Without Bonds, Giants different, but not better

by Chris Jenkins

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. - He's seen worse, written worse, filled out daily lineup cards that should've been scribbled with the eraser end of his pencil. He was, after all, the manager of the San Diego Padres through some of their darkest days.

Of course, Bruce Bochy will not draw that sort of comparison, will not decry the San Francisco lineup that's been left him for the spring and summer of 2008. Life without Barry Bonds will be weird enough - better in many ways, one of those ways definitely not being the batting order.

"Different team? Oh, yeah," said Bochy. "Different brand of ball. Different culture."

For several years now, Bonds has been Gulliver surrounded by a Lilliputian lineup, and his mere presence in the black and orange made no victory unattainable if the game was kept within one of his swings. Without him, as they often were, the Giants were anything but giants, especially as the rest of the division improved around them.

The NL West is still a five-team assemblage, but by all logic and consensus, a four-team race to the finish is anticipated. San Francisco is not expected to be one of the four.

"We know it," said Bochy. "We know there's a lot of naysayers out there. We're gonna have to earn whatever we get as far as respect."

Whatever was happening away from the ballpark, Bonds always commanded the utmost respect at the plate, but he and the Giants were rendered nonfactors in 2007. San Francisco was the only team in the division with a losing record at 71-91, tied with Florida for the worst mark in the NL.

Brutally speaking, the Giants may be headed for an even worse record in 2008, perhaps only the second 100-loss season for a franchise dating to 1883.

Granted, the Giants have a rotation that would be the envy of many clubs, especially if Barry Zito can go back to being the pitcher the Giants deemed worthy of a $126 million contract. Tim Lincecum, Matt Cain, Noah Lowry and Kevin Correia should keep the Giants competitive - for innings at a time.

But, oh, the offense. If everybody were healthy, the Giants would go with a lineup including 41-year-old Omar Vizquel, 36-year-old Ray Durham, 35-year-old Dave Roberts, 36-year-old Rich Aurilia and cleanup hitter Bengie Molina.

Just since the start of camp, Vizquel has been set down for 4-6 weeks with a torn meniscus, Durham has been temporarily unable to throw because of a shoulder problem, Molina has been sidelined by a quadriceps problem and Aurilia has been slowed (further) by hamstring trouble.

"Omar's knee was a really big blow for us, because we're trying to get more geared to pitching and defense," said Bochy. "He's a big part of our defense (at shortstop), the stabilizer."

Effectively taking Bonds' place, at least in the salary structure, is center fielder Aaron Rowand. Without much to offer in the way of an imminent playoff shot, the Giants wooed Rowand with a five-year, $60 million contract. Solid, gritty player that he is, Rowand is not the type to carry a team on his shoulders.

Then again, the Giants long ago wearied of being lugged around by one outfielder. As much as the focus was on Bonds from the time he stepped onto the field, he was even more oppressive in the smaller confines behind closed doors.

"Barry was a dominant personality in the clubhouse, and since he's not here, we've already seen changes," said Bochy. "Barry was the guy here, the superstar, and you'll see these guys show more of themselves. This is a team that will establish a new identity. You'll see a lot of the players' personalities come out now."

Last year, Zito told the San Francisco Chronicle, some Giants were not "comfortable in their own skin" around Bonds. As much as he was lumped with Bonds in the media as "Barry & Barry," Zito counted himself among the discomfitted.

"I'm excited," Zito said of 2008, "because people will be allowed to be who they want to be, not who they think they have to be because there is such a heavy presence in the clubhouse, such a superstar player."

Here's the truly goofy part. Residence in the NL West is one of the major reasons the Giants - too old, too young, too whatever - are so easily dismissed as contenders. At the same time, however, the division is perhaps San Francisco's greatest (only?) source of encouragement.

A year ago, remember, the Giants actually were being picked by some to finish higher than the Arizona Diamondbacks and Colorado Rockies. The Diamondbacks won the division, the Rockies the pennant.

Actually, the Giants went 10-8 against Colorado last year, 8-10 against Arizona. Ten of their games with the Diamondbacks were decided by one run, including seven straight, with the Giants losing six of the latter.

"If you look at our lineup ... well, Arizona didn't win last year because it had the best lineup," said Aurilia. "They just always seemed to get the big hits when they needed them. How many games did they have where they won 2-1 and had, like, three hits? They sure did it against us. You do the little things right - get a guy on, bunt him over, get a sac fly - you can win a lot of ballgames.

"Can that be us this year? Why not? Really, why not? Stranger things have happened."

Bochy smiled.

"All I know," said Bochy, "is that it's gonna be different."

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