CHICAGO CITY WIRE

MAY 24, 2032 · THE CHICAGO BLACK SOX BEAT

From 12-2 to 21-27 in six weeks

BY **VERA NOWAK** · CHICAGO CITY WIRE

The thing worth understanding about this baseball season is that both halves of it were real.

On April 13 the Black Sox were 12-2. That was not a fluke of scheduling or a run of one-run luck. It came out of a 12-game winning streak that started on March 31 and swallowed three straight sweeps, Philadelphia on the road, Toronto at home, and then Somerville in Somerville, which was the one that made people outside this city look up, because Somerville is 31-17 now and has lost three straight to almost nobody else all year. This club went into that building and took all three.

Since April 13 the record is 9-25.

The 12-2 came entirely against Philadelphia and Toronto and Somerville and the rest of the neighbors, and so did most of the 9-25. Chicago finished the divisional stretch at 17-19 and has gone 4-8 since. The start and the collapse happened against the same eight teams.

Here is how that happened, because it is not a mystery and it is not bad luck. This pitching staff has a 4.67 earned run average, 27th in the league. It has walked 184 men, more than all but two clubs. It has allowed 72 home runs, more than all but one. The rotation alone has a 5.32 earned run average and ranks 29th of 32, and during the 12-game streak it was getting a run of games where the walks did not score, and that is the part of a hot start that never keeps. When the club lost eight in a row from May 4 through May 13, it was the same staff pitching roughly the same way and getting the ordinary result.

The bullpen, and this deserves saying because it has gone unmentioned in a losing month, has been good. A 3.66 earned run average, 16th, and only four blown saves all year, which is the fourth-lowest total in the league. Shizuma Oda has a 0.53 earned run average and nine saves. Mike Bolin has a 3.16 with four holds and has walked four men all season. Andrew Behnke has a 1.00 WHIP. Three relievers making a combined

$13.6 million have been the most reliable thing in this organization, and two of the three arrived in the last six months.

Which brings up the winter, because the winter was a real departure from how this front office usually operates.

Mike Z. has run this club since 2019 and built eight straight postseason trips largely by finding people nobody was bidding on. This offseason he did something this franchise has never once done under him: he spent the draft.

On December 2 he made three trades. Billy Perez, a two-time Cy Young Award winner, came from Somerville for Chicago's 9th, 10th and 11th round picks in 2032. Tim Hart and Dave Chapman came from Toronto for a 2033 third-rounder plus Qu-bing Jiang, Danny Santos and Shawn Slater. And Shizuma Oda came from Toronto, with Toronto retaining half his salary, for Chicago's first-round pick in 2033. On New Year's Eve, Jason Long arrived from Baltimore for four more picks. Ming Quan signed for $11 million over five years, Cheuk-yan Zhào for $5 million over five, and in January James Dominey, who is 40 years old and owns a Most Valuable Player award and seven Platinum Sticks, signed for $2.6 million. The payroll is $146.9 million, 13th in the league and fourth in this division, which is more than this club has typically carried.

Count it up: a 2033 first-rounder, a 2033 third, and nine later selections across 2032 and 2033, out the door in one winter. What it bought was this month's first round, where Chicago picked five times between 16 and 25, using first-rounders that began the year belonging to Baltimore, Cincinnati, Huron and Somerville. For a club that has spent a decade explaining that the draft is the whole reason it can compete on this budget, that is a different philosophy arriving all at once, and it says Mike Z. looked at eight straight Octobers without a division title and decided the pipeline could fund one.

It has not worked yet. Perez is 4-3 with a 4.55 earned run average and has given up 11 home runs, second-most of any pitcher in the league. Hart is hitting .188, though 11 of his 26 hits have left the yard and he has 28 runs batted in, which is a strange and specific kind of useful. Quan is at .227. Zhào is at .185. Of the six players brought in this winter, Oda has been the best of them by a wide margin, and he is the one who cost a first-round pick, which is either the winter's one clean piece of business or its most expensive reliever, depending on what Chicago does not draft in 2033.

The offense is 10th in the league in runs and 23rd in batting average, which tells you it is walking (158 walks, 11th) and running (63 stolen bases, fifth) its way to more than the hits justify. Jeremy Albrecht is hitting .289 with 21 steals. Dave Chapman, who came over in that same December 2 window, is at .313 with a .503 slugging percentage. Eitan Menahem has scored 30 runs.

And then there is Victor Gonzales, who is 25, who has already won a Rookie of the Year, a Most Valuable Player award, a Great Glove and a Platinum Stick, and who is hitting .303 with a .432 on-base percentage and 16 stolen bases in 26 games. He is on the injured list. So is Katsutoshi Wada, the biggest

position player contract on the roster, who was slugging .631 in 20 games when he went down on April 20. The two best hitters on this team have played 46 games between them.

Down in the system the picture is split, and the way it came to be split is the part worth knowing. Mike Z. has never had the money to buy a farm system, so he built one the way the budget allowed, which is volume, patience, and a lot of men other organizations had already written off. Springfield is 23-13 and the lines there are what that looks like when it works. Andy Escobedo is hitting .321 with a .429 on-base percentage at 22. Garrett McDougall is at .376 up at Worcester, and Jon Dupler at .393 in High-A. Zack Hankinson has not allowed an earned run in 22 2/3 innings. Ryan Karpe and Logan Bates are both under 2.60 at Double-A.

What that group mostly is, is ready now rather than later, which is the point of building it this way. That is not a system that makes stars and it has never once claimed to be. It is a system that turns out the twenty-third through twenty-eighth men on a playoff roster at the league minimum, every single year, and that is precisely the thing that has kept this club in October eight seasons running.

The arms this organization is actually waiting on are further off. Jared Milligan has barely pitched this year at Leadyard. Chris Hastings is getting hit at Worcester, a 5.06 across 48 innings. Nate Weitzman has a 4.24 at Springfield at 21. And the three men this front office likes best have not played a game yet: Matt Bell, Bob Hutton and Kris Cavanaugh are all at Cape Cod, which does not open for weeks. Pawtucket is 5-19. This club needs arms more than it needs anything else, and the ones worth waiting on are not going to settle anything this summer.

Two games back of the last playoff spot in the conference on May 24 is not a season ending. It is, though, a club that has gone 9-25 for six weeks with its two best hitters in street clothes and a rotation ranked 29th, and the honest version of the next six weeks is that the rotation has to be different, not the luck. Eight straight Octobers were built here on players this organization found and raised itself. This roster was assembled a different way, out of eleven draft picks and a bigger payroll than this club has ever carried, and so far the only piece of it clearly working is the closer.