

Red Sox 2008 Preview

Can Mike Lowell continue to be a stalwart in the middle of the lineup?

Even as he hits his mid-30s, durability doesn't appear to be an issue. Lowell's played at least 150 games a season four years running, and at least 140 in seven of



his eight full seasons. And the season he only played 130 was arguably his only year finer than 2007 — 2003, when he had his career-high 32 homers.

Beyond his reputation in the clubhouse as a unifying veteran force, able to bridge any gap between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking players, Lowell's made the most of his time at Fenway. He hit two-thirds of his 21 homers at home a year ago, batting at absurd .373 there, but the numbers aren't as skewed as one might think.

Despite Fenway's rep as the most doubles-happy park in the majors, Lowell has actually hit more of his in 2006-07 on the road (45 vs. 39).

That bodes well for his production in this new contract, especially with Terry Francona going out of his way to note that his third baseman came to camp "a step quicker" than the year before. Another .320 season might be a little much, but at least in 2008, probably not an absurd thought.

Starting Nine

by Jon Couture

With a roster that returns virtually intact as the one that celebrated in the thin air of Colorado five months ago, the Sox face fewer questions than most teams in baseball. Still, here are nine — with answers — that will go a long way to deciding the Sox' season.

What about Lugo? What's to be expected there?

Speed is great. Speed's even greater if you post better than a .294 on-base percentage, 22nd of the 25 shortstop to qualify for the batting title.

Lugo will never be mistaken for an offensive shortstop, but he has some things going for him. Playing in Fenway means he can keep hitting 35 doubles a season — 22 of 36 a year ago came at home. He's maintained his speed as he hits his 30s, and he's got good discretion when it comes to stealing bases. He's got a 75 percent success rate for his career,

and nearly 80 percent since the start of 2006.

At his worst, he's an automatic out, and a guy with below-average range defensively. At his best, he's got deceptive pop and is more than adequate turning the double play.

His contract's definitely a big market special, but he can certainly do a little more this season to fill it out.



Jason Varitek

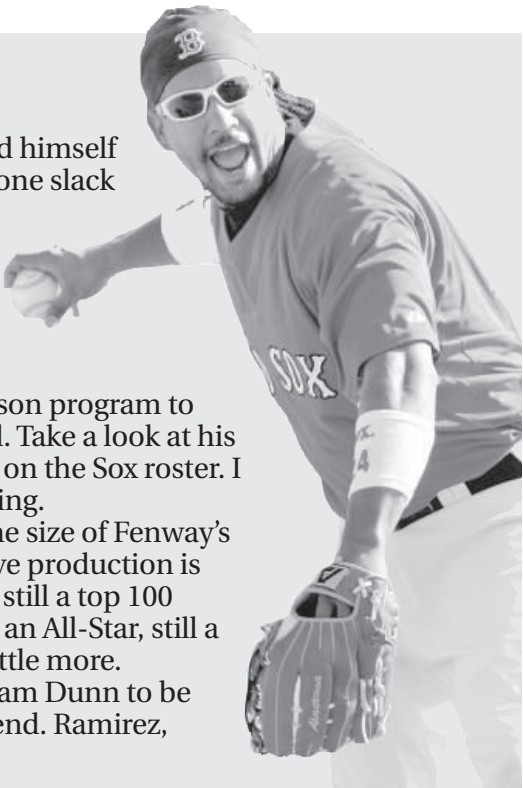
Manny Ramirez. What's to make of what he has left?

Understand that in saying he rededicated himself this offseason, that doesn't mean he had gone slack as he grows older. One of the best parts of the oversaturation of the Red Sox is the growing understanding of just how hard Ramirez has worked, and just how much of what he's been able to do goes beyond his incredible God-given talents.

To hear him talk, he's changed his offseason program to adapt to what he feels he needs to succeed. Take a look at his numbers ... he's the only Hall of Fame lock on the Sox roster. I have plenty of faith he knows what he's doing.

