



RÉCORD CIUDAD

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Four relievers are carrying Mexico City. It is only May.

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The relief corps has an earned run average of 2.54. That is the lowest of any bullpen in The Big League, ahead of Milwaukee and Somerville and everyone else, across 177 innings.

Steve Parker has not allowed an earned run all season. Nineteen appearances, 18 2/3 innings, 14 saves, third-most in the league, a 0.00 earned run average. John Shephard has a 0.95 across 38 innings, which is the most relief work on the staff. Ed Waterman has a 1.88. Harry Smith has a 2.25 with eight holds and five walks in 24 innings. Four pitchers, none of them making more than \$4.6 million, and together they are the reason this club is in first place.

Thirty and eighteen. First in the Ruby, sixth in the league. Fifteen and nine at home and 15-9 on the road, which is the only identical home-road split in this division and is exactly what a team with no park effect working for it should look like.

Those two identical splits are worth holding next to a third one. Mexico City went 21-15 inside the division and 9-3 since the crossover. The divisional sample is three times the size and the less informative of the two, because everything in it is measured against seven clubs this team plays every year. The twelve crossover games are the only reading available on how this roster compares to the rest of the league, and nobody has posted better, though five clubs have matched it.

The more important number: 14-7 against clubs currently over .500. Nobody else in this division is better than 12-10 against that group. This is not a record built on Spokane and Vancouver.

Now the strange one, and it requires care, because it is going to be misread everywhere else.

Ryan Metcalf is 24 years old and is batting .221. He also has 19 home runs, second-most in all of baseball, and 47 runs batted in, which is the most of any hitter in the league. A .221 average with a .558 slugging percentage and the league lead in runs driven in.

What is actually happening: Metcalf is getting on base at .316 despite the average, because he walks, and roughly one in every eleven times he puts a ball in play it leaves the park. He is not a hitter who is failing and getting lucky. He is a hitter whose value arrives in a shape that batting average was never built to measure, and he is signed through 2035 at \$4.7 million, which will be the most valuable contract in this division within two years.

He is also not, by himself, an offense. This lineup is 22nd in the league in batting average and ninth in runs scored, and it gets there on 64 home runs, sixth-most, and very little else. Rocky Brito, at \$13.2 million through 2035, is hitting .225. Joel Favela is at .183. Robbie Lippert is at .170.

And Lorenzo Valenzuela is hitting .180.

That sentence has to be written plainly. He is 33, he owns four Great Gloves, his defensive work has been the organizing principle of this franchise for a decade, and his bat has gone. One home run and 11 runs batted in across 122 plate appearances, a .246 on-base percentage. The glove is still the glove and the glove is worth real runs, and at some point this season somebody in that office is going to have to decide how many runs, and whether it is enough.

The other headline of the winter has delivered completely. Arturo Rivera signed on the second of January for four years at \$30 million. He is 34, he has three Cy Young Awards, and he is 8-0 with a 2.09 earned run average, a 0.86 WHIP and nine walks in 56 innings. Eight wins in nine starts. There is no qualifier to attach. It is the best pitching anybody in this division has done this year.

Behind him the rotation is 20th in the league at 4.36. Eduardo Linares, the other January signing, has a 5.60 and has given up nine home runs in 45 innings. Ricky Falk has a 5.92. Danny Kuntz has walked 22 men in 52 innings. Antonio Santiago, who also owns a Cy Young Award, has made six starts with a 5.28 and is on the 60-day list.

So the staff's overall figures, a 3.60 earned run average that ranks seventh and 183 runs allowed that rank sixth, are the product of one excellent starter, four ordinary-to-poor ones, and the best relief corps in baseball covering the gap. That is a real structure and it has worked for 48 games. It is also a structure that asks four relievers to keep doing this in September, and there is no historical version of that arrangement that has not eventually cost somebody something.

Eight men are on the injured list. There were no trades this winter at all.

And the system below is not producing. Tijuana is 12-24. Ciudad Juárez is 11-25. Nogales is 8-16. Monterrey is 7-17. Four affiliates losing, three of them badly, and the two lowest levels have not opened their

seasons.

The talent this organization is counting on is not hitting. Kevin Clarke is batting .214 with three home runs across 160 plate appearances at Ciudad Juárez, and he is the best of them. Ian McIlree is at .244 there with four. Bobby Kraemer is at .284 with none at Nogales. Jordan Smith has a 2.84 across 12 2/3 innings at Tijuana, Jamel Haynes, ninth overall in 2029, a 3.12 beside him, and Adam Brady is hitting .295. Antonio Velazquez, the best arm in the system, has not thrown a pitch that counts: Mexicali does not open for weeks.

That is not an empty system. It is a system whose entire return is deferred, attached to a club whose window is open now.

For twenty years the scouting pipeline was the entire argument here. Fourteen Great Gloves, no division titles, a model that found value nobody else was pricing. Last October it finally produced a conference championship series. This year the club is in first place, and it got there on a \$30 million free agent and four cheap relievers, and the pipeline that built the argument has stopped producing.

Both of those things are true at once, and the second one is the story of the next three years.