

Riverfront *Report*

CINCINNATI REDS BASEBALL · BEAT COVERAGE

RIVERFRONT REPORT

OPENING DAY PREVIEW · VOL. 1

REDS BEAT

No More Almosts

For five years running, Cincinnati has fielded the most talented roster in baseball and come home every October with nothing to show for it. Sparky Anderson's Big Red Machine opens 1975 out of patience for a storyline it has already heard too many times — and, for the first time, without its usual excuse.

BY DAVE KUHLMANN

CINCINNATI — April 7

There is a version of this preview the Reds have made Cincinnati read every spring since 1970, and by now the city can recite it from memory: a lineup with no soft spot from one through eight, a farm system still sending down help, and a front office confident enough to say the words "World Series" out loud in March without anyone in the room laughing. What's supposed to be different this time is the part that comes after — the part where it actually happens.

Sparky Anderson doesn't pretend otherwise. Four years into a run that's produced two pennants and zero rings, the Reds' manager enters his sixth season with a roster that, on paper, has had no business losing anything since Richard Nixon's first term. What it's had instead is a run of finishes that read like a highlight reel with the ending cut off — and by Riverfront Stadium's reckoning, the excuses have officially run out.

A résumé with no ring on it

Start with the inconvenient timeline. Cincinnati lost the 1970 World Series to Baltimore in five games, lost the 1972 World Series to Oakland in seven, and got bounced from the 1973 playoffs entirely by a Mets team that won eleven fewer regular-season games. Then came 1974 — 98 wins, the second-best record in all of baseball, and a season spent entirely on the outside of the postseason looking in, because the Dodgers happened to win 102. Somewhere in the last half-decade, the Big Red Machine stopped being a nickname for a team that was about to win everything and started being a nickname for a team that was extremely good at not winning the one thing that counted. Nobody in this clubhouse needs that pattern explained to them twice.

BY THE NUMBERS

Opening Day

April 7, 1975 · Riverfront Stadium

1974 finish	98–64, 2nd NL West (missed playoffs)
Manager	Sparky Anderson, 6th season
Postseason résumé since 1970	2 pennants, 0 titles
Projected rotation anchor	Don Gullett, LHP
Closer	Rawly Eastwick, RHP

AFFILIATE	LEVEL	LEAGUE
Indianapolis Indians	Triple-A	American Association
Trois-Rivières Aigles	Double-A	Eastern League
Tampa Tarpons	Single-A	Florida State League
Eugene Emeralds	Short-Season	Northwest League
Billings Mustangs	Rookie	Pioneer League

Full 25-man lineup, rotation and bullpen breakdown live in the Command Center hub — this sidebar is the season-opening snapshot.

Third base isn't a question anymore

For most of this decade, the one soft spot in an otherwise unfair lineup has been the six inches of dirt between second and shortstop's neighbor. Not this year. Pete Rose — who has spent parts of six different seasons bouncing wherever Sparky needed a glove, left field included — opens 1975 as the everyday third baseman, full stop, with no midseason experiment or least-bad-platoon press conference required to get there. That clears left field for George Foster, whose bat has never once looked like it belonged on a bench and whose power still hasn't found a full-time everyday address. Whether that adds up to more than the sum of two very good players moving one spot over is exactly the kind of thing a season is supposed to answer.

It leaves the rest of the eight looking almost unfair on paper: Johnny Bench behind the plate, Tony Pérez at first, Joe Morgan — three years removed from the trade that's aged as well as any front office move in baseball — at second, Dave Concepción at short, and Ken Griffey and César Gerónimo, a Gold Glove center fielder who doesn't hit for much but doesn't need to, rounding out the outfield. Don Werner and Bill Plummer split the job behind Bench when he needs a breather, and Darrel Chaney and Dan Driessen give Anderson a bench that can play four positions between them without the drop-off most clubs take going ten deep.

Gullett, and then a lot of maybes

The rotation is where the questions actually live. Don Gullett, when healthy, is as good a left-hander as there is in the league, and he's the one name in this rotation nobody in Cincinnati is worried about. Behind him is where 1975 gets interesting: Gary Nolan, back after arm trouble cost him most of the last two seasons, is either about to remind the league what a 23-year-old with his stuff looks like or about to remind everyone why teams are careful with pitchers who've had the shoulder problems he's had. Fred Norman and Clay Kirby give the staff two capable veteran innings-eaters, and Pat Zachry — a 22-year-old nobody outside the organization has

heard of yet — rounds out the five. That's four pitchers with something to prove behind an ace, which is either a rotation with a ceiling nobody's talking about yet or the one real hole in a team that doesn't have many others.

Eastwick, and a pen that finally has an answer

If the rotation is a question mark, the bullpen is the opposite. Rawly Eastwick, 24 years old and coming off a taste of the majors last summer, has the look of a closer this club has been missing since Clay Carroll's best years — and Carroll himself, now 33, slides into a setup role alongside Pedro Borbón, the workhorse fireman who's quietly appeared in more games than almost anyone in the league over the last three seasons. Jack Billingham and Pat Darcy give Anderson two arms capable of a spot start or three innings of relief without much notice, and Tom Hall adds a left-handed look nobody else on this staff provides. It is, on paper, the deepest bullpen this organization has had in the Anderson era — which matters more than it used to, given how quickly "Captain Hook" pulls a starter who so much as looks tired.

What's coming behind them

The system that's supposed to keep this window from closing runs through Indianapolis, where the Triple-A Indians will be the first stop for anyone who has to cover an injury at the big-league level, on down through Trois-Rivières, Tampa, Eugene and Billings — five affiliates deep, the kind of pipeline a club builds when it plans on staying good for a while rather than catching lightning once. None of it will matter if the 25 names on the Opening Day roster do their jobs, but organizations that win more than once tend to be the ones that don't need the farm system to bail them out and still have it there anyway.

What 1975 is supposed to settle

Nobody in this clubhouse is interested in another May that turns into another disappointing October — not after 1970, not after 1972, not after a 98-win 1974 that still ended in someone else's celebration. The honest read on this roster hasn't changed in half a decade: this is still the most talented team in baseball, on paper, the way it's been on paper since Nixon's first term. The only question 1975 is actually here to answer is the one nobody in Cincinnati wants to keep asking — whether "on paper" is ever going to turn into something you can hang in the trophy case. Riverfront Stadium opens its gates today assuming, as it has every April for five years, that this is finally the year that gets settled. Eventually, one of these years, that has to be true.