Of course, as the years go on, not even the size of Fenway's left field will hide how much of his offensive production is equalized by losses in the outfield. He was still a top 100 producer of extra-base hits a year ago, still an All-Star, still a 35-homer threat, but there needs to be a little more.

With the potential for Pat Burrell and Adam Dunn to be available this offseason, this could be the end. Ramirez, though, certainly will go out swinging.



How much does dropping Doug Mirabelli help the catching situation?

Bear in mind that Theo Epstein, a GM who holds almost everything exceedingly close to the vest, told reporters "we have some promising catching prospects, (but) we don't have the catcher of the future yet in the organization" this spring.

Still, dropping the can't-hit Mirabelli was an overdue move, especially considering every prospect in the system's upper levels has both caught the knuckleball and shown they could presumably hit .200 in semi-regular duty. Kevin Cash's ascension hardly feels like a long-term move, not with Dusty Brown's offense improving by the day in Pawtucket. Both have exceedingly strong arms, so if either becomes even semi-competent with the bat, Jason Varitek's longevity gets a needed boost.

There's still a belief that George Kottaras could be the answer, though people that watch him regularly say he's definitely not ready for prime time. But anything that clears out the dead weight behind Varitek benefits them all, because it opens up needed opportunities.



How about the pitchers? Who's rising to the occasion?

This is Jon Lester's year to establish himself. Clay Buchholz has the better pedigree and appears to have the higher ceiling, but he's still going to have the reins on this year. Lester, though, is penciled in to be a part of this rotation all year long.

His pitch efficiency is famously terrible, but he is only going to be 24 years old this year. He's surrounded by quality pitchers young and old, and John Farrell's shown the ability to get the most out



Jon Lester

of what he's given. With what Lester's been through, this year is what he's more.

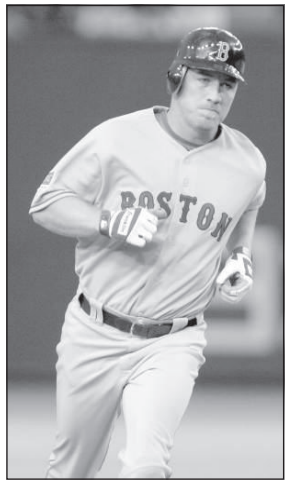
always wanted: a chance to simply compete for whatever he can handle.

In his first two abbreviated campaigns, he's produced league-average numbers and a deceptively pretty won-loss record of 11-2. If he only matches the sort of season Tim Wakefield's produced annually, that would be plenty.

There's a definite chance, though, that he can do a lot

Who's most primed for a breakout among the hitters?

Easy ... J.D. Drew, and it's not close. While there's certainly plenty of room for improvement with Julio Lugo, the stories of



his battling to regain strength after dealing with a stomach parasite don't change the fact that Drew's a talent who's shown flashes of putting it together.

During the meat of Boston's interleague schedule, Drew was as potent an offensive threat as David Ortiz. His power numbers were as high, he hit for as solid an average, and there's

certainly no question about whether he can find a way on base. Yeah, that's the story of his career — flashes of brilliance, topped with months and months of indifference. But as was said when he got here, he doesn't need to be Ortiz or Manny Ramirez. He needs to support them as Mike Lowell has, and a 40-double, 20-homer season is certainly within his reach.

