

Obscura Fantasy Focus: *I think not enough people realize just how good Michael King was last year, which means he's still a bargain on draft day. As good as he was in the first half, King took a massive step forward after the All-Star break, posting a 2.15 ERA down the stretch. Go get him as a rotation anchor and Cy Young candidate in 2025.*

SAN DIEGO PADRES

Cockiness is not, I think, a resilient attribute.

I think all characteristics – those that we'd categorize as positive and those that we'd categorize as negative – have situations where they are just not optimal. Calmness is a very useful trait if your boat has a slow leak, but if you've just crashed into an iceberg in the cold Atlantic, you'd probably prefer a captain who acts decisively, even if he has to raise his voice a little.

I was thinking about all of this as I watched Fernando Tatis Jr. doing his strange, thrusting dance and later sticking his tongue out at Dodgers fans during the Padres win in Game 2. I thought about this, too, when Tatis tossed his bat after crushing a Walker Buehler fastball into the stratosphere in the second inning of Game 3, causing the Padres team to celebrate as if the game and the series were preemptively over.

In a sense, it was: while San Diego won Game 3, they didn't put another run on the scoreboard the rest of the game. They wouldn't score any runs in Games 4 or 5, either.

While it's not fair to paint every Padres player with one brush, it seems very obvious that the Padres play baseball with greater showmanship and more cockiness than other teams. They are very demonstrative, very emotional. They play baseball like they're carrying a chip on one shoulder, and the rest of the boulder on the other.

And they play *well* that way. The Padres, I think, are at their best when they play with an edge. They beat the 111-win Dodgers in the 2022 Division Series by playing loose while the Dodgers played timidly. The Padre's two best players – Manny Machado and Fernando Tatis Jr. – very obviously thrive in that space. Tatis particularly revels in heat: he has a career OPS of 1.328 in the postseason, which is absurd.

So there is value to cockiness. Playing in a division where your upstate rivals have run the table for a

decade, there is considerable merit in behaving like the pestering kid brother who knows how to get under the skin of the older sibling. It is a dominoing attribute, too. If you're a loud and cocky team that manages to win, your opponent is going to find you even more unpleasant to play against the next day.

But cockiness does not hold up very well when the tide turns. And I think the tide turned, very obviously, when Teoscar Hernandez hit his grand slam in the fifth inning of Game 3. The grand slam didn't give the Dodgers the lead, but it turned a 6-1 laughter into a 6-5 tightrope walk. The Padres managed to walk that tightrope, but they didn't enjoy the experience. When the Dodgers won Game 4 early, I knew that they were going to advance. You could feel the atmosphere go cold in San Diego.

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The Padres lost Juan Soto, Blake Snell, and Josh Hader last year. You wouldn't know it:

Year	W-L	Run Diff.
2024	89-73	+91
2023	82-80	+104

Absent an elite hitter, a two-time Cy Young Award winner, and an ace closer, the Padres managed to run out nearly the same run differential, but with better results in the record book.

Four obvious factors allowed San Diego to tread water:

- Michael King, acquired from the Yankees in the Soto trade, had a breakout season transitioning from a reliever to a starting pitcher, posting a 2.95 ERA and notching 201 strikeouts in 173.2 innings.

- Dylan Cease, acquired in March for a bushel of prospects, snagged some down-ballot Cy Young