So here we are. On the cusp of the 2012 season and the Indians are getting ready to play ball. But so is everyone else. The everyone else we should care about are the teams that the Indians share a division within the AL Central. Let's take a trip around the division and visit each team, because to win a division in Major League Baseball, you need to win within it. The only two teams to have the best record within their division and not win it were Tampa Bay and St. Louis, both who ended up winning the Wild Card spots for their respective leagues.

It's important and it's important to know your opponent. For your viewing pleasure, let's take a trip around the AL Central and a preview of the other four teams that will contest the Indians this season.

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Detroit Tigers

Last Year: 95-67 (Won AL Central – Lost ALCS)

Run Differential: +76

Average Runs/Game: 4.86 (Batting), 4.39 (Pitching)

Offseason Capsule

Additions: 1B Prince Fielder, OF Eric Patterson, RHP Collin Balester, RHP Octavio Dotel

Departures: IF Carlos Guillen, IF Wilson Betemit, OF Magglio Ordonez, RHP Brad Penny, RHP Ryan Perry. RHP Joel Zumaya

Storyline: Prince of the Park

The Tigers, stricken with an early blow of losing Victor Martinez for the season, made the surprise of the offseason when they inked free agent Prince Fielder to a nine-year contract. With Martinez tearing his ACL, the Tigers were in a need to fill a pretty significant void in their lineup. They did so by getting the best available bat on the market.

But the question now is: Did they hurt themselves in the long term for a short term fix? Is it even a fix because now it sets up a defensive alignment in the infield that is less than stellar defensively… Time will tell for that, but make no mistake that the Tigers will hit. They don't have Martinez this season, so while Prince is a mega-upgrade to an already stout offense, they aren't as terrifying as they would be if they had Vic.

On Repeat: Justin Verlander, RHP

Not only did Justin Verlander win the American League Cy Young Award last season, he took home the American League Most Valuable Player award as well. The Cy Young? No-doubt deserved. The MVP was hotly debated, but it's hard to argue with a .828 win percentage, a 2.40 ERA, 250 strikeouts, and 34 games started, all of which led the league. With no significant

competition, Verlander became the first pitcher in 20 years to win the AL MVP award.

But can Verlander do it again? It seems highly unlikely that Verlander can put himself in position to win 24 games, not to mention if he does, see his team pull through and notch it. He'll certainly put up his numbers and be one of the best pitchers in the American League, but his 2011 was a special season and it's unlikely he repeats that performance.

Honorable Mention: I don't count on Alex Avila hitting .295 (.389 OBP) with 19 home runs and 82 RBI again.

Add/Drop

I'm confused at the Ryan Perry/Collin Balester swap to be honest. They are the same age and Perry has shown success at the major league level at an even younger age. Seems like the Tigers are giving up on Perry a little early after he struggled in 2011, where they could have had something there with the hard-throwing right-hander. They did add Octavio Dotel to strengthen their pen, but the Tigers did little to address their rotation, which had a hole with Brad Penny in it.

Concern

It has to be their defense. Just look at that infield. Miguel Cabrera fields grounders with his face at third. Prince Fielder is a capable first baseman, but not with a three-ring circus of fielders around him. Ryan Raburn has played second, but there's a reason he's been playing the majority of his time in the outfield. And then of course, the crown-gem of them all at shortstop, Jhonny Peralta. I'll say no more. If your starting number two pitcher is Doug Fister, the fact that you have Justin Verlander may not matter as Fister is a contact pitcher who is unlikely to repeat a 2.83 ERA with an infield defense made up of those characters.

Outlook

This is a talented team, make no mistake about any of the things I've said that discredit them. They're going to win some games. But with high expectations, as we've learned in Cleveland, often come much disappointment. If Tiger fans start gasping at the mistakes the team makes that end up costing them precious games in the standings, don't be surprised. However don't also be shocked if they win a 15-12 slugfest or blow a team out 18-3 once or twice this season. This team will contend, but I'm not so sure it will be smooth sailing.

