

Today's pecking order:

I've been wondering lately what the perfect baseball team would be, if the perfect baseball team were made up entirely of birds. What bird would you pick to fill what position and where would you bat them? Living in a tree house will start you thinking about such things. Months of filling bird feeders, birdbaths and bird thickets has given me the observational ammunition to make enlightened choices.

There is only one rule in the selection process. The bird must be one that eats at backyard feeders. If you want to play the game with me you'll have to play by my rules. Personally I think using such species as Condor and Albatross is an insult to the backyard birds of the world. I think stocking your team with prodigious talent just because you can is like, well, it's like the Yankees. Unsporting.

Batting first and playing second base I'll go with the ubiquitous, aggressive American Goldfinch. It's quick, not afraid to bunt and loves to mix it up out there. It's not going to hit a lot of homers, a table setter, if you will. The Goldfinch will give you 100% for the entire season. Heck, they stay through the winter just to be early for spring training.

Hitting second and playing shortstop for me is the fabulous Nuthatch. They are lightning fast and great talkers. They do a woodpecker impersonation that is absolutely disconcerting to an opponent. There is no stronger wing in the game, perfect for the long throw from deep short. Want a hard slide to break up the double play? Need a player to stretch that double into a triple? Nuthatch.

In the third spot you need a bird with power and a good eye at the plate. Has to be able to drive the ball to all fields with enough speed to leg out those doubles. I'm going Red-Breasted Grosbeak here. Great attitude. Early to the feeder and early to bed. A manager's dream. I've got the "Beak" at third. Fearless, great reflexes.

Batting clean up is a no-brainer for me. I want power, power and more power. Preferably with a lousy, in your face disposition. I want a bird who will clear out the feeder and then laugh about it. Since it's all stick and no glove it'll play left field (no DH in this league). The choice, of course, Bluejay.

Now, you need cover for the number four hitter. You don't want those yardbirds pitching around the jay. So you want some power that's not afraid to swing at the ball. You want physical size and status in the eyes of the other birds. I'm thinking woodpecker here. Red-bellied Woodpecker to be specific. Now, a red belly has a cannon for a wing so I'm playing it in right field. Clemente and Kaline in one bird.

You're still looking for a player to keep the big inning going in the number six spot. A consistent hitter from the left side of the plate is even better. You have to accept the fact that your first base bird is going to be a tad goofy, like all lefties. Have you seen the Cowbird's romantic display? No doubt about it. Cowbird plays first.

The most important defensive player on the field, aside from your catcher is your centerfielder. OK, maybe shortstop, but centerfield is critical. This bird has to chase down everything in that vast expanse between right and left field. I grew up with old Yankee Stadium. Believe me, centerfield can be vast. I think Chickadee for center. It's as fast as they come and, if you listen carefully, his repeated song sounds like. "I got it. I got it. I got it." The Chickadee bats seventh.

In the eighth spot you need a player who knows the game, which means a contact hitter who will take a walk or even get hit (not on purpose, of course) to get on base. A player who's aware of every situation and someday will make a really good manager. The Sparrow is an easy choice. Cagey, experienced, committed to team play and able to see the details. Where to play the Sparrow? Catcher, of course.

Do any of you remember Red Barber, the Hall of Fame announcer? When a pitcher was way ahead in the count Red would say, "He's sittin' in the catbird's seat." Red was great. Red was not a goof like so many sportscasters. He was a gentleman.

Which brings us to today's pitcher. Our starter is a colorful character, a real fancy dresser who'll just start singing at the drop of a hat. You knew you had something special when it reported to spring training in a red suit and a fifty-dollar haircut. We just got this bird in a trade with St. Louis. A Cardinal.

So there you have the Houston Feathers. Come on out and support them when the Caledonia Beaks are in town next week. Bring the family. You can't beat a day at the old ballpark. Just the thought of cracked corn and a cold beer makes we want to get there early, in time for pecking practice.

