

I am going to take a look at the “Big Four” teams in Texas and how they compare heading into next season. The (*) indicates my choice for the top player at each position and I also chose the top five starting pitchers and the top three relief pitchers. **Bold is a returning starter.** Late signees that would have likely been starters were David Newmann and Will Middlebrooks for the Aggies, Jeff Russell for the Longhorns and Tyler Henley for the Owls.

Texas A&M Aggies (48-19)

C-Alberto Lopez, JUCO
1B-Darby Brown, .322-1-27 *
2B-Blake Stouffer, .398-12-85 *
 SS- Jose Duran, JUCO
3B- Brian Ruggiano, .255-1-14
LF-Ben Feltner, .303-1-24
CF-Kyle Colligan, .284-10-37*
 RF-Brodie Greene, .312-0-8
DH-Luke Anders, .336-11-46*

RHP-Scott Migl, 7-3, 3.77*
 RHP-Kyle Thebeau, 3-6, 4.67, 6 saves
 LHP-Kirkland Rivers, 2-3, 5.21, 2 saves
 RHP-Clayton Ehlert, 1-1, 4.70
 RHP-Carson Middleton, JUCO

REL-Jordan Chambless, 2-0, 1.86*
 REL-Hank Robertson, JUCO
 REL-Travis Starling, 1-0, 1.33, 2 saves

Catcher- Clearly Preston Clark is the best catcher in this group; he had a down season by his standards last year and was still able to earn second team All-Big 12 honors. Zornes has played more than Glime or Lopez and would likely be second in this group. The three catchers lost to professional baseball after last year batted in the middle of their team’s lineup. Clearly catching is the current biggest question mark for the Aggies entering next season after losing both Craig and Josh Stinson.

First Base-Darby Brown has the best numbers considering he played about half the number of games, due to injury, that Dustin Dickerson did at Baylor. J. P. Padron did not play as well as expected out of San Jacinto and could face tough competition for the starter job. He played each position on the infield last year except shortstop. Belt is extremely valuable as a pitcher but after watching him play first at San Jacinto and in TCL ball, I think he will contribute more at the plate next year than on the mound.

Second Base-Blake Stouffer would have a slight edge over Aaron Luna at second as they are known more for their bats, and neither has played outstanding defense. I think Stouffer could be even better at the plate in 2008 and should challenge for Big 12 POY, just like Luna will challenge for C-USA POY. Tucker and Hansen are good young players who both exceeded expectations last year (neither were expected to start), but Stouffer and Luna overshadow them.

Texas Longhorns (46-17)

C-Preston Clark, .286-8-45*
 1B-Brandon Belt, JUCO
2B-Travis Tucker, .307-1-34
 SS-Bobby Buckner, Frosh
 3B- Pat McCrory, .067-0-1
LF-Jordan Danks, .332-4-38
 CF-Kyle Lusson, .240-0-0
RF- Kyle Russell, .336-28-71*
DH-Russell Moldenhauer, .278-6-32

LHP-Austin Wood, 8-1, 3.15, 1 save*
 RHP-Ken Kasperek, redshirt
 LHP-Riley Boening, redshirt
 RHP-Hunter Harris, 2-0, 5.89
 LHP-Kyle Walker, 1-0, 10.80

REL-Garrett Clyde, JUCO
 REL-Keith Shinaberry, 0-2, 5.96
 REL-Casey Whitmer, FSU Transfer

Baylor Bears (35-27)

C-Greg Glime, .261-0-3
1B-Dustin Dickerson, .292-3-30
2B-Shaver Hansen, .296-3-35
SS-Beamer Weems, .321-9-59*
3B-Ryan Campbell, .321-5-29*
LF-Ben Booker, .306-2-32
 CF-Paul Miles, .253-0-14
RF-Aaron Miller, .296-4-45
 DH-Dan Evatt, Frosh

RHP-Kendal Volz, 6-2, 5.16*
 RHP-Wade Mackey, 4-3, 3.18
 RHP-Randall Linebaugh, 3-5, 5.86
 RHP- Tim Mathews, 2-2, 4.64, 1 save
 RHP- Shawn Tolleson, redshirt

REL-Nick Cassavechia, 6-2, 3.12, 11 sv*
 REL-Willie Kempf, 2-2, 3.00, 2 saves
 REL-Jake Weghorst, 1-0, 4.94, 1 save

Shortstop-Beamer Weems is an All-American candidate who might be the best shortstop in the nation in 2008, so he clearly overshadows three talented newcomers at the other schools. Jose Duran is the top newcomer of the group, starting over 120 games at North Central Texas. He is not as flashy as Brandon Hicks, but he is athletic and a very good hitter. Hauge is a top recruit and likely a three-year starter but the mystery is Buckner, coming out of Idaho with great fanfare but little competition.

Third Base-Ryan Campbell was the surprise of Baylor’ top ranked recruiting class from a year ago and he just nudges out Seastrunk at third base. Both had comparable numbers, but Campbell’s happened in Big 12 play, not against C-USA schools. Pat McCrory had a solid summer playing at third in the TCL. Brian Ruggiano is coming off a breakout summer at Beatrice and will compete with Dane Carter and TCL All-Star Justin Walker, so the Aggies should have a solid player at the position.

Left Field-This might be the most talented single position in the state, and several of these players could also play centerfield next season. Jordan Dodson has a slight edge over the others in the group, but they are all solid draft players for next season. Dodson and Danks have a higher power potential, but Feltner and Booker have outstanding speed on the basepaths. If Feltner shows as much improvement before next season as he did this past year, he could move to the top of the list.