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Chicago White Sox

Last Year: 79-83 (3rd AL Central – 16 GB)

Run Differential: -52

Average Runs/Game: 4.04 (Batting), 4.36 (Pitching)

Offseason Capsule

Additions: IF Dan Johnson, OF Kosuke Fukudome, OF Delwyn Young

Departures: IF Omar Vizquel, OF Carlos Quentin, OF Juan Pierre, LHP Mark Buehrle, RHP Sergio Santos, RHP Jason Frasor, RHP Tony Pena

Storyline: South Side to South Beach

The AL Central last year had the most intriguing group of managers. You had the always quotable Ozzie Guillen, the grumbling Jim Leyland, the up-beat Manny Acta, and the ever-present jolly-looking Ron Gardenhire. Well, Ozzie Guillen has left Chicago and is basking in the Miami sun now. It signified a complete change in the organization as they also let a significant portion of what made up their team the past few years go.

In response to Guillen's departure, the White Sox looked to be on the verge of possibly taking Sandy Alomar Jr. away from their rival, until they turned in a completely different direction and hired Robin Ventura. The thing with Ventura is he lacks experience, having no pervious managerial experience under his belt, he signed on with the White Sox last summer as special advisor. Former major leaguers who sign on in that capacity, usually are being groomed and are around to learn for an eventual rise to coaching, but Ventura's time came earlier than anyone expected. Now we'll see if he has what it takes as he starts a new era in Chicago.

On Repeat: Adam Dunn, DH

Everyone wants to know. What had happened?! I mean, we had a player who was so consistent on a year to year basis. Every year you could count on the guy hitting 40 home runs, walking 100 times, and of course striking out a bunch. But he produced and he was good. From

Cincinnati to Washington, he did his job. Then he signed with the White Sox at 31 and Adam Dunn, meet wall, you've hit it.

A lot of people are touting Dunn as the AL Comeback Player of the Year. Truth be told, I'm not really sure what you are going to get. He could bounce back and be that player he was. Or he could continue on this path of, horrifying at-bats and disappointing swings. It's not the strikeouts; he has struck out more in a year before and had better seasons. It just seems to be regression. That's why I don't think he'll completely rebound, but he won't completely whiff around. I think he's going to find that middle ground and he'll simply be a less-productive version of what we've come to know. There was nothing last season to end the year that made you think he was going to turn it around this year (he actually hit one home run, one, in August and September) but this spring may say otherwise. He has led his team in home runs and RBI (and walks, but not strikeouts), but spring numbers are spring numbers and he hit three jacks with 27 strikeouts last spring. So take it all for what it is worth.

Add/Drop

They didn't add anyone. No really, this team did not make a real significant move in terms of additions to their roster and they list a significant portion of it, including their manager, go. The one constant for them the past few years, Mark Buehrle? He followed Ozzie Guillen to Miami. Two-thirds of their outfield, one who led off and another who did nothing but hit 20-plus home runs for the past four years are both gone.

Concern

This rotation the White Sox have will either be one of the best in the American League or completely break down. Jake Peavy has the ability to be an ace, but we haven't seen it since he arrived in Chicago. John Danks and Gavin Floyd have moved on from budding youngsters ready to break out to rotation veterans who have just plateaued at a mid-range level. Then you have 2011 breakout player Philip Humber and crazy-stuff reliever turned starter Chris Sale. After four stops, things finally clicked for Humber last year as he was the best pitcher on the White Sox staff, but we'll see if he can repeat. Sale meanwhile is a 22-year old who was electric in the bullpen last year and is undergoing a transformation many young pitchers now seem to do.

They have talent at all five spots and the potential for that rotation to carry them is there. But on the other hand, it is one big giant question mark.

Outlook

I know one thing. Chicago is going to be significantly less fun to pay attention to now that Ozzie Guillen isn't in the other dugout. You have to admit that the guy is crazy and when he's not on your team, there's endless entertainment in watching him curse out his players or call one of our players a "fat kid" at first base. Unless Robin Ventura is running out to fight Nolan Ryan, I'm not sure he'll bring the same entertainment factor to his version of the White Sox, which now look significantly different even if Ozzie is in the dugout or not. They could finish last, or their pitching could come together and take them in a better direction. But it clearly looks like a re-loading/re-grouping phase on the South Side.

