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The defending champions are 22-26 and selling

BY CAMILLE OSSORIO · DENVER HERALD

On December 31, Denver sold two draft picks to Tampa Bay for \$6 million. On March 1, it sold a 2034 fifth-rounder to Memphis for \$5 million. In between it sent Sigismund Bayer to Huron for an eighth-round pick and Jason Hopkins to Big Horn for a tenth, and on the morning of the opening game it gave Montreal a 2033 tenth-rounder for a 37-year-old relief pitcher.

Eleven million dollars in cash collected, two useful major leaguers sold for late picks, and the picks themselves sold to Tampa Bay and Memphis, who own two of the three worst records in baseball. All of it by the team carrying the largest payroll in The Big League at \$220.5 million, which is \$78 million above league average and \$34 million more than anyone else is spending.

The defending champions are 22-26.

Fifth in the division. Twentieth in the league. One game on the wrong side of the last postseason place in the conference, which is a position this franchise has not occupied in late May in a very long time, and the run differential is minus-13, so it is not a mirage in either direction.

Split the record and the shape changes. Denver went 19-17 against the Jade, which is mediocre and survivable for a club with this roster. Since the crossover: 3-9, the worst twelve games any team in this conference has played.

Nineteen and seventeen against the Jade is a bad month. Three and nine against the rest of the league is a different claim entirely, and it is the first evidence all year that the problem is not scheduling noise. Twelve games is not enough to convict on. It is enough to open a file.

The reason is not the money and it is not the injuries, though there have been plenty of both. The reason is at the plate, and it is the same reason it was in April, and it is visible in exactly two numbers.

Denver has drawn 119 walks. That is 31st of 32 teams. Denver has struck out 464 times. That is also 31st of 32. There is no lineup in this league with a worse combination of the two, and the two are the same failure looked at from either side: this team does not control the strike zone. It hits the ball hard when it hits it, third in the league with 66 home runs and sixth in slugging, and it has an on-base percentage of .306, 22nd. A lineup that slugs .421 and reaches base at .306 will score in bursts and go missing for a week, and it has.

Jared Pink is hitting .193 and has 10 home runs. Hyun-kyu Kim is hitting .238 and has 10. Emanuel Mendoza is at .255 with a .262 on-base percentage, which means he has walked once in 103 plate appearances. Kevin Porter, 34, at \$30 million a year through 2033, is hitting .235 and lost 23 days to the injured list from April 11. Morgan Alison, at \$32 million, has played 33 games. Victor Baez, at \$28.5 million, has played 33. Ivan Sanchez, at \$20.5 million, has played 42.

Four contracts totaling \$111 million have produced 138 games played between them, which is under three men's worth of a season.

Grade the winter honestly, since somebody has to. Emilio Della Mea, signed February 20 for three years at \$18 million, is hitting .308 with a .385 on-base percentage and a .557 slugging percentage and took a player of the week award on May 10. That is the best contract handed out anywhere in this division and it is not close. Marty Kilby, signed March 3 on a one-year, \$19 million deal, has a 1.87 earned run average, a 0.92 WHIP, and eight walks in 53 innings, and he was available in March because nobody else would pay it. Two signings, two clear wins.

Then: Matt Ware is signed through 2035 at \$18.7 million and has a 5.82 earned run average across 12 starts. Hector Sierra has an 8.31. Danny Gonzales, signed in January, has a 9.00 earned run average and a 2.13 WHIP in 17 appearances. The bullpen has 13 saves and 11 blown, a conversion rate of 54 percent, on a staff whose relievers have thrown 202 innings.

And Jason Hopkins was sold to Big Horn for a tenth-round pick in December, and he has a 2.63 earned run average there, and Big Horn is 27-21 and two games clear of a playoff place.

Jay Ausburger has run this baseball team for 27 seasons and has six championships and a habit of making six trades on a single August afternoon, and the version of him that is visible in this winter's ledger is a different man: five trades, not one of which brought back a major-league player except a 37-year-old reliever, a center fielder and a relief pitcher sold for late picks, eleven million dollars collected, and three free-agent signings. That is a front office managing a balance sheet, not building a roster. Whether the two are the same thing at \$220.5 million is the question this season is going to answer.

The farm will not bail this out, and it was not built to. Frisco is 18-6, but the best young player in the organization is Gustavo Perez, a 20-year-old outfielder in rookie ball, and the next is Sake Oostvogels, a 22-year-old pitcher at El Paso. Neither is a 2032 answer. A club that needs help before August will have to buy it, which is the one thing this front office has always been willing to do and the one thing it spent this winter not doing.

The club has 114 games left and is one game out of a playoff spot, and a \$220.5 million roster that slugs .421 does not stay 22-26 by accident or by decree. It is 7-17 against teams with a winning record. That is the number to watch between now and the deadline.

Denver won the championship in November on six trades made in a single afternoon. This winter's ledger has five, and 22-26 is what they have bought so far.