

Wallace wins Spartanburg

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Mike Wallace won the Spartanburg County Youth Sports tournament at Oak Ridge Country Club.

Wallace topped the field with a round of 74, followed by Wanda Green at 78. Floyd

Hendix was third, six shots off the pace.

Chester-Spartanburg won the IGA match March 11 at Sandy Creek Golf Club in Commerce, Ga.

The 18-player Chester-Spartanburg team finished

at 58, four shots ahead of Asheville-Shelby. The 11-player group from Augusta, Ga., Swainsboro and Par Busters Charlotte, finished fifth with 64.

NL should be open in 2006

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finished just a game behind Houston for the wild card in 2005.

Leadoff man Jimmy Rollins carries a 36-game hitting streak into the season from last year. The rest of the lineup is loaded with Chase Utley, Bobby Abreu, Pat Burrell and Howard - the pick here to lead the league in homers and possibly win the MVP.

New center fielder Aaron Rowand is an underrated defensive whiz who knows how to win.

The pitching staff is suspect - and the bandbox of a home ballpark doesn't help. Tom Gordon, 38, replaces Wagner for his first stint as a full-time closer since 2001.

The rotation is desperately missing a true No. 1 starter, but Eret Myers could become that guy. One of these years he's going to have a breakout season.

New York Mets

The Mets have a lot of eggs in one basket: Pedro Martinez's special Nike shoe. Slowed by a nagging toe injury, the three-time Cy Young Award winner was scheduled to make his first start of spring training this weekend.

If the Mets are going to reach the playoffs, which they expect to do, Martinez must be healthy. That's no sure thing, and the rest of the rotation could be spotty.

Tom Glavine turns 40 and will probably get the opening day assignment. Aaron Hellman, an effective reliever last year, gets another chance to start.

Wagner is a big boost for the rebuilt bullpen. Delgado and new catcher Paul Lo Duca make a balanced offense very dangerous - especially if speedy Jose Reyes gets on base more and Carlos Beltran bounces back from his disappointing New York debut.

This team should certainly contend for a trip to the postseason.

Washington Nationals

A reluctant Alfonso Soriano finally agreed to move from second base to left field this spring after he was acquired from Texas in December. He might be an adventure out there, and he could still get traded again.

Livan Hernandez and young closer Chad Cordero lead a pitching staff that finished fourth in the league with a 3.87 ERA last year. The Nationals hope Soriano will improve the dismal offense. Promising third baseman Ryan Zimmerman is a Rookie of the Year candidate.

The team still doesn't have a new owner.

Florida Marlins

After their second payroll purge in eight years, the young Marlins might be the worst team in baseball.

Josh Beckett, A.J. Burnett, Delgado, Lo Duca, Luis Castillo, Juan Pierre, Todd Jones, Alex Gonzalez, Mike Lowell, Juan Encarnacion, Guillermo Mota and manager Jack McKeon are all gone.

Frustrated by a failure to secure a new ballpark, the Marlins also began looking to move with the permission of Major League Baseball.

Cy Young runner-up Dontrelle Willis and star slugger Miguel Cabrera have some long days ahead of them.

Florida did acquire a boatload of talented prospects in return for all those veterans, so there's hope for the distant future. Rookie manager Joe Girardi is a bright guy, too.

CENTRAL St. Louis Cardinals

The Cardinals lost dependable pitcher Matt Morris, outfielder Reggie Sanders and second baseman Mark Grudzielanek during a quiet offseason, but they should still have enough to win this division.

Carpenter and Mark Mulder pace a solid rotation, and Braden Looper was a wise signing as a setup man. Rolen is back from a shoulder injury that forced him to miss most of last season.

Playing in its new park, St. Louis is seeking its third straight 100-win season.

Houston Astros

The gritty Bagwell tried to play through debilitating pain during spring training, but acknowledged Saturday he was not healthy enough to play on opening day. Doctors will try to determine if surgery would help his shoulder.

With Bagwell out for at least the start of the season, Lance Berkman will move from the outfield to first base. That should provide more playing time in the outfield for Jason Lane, Willy Taveras and Chris Burke - and Houston might be better off.

All-Star closer Brad Lidge must bounce back from an up-and-down postseason.

Milwaukee Brewers

The young Brewers are a popular pick to challenge for a playoff spot after they went 81-81 last year, ending a string of 12 straight losing seasons.