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Kansas City Royals

Last Year: 71-91 (4th AL Central – 24 GB)

Run Differential: -32

Average Runs/Game: 4.51 (Batting), 4.70 (Pitching)

Offseason Capsule

Additions: IF Kevin Kouzmanoff, RHP Jonathan Broxton, LHP Jose Mijares, LHP Jonathan Sanchez

Departures: C Jason Kendall, OF Melky Cabrera, LHP Jeff Francis

Storyline: Lean, Mean, and Young, Bashing Machine

It’s all starting to come together. After years of high first round picks, losing seasons, and prospect-adding trades, the Kansas City Royals are starting to come together. Although some of their pitching pick-ups have been busts (more on that in a second), their offense is starting to gel. It started with the long-awaited breakout of Alex Gordon after he moved to the outfield and continued when the club called up Mike Moustakas and Eric Hosmer to man the corner infield spots. Of the two, Hosmer made the biggest impact, hitting 19 home runs in almost a full-season of work and chances are he’ll only improve. Let’s not forget established and feared Billy Butler anchoring the middle of the lineup.

Now they have young and promising Lorenzo Cain taking over in center for Melky Cabrera, Alcides Escobar, a slick fielding shortstop, and until he got hurt, young catcher Salvador Perez inked to a long-term extension. Things are coming together for this Royals bunch, a top-ten offense in the MLB last year. While they still have areas to improve upon, they may make another significant move in the AL Central.

On Repeat: Alex Gordon, OF

Finally. It seemed like yesterday Alex Gordon arrived in Kansas City and was ready to take the world by storm. He was a modern day Bryce Harper, highly anticipated prospect who will turn a franchise around. He wasn't quite on the level of hype that Harper is on. But if you remember (and it really does seem like yesterday), Gordon was supposed to be the Royals next George Brett. Well, Gordon had a mediocre first year in the bigs, at 23, he hit 15 home runs and knocked in 60 runs. That's decent production for a player, but not for the second coming of something special.

Years following, he would put up virtually the same numbers, only getting better in his discipline (cutting down on his strikeouts, increasing walks). Then 2009 and 2010 hit and he was in-flux. The Royals went through moving him down and up and changing positions and just not being really sure what they were getting. Then Gordon was a new person in 2011, playing the outfield and overall, becoming the player the Royals thought he could be. The talented started to show and let me just say that it is for real. He's also only going to get better with young hitters like Mike Moustakas and Eric Hosmer around him. As this lineup buds into something dangerous, Gordon is going to get more respect and garner more fear because he will eventually be their best hitter. Right now it's Billy Butler, but by the end of 2012, it very well may be Gordon.

Add/Drop

The big move that this team made was trading Melky Cabrera to San Francisco and getting Jonathan Sanchez in return. When Bruce Chen is your most reliable starter, something needed to be done and the move to get Sanchez was a great one. The great thing about Sanchez is that he has some good stuff and has had actual major league success. I'm not sure he's the guy you want headlining your rotation, but for now, he's a major upgrade over everyone else the Royals trotted out last year. They have a solid bullpen, a fantastic lineup, but the one thing this team needs is a rotation. Sanchez is a step in the right direction to getting that.

Concern

Whiel Sanchez is a step, they still have a lot more rungs to climb. Only Baltimore's starter ERA was worse in Major League Baseball last season. They'll get aided with Sanchez's addition and

Bruce Chen is capable, but not someone you want to rely on heavily. Aaron Crow has ended up back in the bullpen, so they'll likely go with some sort of round-out combination of Luke Hochevar, Danny Duffy (20 starts, 5.64 ERA career), and Felipe Paulino (eeek). This is a big concern for the Royals because if they had any sort of pitching staff, they'd be contenders for the AL Central this season with their potent offense. Broxton may or may not fill in for the now injured Joakim Soria (season-ending elbow injury suffered against Indians during the spring), but Soria's presence certainly made the bullpen deep.

Outlook

They'll be a team of ups and downs with their explosive offense and questionable pitching. They may win a lot of games by out-slugging the opposition but they could also end up losing them. I could see the Royals losing a few games in which they lead big early on, but squander away the lead because their starter can't throw strikes and middle relievers are called upon too early. I'd be scared of this Royals team making a significant move in the American League this year because they can hit with the best of them and if a team is not on their game pitching on a particular night, it could be a bloodbath at the hands of these young studs. But what will keep them from taking a bigger step is the lack of pitching as we've dissected already. I think they finish third in the division though and that is saying something from where they were just a few seasons ago.

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