did most of that team -- and wrote his ticket out of Chavez Ravine by disparaging manager Davey Johnson and team management in a post-game interview in early August. Mondesi, who has a cannon for an arm in right field, will look to rebound from a 1999 campaign in which he hit just .253 with 33 homers and 99 RBI. A career .288 hitter with 163 homers and 518 RBI, the right-handed Mondesi should be able to come back at hitter-friendly SkyDome. However, it will be tough to improve upon the job Green did last season, as he batted .309 with 42 home runs, 123 RBI and 20 stolen bases. Right-hand hitting Shannon Stewart shined in his first full major-league season in 1998, batting .279 with 12 home runs, 55 RBI, 67 walks and a team-high 51 stolen bases out of the lead-off

spot. The leftfielder did not suffer a sophomore slump in 1999, batting .304 with 11 homers, 67 RBI and a team-leading 37 stolen bases. Center field will continue to be patrolled by Jose Cruz Jr., but the Blue Jays have Vernon Wells waiting in the wings. Cruz, who has yet to live up to the billing he had when he was a prospect with the Seattle Mariners, batted .241 with 14 homers and 45 RBI last season. Toronto feels Wells is not quite ready to take over the starting job in center, but he showed flashes of promise in 24 games last season. Wells batted .261 with one homer and eight RBI in 1999.

### **CATCHER**

Darrin Fletcher had a career year in 1999 as the Jays' number-one catcher batted .291 with 18 homers and 80 RBI. The 33-year-old receiver managed to establish personal bests in just about every offensive category, despite spending all of May on the disabled list following a freak batting-practice incident that left him with eye lacerations. He had a rough campaign in the field, permitting 10 passed balls and ranking near the bottom of the AL in throwing out base stealers, but the team loves his lefthanded bat and is willing to overlook his deficiencies behind the plate.

### **DESIGNATED HITTER**

David Segui was retained by the club during the offseason, only to be sent packing in a three-way swap of first baseman with the Texas Rangers and Montreal Expos. Segui was sent to Texas, which shipped Lee Stevens to Montreal. The Expos finished off the transaction by sending the once-heralded Brad Fullmer to Toronto. The lefty-swinging Fullmer, who will be the Jays' designated hitter and spell Delgado at first from time to time, batted .277 with nine homers and 47 RBI in 100 games last season. However, he was hitting just .219 before the All-Star break and was sent down to the minors.

### **BENCH**

There is really not much worth mentioning here. Wells will sit on the pine while waiting for Cruz to falter. Castillo, who hit .263 with four homers and 31 RBI for the Cardinals in 1999, will at least start the 2000 season backing up Fletcher at catcher. Infielders Craig Grebeck, Willis Otanez and Jacob Brumfield -- all righthanded hitters -- will also spend considerable time on the Toronto bench.

### **STARTING PITCHING**

For the second straight year, the Blue Jays go into a season after trading away one of their ace starters. Last year: Clemens. This year: Hentgen. However, Hentgen was just a shell of the pitcher who won '96 Cy Young honors, going 11-12 with a 4.79 ERA in 34 starts last season. Perhaps the move to St. Louis and the National League will do the righthander some good. David Wells, the key figure Toronto got back in the Clemens trade, was the Blue Jays' best pitcher in 1999 and now officially assumes the ace role with the club. The hefty lefthander had a team-high seven complete games and went 17-10 with a 4.79 ERA and one shutout in 34 starts last year. After first ripping the team for trading away Hentgen, Wells has since backed off his comments -- perhaps realizing there is enough negativity in the fold now that Mondesi is around. Righthander Joey Hamilton's shoulder problems led to a disappointing 1999 campaign. Hamilton, who will begin this season on the disabled list after off-season surgery on his right shoulder, went just 7-8 with a 6.52 ERA in 22 games, including 18 starts, last year. He is one of the bigger question marks the Jays have to deal with in 2000. Righthander Kelvim Escobar started 30 of his 33 games last season, going 14-11 with a high 5.69 ERA and one complete game. Meanwhile, righties Chris Carpenter and Roy Halladay showed a bit of promise as rookies last season. Carpenter threw four complete games and one shutout in 24 starts, while compiling a 9-8 mark with a 4.38 ERA in '99. Halladay started 18 of his 36 games and went 8-7 with a 3.92 ERA. According to Fregosi, the fifth spot in the rotation is up for grabs between Nerio Rodriguez, Pete Munro, Frank Castillo and Clayton Andrews until Hamilton returns.

### **BULLPEN**

Billy Koch is the closer for the Blue Jays and Fregosi is very high on him. The skipper was quoted as saying that Koch has "the best stuff he's ever seen." Koch went 0-5 last season, but recorded 31 saves and had a 3.39 ERA. The righthander struck out 57 batters while allowing just 55 hits in 63 2/3 innings in 1999. Righthander Paul Quantrill returned from injuries sustained in an off-season snowmobile accident to go 3-2 with a 3.33 ERA in 41 games (48 2/3 innings) last year. John Frascatore did an admirable job out of the

Jays' pen in 1999, going 7-1 with a 3.41 ERA and one save in 33 games (37 innings). While Toronto lost lefthander Graeme Lloyd to free agency during the offseason, the Blue Jays gained a pair of southpaws in Painter from St. Louis and Pedro Borbon from Los Angeles. Painter went 4-5 with a 4.83 ERA and one save in 56 games, including four starts, for the Cardinals last season. Borbon appeared in 70 games as a reliever for the Dodgers in 1999, compiling a 4-3 record with a 4.09 ERA.

### **QUESTIONS**

How bad will the Jays miss Green and Hentgen? Will Mondesi be productive and happy, or disappointing and a troublemaker? Is Hamilton ever going to get healthy enough to regain the form of the pitcher he once was with San Diego? Will Cruz ever fulfill his potential? If not, how long before Vernon Wells becomes the starting centerfielder?

### **OUTLOOK**

The Blue Jays had New York and Boston in their way last year and the 2000 campaign doesn't appear to be any different. While the club has some solid young arms in the rotation and a quality closer in Koch, the loss of Green really hurts the lineup and the organization failed to do enough in the offseason to offset Boston's moves. Look for a third-place finish.

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