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Black Sox sit three short as injured stars return

BY **VERA NOWAK** · CHICAGO CITY WIRE

The way to understand this summer is to start with the question I put to Mike in July, which was how the April team, 12-2 and on a 12-game winning streak, became the one we have been watching since. He did not dress it up.

> *"My best hitter and my best power hitter both went down with injuries," he said.*

That is Victor Gonzales and Katsutoshi Wada, and in May I told you the two of them had played 46 games between them. They are both back now, and the difference is plain to see in one of them. Gonzales is hitting .344 with a .445 on-base percentage and 31 stolen bases, and he was the league's player of the week on July 5. Wada has been harder going. He has 13 home runs and a .336 on-base percentage, but he is batting .195, and the biggest position player contract on the roster runs through 2034.

Here is where that leaves the club. Chicago was 21-27 when I last wrote, and it has gone 28-29 since. It bottomed out at 27-35 on June 8 and has played .500 baseball from there, 22-21. It is 49-56 this morning, sixth in the Sapphire and 11th in the Ice Conference, three games behind Denver for the eighth and last playoff spot, with Fort Collins and Philadelphia also standing in between.

This franchise has been to the postseason eight years running. Nobody here needs me to tell them what that number means this week.

The second thing I asked Mike was about the bullpen, and he turned the question around, which I have learned is usually the moment he is about to tell you something true.

> *"My biggest weakness is SP," he said, "especially now with two season ending injuries to the staff and now another injury to an RP. Both sides of pitching feel like they are running on fumes."*

The two season-ending injuries are Billy Perez and Carlos Norena. Perez, the two-time Pitcher of the Year Award winner who came from Somerville in December for three late picks, finished his season 5-7 with a 4.88 earned run average. Norena was 5-5 at 4.07. Juan Magana is the reliever. What is left of the rotation owns a 4.56 earned run average, 22nd in the league, while the bullpen sits 13th at 3.46. Shizuma Oda, who was the one piece of the winter clearly working in May, still is: 19 saves and a 1.56 earned run average. The trouble is the games that get to him close. Chicago is 11-22 in one-run games this season and 5-9 in extra innings, and a club that loses the close ones at that rate is almost always a club short an arm or two in the middle innings.

So Mike went and got arms, and he got them the way this front office gets most things. Chris Kempner came from Southland for a sixth-round pick, with Southland keeping half his salary and sending $2 million along with him. Travis Nelson came from Somerville for a 2034 seventh and twelfth, with Somerville keeping half of his. Neither cost anything that shows up on a prospect list, and neither has settled in yet: Kempner has given up nine earned runs in 10 innings across his first two starts, and Nelson eight in 12.

That tells you a good deal about how Mike reads this deadline. He is not selling. He will not trade away eight Octobers while three games is still three games. But he is not spending anything he will want back, either, and there is a reason for that, which he explained in the answer I most wanted to share with you this week.

I asked him in May how mortgaging next year's draft board squared with a streak built on the draft. His answer came back just this week, and it was worth the wait.

> *"Timing is everything," he said. "I have multiple players coming up on contract years over the next few seasons and I can't keep them all. I needed to go heavy into college players in this year's draft to make sure they are developed and set up ahead of time for the next level by the time I move on from some of my major league talent over the next few seasons."*

That is the whole plan, and it is a patient one. Oda's deal ends this year. So do Tim Hart's, Tim Elizalde's and Dave Chapman's, and Chapman has driven in 64 runs. The college players are meant to be ready when those men are gone. Mike says his farm system was ranked 29th of 32 going into the draft and 12th coming out of it, and the organization's own clubs back him up: Springfield is 61-32 and Worcester 50-43.

The one I would ask you to remember, though, is not a college player at all. Mike signed Roberto Garcia on the international market, and he told me he sent him to Cape Cod in the rookie league on purpose, with most of this year's draft class around him, "to have a winning environment built around him for his first season." Cape Cod was 13-1 when he said it. It is 22-6 now. Garcia is 18, he has a 1.82 earned run average in his first 24 2/3 innings, and the league's own list of its top 100 prospects has him 11th. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him 30th. In May I told you the three players this front office liked best had not played a game yet. Kris Cavanaugh, one of them, is now hitting .398 at Cape Cod and sits 77th on the league's list.

None of that pitches in August. What pitches in August is Elizalde, Kempner, Nelson and whoever else is left behind them, in front of a lineup that is 10th in on-base percentage and fifth in stolen bases and 26th in home runs.

There are 57 games left. Thirty-nine of them are inside the division, including six against Philadelphia, one of the clubs Chicago has to pass, and six against Somerville, which Chicago swept in Somerville in April, when all of this was going the other way. Eight straight Octobers were built here on patience, and Mike is being patient again. Whether that is enough to make it nine is what the next two months will tell us.
