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Dynamite lose Kuznicki, scramble for relief at deadline

BY **CAMILLE OSSORIO** · DENVER HERALD

On August 1, Steve Kuznicki threw a pitch in Spokane and tore the labrum in his shoulder. The injury is career-ending. He had a 3.15 earned run average, 91 strikeouts in 80 innings and 11 holds, and no reliever on the staff had thrown more. Within a day Denver's front office posted on the league's trade board that it was looking for a good quality reliever and a slugging outfielder or designated hitter.

That is the transaction that frames this deadline, and it came at the end of a run of them that started in June.

Tampa Bay sent Malik Harris for two low-level prospects, Nick Millard and Tyler Stillman, and kept half his salary and added $500,000. Montreal sent Jon Romero, 36, for a 2033 ninth-rounder and kept half of his. Southland sent Danny Kimball and Jean Dupont for Chris Enriquez and Ryan Morgan, kept half of both salaries and added $1.5 million. Four relievers, none of them expensive, every one of them partly paid for by somebody else. In May this franchise was selling players for picks and picks for cash. It is buying now, and it is buying the way a club with the league's largest payroll, $226.4 million, buys when it does not want that number to get any larger.

I asked Jay in July whether he was a buyer or a seller at the break.

> *"Buyer," he said. "Always a buyer. Except when I'm a seller."*

It is also accurate.

Now the part the transactions are trying to fix. In May I wrote that this lineup could not control the strike zone: 31st in walks, 31st in strikeouts, 22nd in on-base percentage, and a 22-26 record that the plate

discipline explained. Jay said at the time that it would even out once Kevin Porter, Tom Everette and Victor Baez came back. He was right and I was not. Denver has gone 30-27 since, and the offense is second in the league in runs, second in batting average, second in slugging and second in home runs, with 151. The on-base percentage has climbed to fifth. It still strikes out more than all but one club, and it no longer matters much.

Everette is hitting .325 and slugging .525, with Oahu still paying half of his salary. Hyun-kyu Kim, signed in January for one year, has 23 home runs and was named the league's player of the week today. Jared Pink has 21 home runs and a .206 average, which is a catcher doing exactly one thing very well. Emilio Della Mea, the best free-agent signing anybody in this division made last winter, is at .286 with a .362 on-base percentage.

So in July I asked whether any heads had rolled, since Jay promised in May that they would.

> *"The axe is poised near the neck region of the nearest scapegoat," he said, naming hitting coach Raul Cabello, "but I think this is a better team than the record indicates."*

The second half of that answer is correct, and the arithmetic supports it. Denver has outscored its opponents by 32 runs and sits one game under .500. The first half is aimed at the wrong department. Cabello's lineup is second in the league. The staff behind it is 20th in earned run average, the rotation is 21st, and the bullpen has blown 21 saves, the most in baseball. If something in this organization is costing Denver games, it is not the hitting.

The rotation has two starters doing their jobs. Jonathan Miller is at 3.59 across 133 innings. Marty Kilby, the $19 million one-year signing, is at 3.71 with a 1.05 WHIP and is on the injured list. Matt Ware is at 4.34 and is signed through 2035. Salvatore Paez is at 5.33. Hector Sierra, at 7.41, has been sent down.

The new relievers have not solved it yet. Harris has a 4.02 across 31 1/3 innings. Romero earned a save on August 1. Dupont has been hit hard in his first seven appearances. Four relievers in, one out for good, and the net gain so far is not measurable.

What Jay still has to spend is the farm, which he put on the trade board in July name by name, each one "available in the right deal." Gustavo Perez is 64th on the league's own list of its top 100 prospects and 56th on DSA Reports' list dated July 19, though he is hitting .194 at Franklin this season. Alex Suazo is 65th on DSA's. Odilon Keating, 17, is 67th. Those are the three names every club selling a real bat will ask for, and after the last six weeks, the relief-pitcher route is mostly used up.

Denver is 52-53 and holds the eighth and last playoff spot in the Ice Conference this morning, a game behind Montreal and a game ahead of Fort Collins. It has been to the postseason 14 years running and is the

defending champion. Of the 57 games left, 36 are inside the division, six of them against Fort Collins and 18 against Cincinnati, Galveston and Rochester.

The last time this front office was in a spot like this, it made six trades in one afternoon and won the championship in November. The club has made three this summer. The math says it needs a starter more than it needs another reliever, and a bat only if Morgan Alison, at $32 million and on the 60-day list, is not coming back. Watch which of those Jay goes after this week. That will tell you more than anything he says.