

Written by Rob Smith
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It may have taken longer than expected, but the NL playoff picture has finally taken shape. I'll preface the following piece with the disclaimer that anything can happen in baseball, but it appears that the pool of playoff contenders in the NL has been whittled down to 8 teams (Philadelphia and Atlanta in the East; Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati in the Central; and San Francisco and Arizona in the West).

With that in mind, let's take a look at which areas these playoff hopefuls need help and where they might find it.

1) Philadelphia Phillies

Needs: RP, RF

- The Phillies vaunted starting rotation took a hit when [Roy Oswalt](#) went down, but the trio of Halladay-Lee-Hamels will be all the team needs come playoff time. The bullpen has been beset by injury after injury. [Brad](#)

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Lidge

,
Jose Contreras

, and

Ryan Madson

have all gone down at some point this season, and both Lidge and Contreras remain sidelined. Philly would like to add a reliable late-inning reliever, such as San Diego's

Heath Bell

or

Mike Adams

, but the price for both will be steep and the Phillies spent a lot of their farm system capital acquiring Lee and Oswalt. Assuming that the Phillies are unwilling to part with top prospects

Jarred Cosart

and

Jonathan Singleton

, they might have to settle for a 2nd-tier reliever like Oakland's

Grant Balfour

or Twins closer

Matt Capps

. Manager Charlie Manuel

has made it clear that he wants another right-handed bat

. Despite

John Mayberry

's recent hot streak, Philadelphia has been linked to Oakland's

Josh Willingham

and San Diego's

Ryan Ludwick

, and either would be a good fit in the bandbox that is Citizens Bank Park.

2) Atlanta Braves

Needs: CF, SS, LF

- Nate McLouth and Jordan Schafer don't get on base enough, and the Braves are rumored to be interested in Houston's

Michael

Bourn

and H

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[unter Pence](#)

. Pence is better-suited for a corner spot, and would probably cost more top prospects than GM Frank Wren would be comfortable sending away. Bourn, meanwhile, would give Atlanta the type of productive speed that it has been lacking at the top of its order. At shortstop,

[Alex Gonzalez](#)

has been outstanding defensively, and impotent with the bat. It'll be interesting to see if the Braves make a run at Mets' superstar

[Jose Reyes](#)

. Blockbuster in-division trades are rare, but the addition of Reyes would make Atlanta a legitimate World Series contender, and the Mets need to rebuild their pitching staff with the type of elite arms that the Braves have on the farm.

[Julio Teheran](#)

and

[Arodys Vizcaino](#)

are probably off-limits, but a package built around surprising rookie

[Brandon Beachy](#)

might get the Mets' attention. Even if Atlanta views Reyes as a rental, they could replace whatever organizational depth they lose in the trade with the draft-pick compensation that would accompany Reyes' departure. The Braves might try to get in on the Willingham sweepstakes as well.

[Chipper Jones](#)

' balky knee is giving him trouble again, and if

[Martin Prado](#)

has to be called in from left field to replace him, Atlanta would need an outfield bat with more pop than McLouth's.

3) Pittsburgh Pirates

Needs: SS, 3B, 1B, SP, RP

- Nobody thought the Pirates would snap their 18-year losing streak with a playoff berth, but they find themselves a game out of first place in the NL Central more than halfway through the season. If the Bucs are going to make a run at the division crown, however, they'll need to add to their overachieving roster with help from outside the organization. Red Sox shortstop [Marco](#)

[Scutaro](#)

would be an upgrade over

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[Ronny Cedeno](#)

, and

[Lyle Overbay's futility](#)

screams "DFA me!" The Pirates' farm system is pretty weak, so they won't be able to acquire a high-end talent like

[Prince Fielder](#)

(who Milwaukee will likely hold on to and wouldn't trade within the division, anyway) but

[Carlos Pena](#)

or

[Carlos Lee](#)

wouldn't be terribly costly, at least in terms of prospects. In Lee's case, Houston would have to throw a significant amount of money Pittsburgh's way in any deal. On the bright side, left fielder

[Alex Presley](#)

has impressed in his limited time, and could be an effective table setter down the stretch.

Another veteran arm in the pen wouldn't be a bad idea, considering

[Jose Veras](#)

and

[Chris Resop](#)

are unlikely to maintain their ERAs at 2.61 and 3.35 respectively.

[Kevin Slowey rumors are percolating,](#)

but he's no better than

[James McDonald](#)

. If the

[Ubaldo Jimenez trade rumors](#)

are true, he is exactly the type of top-of-the-rotation starter that this roster lacks.

