

Potomac Nationals 2009 Preview

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WOODBRIDGE, VA – The Potomac Nationals are looking to build upon a strong 2008 campaign in their quest to win another Carolina League title. The 2008 version came on strong late in the season and won the Mills Cup in a five game series against the Myrtle Beach Pelicans.

The Carolina League plays a half-season format where there are two champions -- one from the first half of the year and one from the second portion. In each division, the first half winner plays the second half winner in a best of five game series. Once these conclude, the winners play in the championship. Potomac resides in the Northern Division in the Carolina League.

Since the Washington Nationals have struggled on the field recently, it means that Potomac has been given a wealth of talent and that should be no different this year. This team is filled with top draft picks who many believe are destined to be playing in Nationals Park within a few years. Specifically, many regard Michael Burgess -- the super-talented left hand hitting outfielder who was selected in the first round of the 2007 draft (49th overall) -- as the second best prospect in the Nationals organization behind Jordan Zimmerman. Burgess had 24 homers in a mere 412 at-bats in lower A-ball last season and is considered a five tool player. If Burgess can lower his strikeout total thus far in the minors, he is destined to be starting right fielder in Washington. Burgess also boasts one of the best throwing arms in the organization.

Along with Burgess, right-handed hitting first baseman Chris Marrero, who signed out of high school as a 2006 first round pick (2006), will also begin the season in Potomac and is seen as the potential replacement for Adam Dunn in a few years. Marrero has battled some injury issues early on in his career including a broke ankle last year but is completely healthy and looking forward to a huge 2009 season. The first basemen only played half the season compiling 280 at bats but had 11 home runs and 38 RBIs. Potomac will certainly look for Marrero and Burgess to anchor the middle of the lineup. The third round pick out of Long Beach State Danny Espinosa is also seen as one of the Nationals top prospects with his slick fielding glove.

The Potomac Nationals are also blessed with numerous good, experienced arms in the pitching staff that will be looking to baffle opponents. It would be a mistake not to start with the winning pitcher in the clinching game of the Mills Cup Erik Arnesen. Arnesen isn't gifted with an overpowering fastball but throws a very effective sinking fastball with movement. He struck out 111 batters in 124 innings so definitely has some power potential at the next level. The rest of the rotation is going to be filled with lefties Will Atwood and Tom Milone along with righties Jeff Mandel and Brad Meyers. Atwood and Milone were 2008 top draft picks so are expected to take a step forward this year in Potomac. Lastly, the bullpen is a mixed bag with the closer role wide-open for right now.

Overall, a good number of the Nationals top prospects will begin the year in Potomac. It is anyone's guess whether these players will eventually get promoted to Harrisburg, including Burgess and Marrero, but with basically the same team as last year that won the Mills Cup, this team promises to be one of the early favorites in the Carolina League.