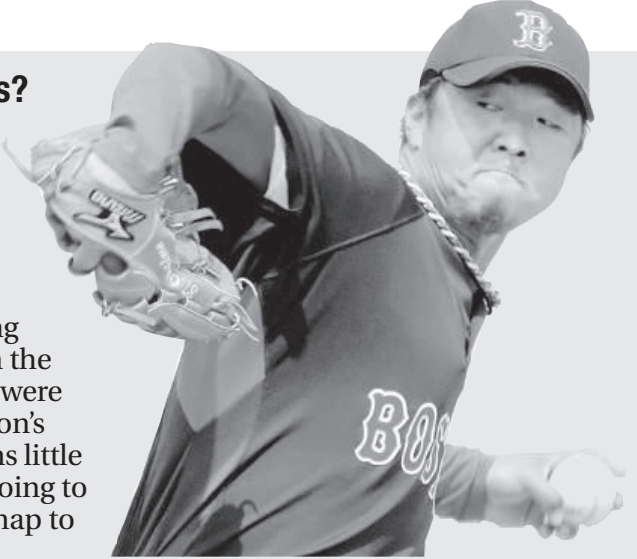
If he gets there, the offense becomes significantly more potent.

It's Year Two for Hideki Okajima ... can he maintain his success?

Given the people who watched in Japan were shocked at how well he performed here, it certainly doesn't seem likely. The emergence of Manny Delcarmen, though, should lessen the burden on an arm that ran out of gas at season's end.

Any time the book gets thicker on a pitcher's tendencies and stuff, he's going to have to adapt. Okajima's done that, working on a two-seam fastball that should greatly complement the curveball he loves and that hitters still seemed unable to figure out the second and third time around.

The bullpen was such a huge part of Boston's success a year ago, it's hard to imagine them getting better as a group, especially not a shocking All-Star like the "hero in the dark." But his numbers were so good before the season's final month, there seems little chance that the lefty's going to fall completely off the map to



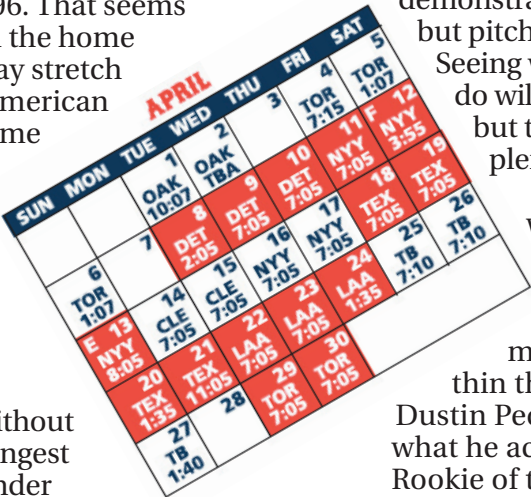
What figures to be April's fact-light, panic-driven story?

That it's the trip to Japan's fault that the Red Sox are under .500 entering May.

Boston's been a franchise accustomed to hot starts of late — 16-8 last year, 15-6 in 2004, and no sub-.500 opening months since 1996. That seems hugely unlikely this year, given the home opener on April 8 starts a 20-day stretch encompassing almost all the American League's teeth. Three-game home series with Detroit and the Yankees before two-game stops in Cleveland and the Bronx. After a bit of a respite via four games against Texas, three hosting the retooled Angels, then three in Tampa against the invigorated Rays.

It's Boston's longest stretch without a day off this season, and the longest allowed originally scheduled under the league's Basic Agreement.

Technically, that does have something to do with the Japan trip and all the off days surrounding it, but I'm guessing that factoid won't be what's driving the phone lines.



Can they repeat?

Too easy. Of course they can, but there's no denying the league got better around them. Detroit joins the usual suspects, with offense demonstrably better than Boston's, but pitching demonstrably worse. Seeing what Los Angeles can do will be interesting as well, but their offense still needs plenty of work.

Let's take this another way. To repeat, they're going to need some luck and/or additions on the mound, because they're thin there and they know it. Dustin Pedroia has to maintain what he accomplished in winning Rookie of the Year, and Jason Varitek has to stay healthy, even if his offense continues to decline.

More than anything not mentioned elsewhere in the Starting Nine, though, their season hopes



are pinned to on David Ortiz. He is now this team's offensive star, and to be real honest, the track record for men of his stature is exactly one of slow decline. It's hard to imagine

his production being any better than it is right now, and when it starts to go, the Red Sox will have plenty to concern themselves with replacing it.