To contend, they need No. 1 starter Ben Sheets to stay healthy - and he might begin the season on the disabled list. Can Doug Davis, Chris Capuano and closer Derrick Turnbow be as effective on the mound as they were in 2005?

The Brewers added third baseman Corey

Koskie and traded first baseman Lyle Overbay to make room for rookie slugger Prince Fielder, the son of former big league star Cecil Fielder.

Carlos Lee is eligible for free agency after the season and could become trade bait if Milwaukee falls out of contention early.

The Brewers might not be ready yet, but steady manager Ned Yost and GM Doug Melvin definitely have this franchise headed in the right direction.

Chicago Cubs

The question is always the same with the Cubs: Will ace pitchers Kerry Wood and Mark Prior be healthy?

Not necessarily. Wood is coming off shoulder surgery and a minor knee operation and is expected to miss the first few weeks of the season. Prior could be out, too, after straining his right shoulder.

As for the rest of the staff, Carlos Zambrano is a legitimate ace and Greg Maddux can still win. Plus, the bullpen got better with the additions of Bob Howry and Scott Eyre.

Derrek Lee was probably the best player in the league last year, and third baseman Aramis Ramirez is also dangerous at the plate. New outfielders Jacque Jones and Juan Pierre should help the offense.

Manager Dusty Baker and GM Jim Hendry are in the final years of their contracts. This team could finish anywhere from first place to fourth.

Pittsburgh Pirates

New manager Jim Tracy is stressing fundamentals and defense with the young Pirates, who are counting on an extremely inexperienced rotation led by talented lefties Zach Duke (8-2, 1.81 ERA), Oliver Perez and Paul Maholm.

Jason Bay, the 2004 NL Rookie of the Year, is coming off another big season, but the rest of the offense looks pretty pedestrian. Second baseman Jose Castillo and shortstop Jack Wilson can pick-it up the middle. They form a fine double-play tandem.

Mike Gonzalez gets his first shot to be a closer.

Cincinnati Reds

The World Baseball Classic was probably the best chance for Ken Griffey Jr. to win this year. The lineup is still dangerous with Griffey, slugger Adam Dunn (40 HRs) and All-Star shortstop Felipe Lopez, coming off a breakout season. Young third baseman Edwin Encarnacion is having a big spring and looks like the real deal, too.

The pitching staff, however, is a mess. A recent trade to acquire right-hander Bronson Arroyo from Boston might help, but giving up Willy Mo Pena hurts an offense that led the league in runs last year.

When the hitters do build a lead, there's no established closer to nail it down.

The Reds have had five consecutive losing seasons, their longest such streak since 1945-55. No wonder they have a new owner (Bob Castellini) and general manager (Wayne Krivsky).

WEST

San Francisco Giants

While everyone is watching Bonds, the key to San Francisco's season could be the health of ace Jason Schmidt (12-7, 4.40 ERA) and closer Armando Benitez (left knee).

Morris should be a nice complement at the front end of the rotation. The back end is a concern.

The lineup offers some help for Bonds from Moises Alou, Randy Winn, Pedro Feliz and first baseman Lance Niekro.

This division still appears pretty soft. The aging Giants can win it if Bonds' knee is able to withstand the rigors of playing left field and running the bases after all the walks he's sure to receive.

When Bonds plays, San Francisco scores plenty of runs. When he doesn't, the offense is anemic.

Los Angeles Dodgers

A slew of former Red Sox will be wearing Dodger blue, including Garciparras, Little and third baseman Bill Mueller.

This team should be much better than last year's 71-91 version. Furcal provides a spark at the top of the lineup. The rotation is capable, though far from special.

One of three starters needs to step up and have a big season: Derek Lowe, Brad Penny or Odalis Perez. Jae Seo, acquired in a trade with the Mets, could be a steal.

The lineup lacks power outside of Jeff Kent and J.D. Drew - if he is healthy. All-Star shortstop Cesar Izturis is recovering quickly from elbow surgery, but the Dodgers haven't said how they might reshape their infield when he returns.

Arizona Diamondbacks

Loaded with talented prospects, the Diamondbacks are probably at least a few years away from seriously contending for a pennant under new GM Josh Byrnes.

They traded slugger Troy Glaus and pitcher Javier Vazquez in the offseason. Gold Glove second baseman Orlando Hudson was a nice addition - his offense might improve, too.

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