Center Field-Kyle Colligan bounced back from an early season injury. He hit .305-10-29 with 10 steals in the last two thirds of the season after recovering from an early injury. He is poised for a big junior season and will be a high draft pick next year. Lusson, having a very good summer offensively with Beatrice, and Miles could be the starters, but they could easily be supplanted before next season. They are as much a guess as anything right now. Derek Meyers has physical tools and a solid bat but he will have a hard time replacing Tyler Henley, who signed late with the Cards.

Right Field-Since Kyle Russell returns and is the favorite for Big 12 POY and a candidate for national POY as well. He led the nation in homeruns but was largely ineffective at the end of the season (.222-2-4 in his last 10 games). Jared Gayhart played a big role in Rice advancing to the College World Series and could even be more valuable this year since he could also pitch. Aaron Miller missed the second half of the season after being hit by a pitch but was poised for a huge season. Greene was also limited after being struck in the face by a pitch but had a solid summer and is completely recovered.

Designated hitter-Luke Anders battled through a hand injury and it sapped him of his power and took down his average in the playoffs. He was the most improved player in the state last year and should have a bigger year this year. Jess Buenger had an excellent year for Rice and could start on the infield for the Owls this year. Russell Moldenhauer showed his offensive potential in the middle of the Texas lineup much of the year. Baylor's lone position with no clear starter is DH so any of a number of players could be the lineup for their bat.

Starting Pitchers- Ryan Berry was the National Freshman Pitcher of the Year but struggled in post-season play after being money during the regular season. Matt Langwell, coming back from "Tommy John" surgery, blossomed under the tutelage of Wayne Graham and beat Texas A&M (albeit with a little help from the umpires in game two of the Super Regional). Austin Wood was the 'Horns best pitcher down the stretch and should be a high draft pick next season. Scott Migl should have won two more games but was lifted twice with two outs in the fifth inning in games the Aggies won. He will turn those outings into victories in 2008. It was a hard choice between Thebeau and Volz for the fifth spot as both were inconsistent. Volz dominated Oklahoma at the Big 12 tournament in his finest performance of the season, and Thebeau punched the Aggies' ticket to the Super Regional against Louisiana-Lafayette. Ironically enough, both struck out 13 each in those games.

Relief Pitchers-Cole St. Clair will enter next season as the most dominate relief pitcher in the country, but could move to the starting rotation for Rice and that would certainly move him into the top five starting pitchers in the state. Jordan Chambless was well on his way to a great season at the end of the Aggie bullpen before injury forced him to the sideline. He will start throwing again when school resumes. When Nick Cassavechia was on, he was an All-Big 12 performer. He gave up 11 of the 20 runs he allowed in three games against A&M, OU and the last game of the year against TCU. He was the Cape Cod League "Closer of the Year" this summer.

Transfer Players-Most of the impact transfer players will be found on the mound. Hank Roberson is the best relief pitcher in the bunch and should team up with Chambless at the end of the Aggie bullpen. Matt Speake won 19 games the past two seasons while playing in the thin air of Hobbs, N. M. and could start early in Aggieland. RHP Carson Middleton, from McLennan, is also coming to Aggieland and could play a big role as well. He has electric stuff and was a big strikeout pitcher in JUCO and high school. Jose Duran, the younger brother of Texas Ranger AA All-Star German Duran is a top all-around player with speed and bat control. Alberto Lopez will compete with freshmen for playing time in Aggieland, hitting .411-4-41 last year. Adding Winthrop's Phil Carey right before classes started was a huge addition for the Aggies, as he can play in the infield or outfield. Luetge went 10-3 and Rogers went 9-6 in two years at San Jacinto but each are counted on to have big roles at Rice. Belt went 7-2 on the mound and hit .421-9-52 to lead San Jacinto in all three categories. Garrett Clyde, a former position player at San Jac, is just learning to pitch but has tremendous velocity. Whitmer dominated in the TCL for the BV Bombers as a starter and was the leagues' top prospect. I am not impressed with the late Texas infield transfers. They might be excellent in the field but they don't scare me at the plate. USC's Mike Torres hit .253-1-10 and Fresno's David Hernandez hit .250-0-6 last year. Neither was a full time starter in the second half of the season last year.

Overview-I have Texas A&M with six of the stars, Rice has four, Baylor has four and Texas has three. Texas A&M must answer questions at catcher and in the starting rotation. Texas must have pitchers return from injury and find a closer for the first time in six years. Baylor must have their sophomores improve offensively from last year as well as find one more bat. Rice must replace their leaders in Joe Savery and Brian Friday as well as determine St. Clair's role early in the season.

I believe Texas A&M will put the best everyday lineup on the field next season and Rice will have the most experience on the mound. Each and every team should be excited about next year because of their returning players as well as top freshman classes that could win starting positions at Texas A&M, Texas or Rice. The Aggies still have young pitchers that will fill some roles, the 'Horns have a great group of outfielders in the pipeline, and Wayne Graham thinks this is the best freshman class he has ever recruited to Rice. The only problem for these freshmen is they have to wait their turn with four veteran teams returning in front of them this season.

Next year will another competitive race between these four teams and two of them should be inline to host NCAA Super Regionals as national seeds, obviously making them favorites to advance to the 2008 College World Series. The other two could still host regional play but would likely face tough trips for Super Regionals. I can almost guarantee that Rice would face at least one of the Big 12 schools head to head in a Super Regional.