4) St. Louis Cardinals

Needs: RP, 2B

- Florida's [Randy Choate](#) would be an excellent lefty-specialist for the Cards, and a considerable upgrade over [Trever Miller](#). Bell would solve the closer dilemma if Tony LaRussa isn't comfortable trusting

[Fernando Salas](#)

to finish games in September and October. St. Louis can't feel too confident about

[Chris Carpenter](#)

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, who hasn't been himself this year. Unfortunately, the arms on the market aren't any better, and farm arms

[Carlos Martinez](#)

and

[Shelby Miller](#)

will only get innings out of the bullpen, if at all.

[Skip Schumaker](#)

is a favorite of LaRussa, but his .663 OPS indicates that he's not an everyday starter. Toronto's

[Aaron Hill](#)

and Seattle's

[Chone Figgins](#)

both need a change of scenery, and their respective teams would be willing to include cash considerations in order to soften the blow of their hefty contracts. Neither has been too productive thus far, but both are low-risk (assuming financial support from Toronto/Seattle) gambles that could pay big dividends in the race for the Central.

5) Milwaukee Brewers

Needs: SS, 4th OF

- Milwaukee's off-season acquisitions of Zach Greinke and [Shaun Marcum](#) left their farm system depleted, so it's hard to see them coming up with the pieces necessary to make a move for Reyes. The cash-strapped Dodgers wouldn't mind unloading

[Rafael Furcal](#)

, who (when healthy) can be a disruptive force. The offense doesn't need much help anyway, as the Brewers are in the top 10 in MLB in runs scored, homeruns, and OPS. Marcum has done a nice job, but Greinke has struggled after getting injured in spring training and

[Yovani Gallardo](#)

's development has stalled. Trading for former Mets closer

[Francisco Rodriguez](#)

was a sharp move, with

[John Axford](#)

and a resurgent

[LaTroy Hawkins](#)

giving Milwaukee a solid back end of the bullpen.

[Mark Kotsay](#)

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doesn't have much left in the tank, and Royals outfielder

[Melky Cabrera](#)

would be a solid playoff-tested veteran addition to Milwaukee's bench.

6) Cincinnati Reds

Needs: SP, SS

-The pitching staff needs a major upgrade if the Reds intend to compete for a world series crown. GM Walt Jocketty should be blowing up the Rockies' phones trying to get Jimenez. A couple more names to keep in mind are Marlins' starters [Anibal Sanchez](#) and Javy Vazquez. Sanchez will be arbitration-eligible in 2012 before hitting free agency in 2013, but Florida probably needs to keep him around in order to remain competitive heading into their new stadium. Vazquez, meanwhile, will be a free agent following this season and has pitched well of late. He could serve as a mentor to young ace

[Johnny Cueto](#)

and maybe help out the struggling

[Edinson Volquez](#)

. Reyes would be a great rental option here, too, but the Reds seem content to see if Zach Cozart can handle the shortstop position. Cincinnati will undoubtedly acquire a starting pitcher, and another bullpen arm (although their pen has been a pleasant surprise) is also likely.

7) San Francisco Giants

Needs: SS, 3B

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- Reyes has been linked to the Giants, and would be a huge upgrade over the [Brandon Crawford](#) / [Mike Fontenot](#) platoon. A [Madison Bumgarner](#)-centered deal would probably get it done, and San Francisco can afford the big-money extension that Reyes would command. [Jonathan Sanchez](#) could easily fill the third starter's slot in the playoff rotation, and the boost that Reyes would give to the top of the lineup would be immeasurable. Cubs' third baseman [Aramis Ramirez](#) would be a good fit here, with [Pablo Sandoval](#) moving across the diamond to replace the slumping [Aubrey Huff](#) at first base, but Ramirez has refused to waive his no-trade clause and given no indication that he'll change his mind in the next week or so.

8) Arizona Diamondbacks

Needs: SP, RP, 4th OF

- [Ian Kennedy](#) is finally fulfilling the promise seen in him way back when he was a highly-touted Yankees prospect, Josh Collmenter has been effective, and the [Daniel Hudson](#)-for-[Edwin Jackson](#) trade was an absolute fleecing in Arizona's favor. Still, Arizona lacks the power arms that usually win games in the postseason. Mariners' lefty [Erik Bedard](#), who will come off the disabled list soon, has been outstanding this year and has the ability to miss bats. The bullpen needs help, and a lot of it. [J.J. Putz](#) and [Sam Demel](#) (and, more recently,

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David Hernandez

) have been the only reliable arms.

Xavier Nady

is on the downside of his career. Royals outfielder

Jeff Francoeur

and Chicago's

Marlon Byrd

present bigger threats at the plate and both are better defensively than Nady.

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