BAY SPORTS DAILY

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Cannons' farm climbs to 23rd, out of the cellar at last

BY **JUNIOR ESCAMILLA** · BAY SPORTS DAILY

Breaking news from the bottom of the standings: Tampa Bay's minor league system is 23rd.

Twenty-third! In combined record across all six affiliates! That does not sound like much until you know the rest of it, which is that from 2025 through 2030 this organization's farm finished 32nd of 32, six years running, and last season it was 31st. I have covered this team since 2025. Until now the best number I had to report was 31st. I made a graphic. It is mostly confetti.

Now the big-league club, which I am legally required to mention.

The Cannons are 39-66. Eighth in the Jade, 27 games out, and 29th in The Big League, which means there are three teams worse and I have their numbers saved in my phone for emergencies. They have lost four straight and eight of their last 10, and since my May piece they are 20-37. There was a nine-game losing streak from June 20 to June 29 that I am choosing not to relive. The road record is 16-38. They have been shut out 11 times.

The offense is still the worst in baseball, and still the worst in basically every way you can measure it: 32nd in batting average, 32nd in slugging, 32nd in OPS. The bullpen is still 32nd too. I wrote in May that the worst offense was being backed by the worst relief corps and I would like credit for consistency, theirs and mine.

In May, Leo told me this about Justin Davis:

> *"Davis is a building block for the future, and the plan is for more help to come throughout the duration of the contract."*

The building block has held up his end. Davis is 11-6 with a 3.02 earned run average across 137 innings. He has 11 of this team's 39 wins. He is signed through 2036. The help has not come yet. I believe Leo about the plan. I would also believe Davis if he started a podcast about it.

Chris McMillian has 24 home runs, tied for 10th in the league, at 23, on the minimum. He is day-to-day this week and I am refreshing the injury report like it owes me money. Billy Kern is hitting .286. D.J. Lord, 35, has a .353 on-base percentage. James Jimenez, owed $19 million in the last year of his deal, has 20 saves and a 4.01, which is the best version of James Jimenez this site has seen.

And then the deadline, the one part of the calendar this franchise is actually good at.

Leo has already made one deal. Malik Harris, a reliever with a 1.09 earned run average here, went to Denver along with half his salary and a little cash, and back came two young players: Nick Millard, an outfielder at Sarasota, and Tyler Stillman, a starter who has a 1.35 in six outings at St. Petersburg since he arrived. That is the Cannons business model in one trade, and I mean that as a compliment for once.

This week Leo put Mike Vanover, D.J. Lord and Billy Kern on the trade block with a note: "Get your rentals that will take you over the hump." I have never loved a trade note more. Somebody out there is two games out of a playoff spot and needs a 35-year-old first baseman with a .353 on-base percentage. Leo is waiting by the phone. So am I, with the graphic template open.

Now back to the farm, because it is the whole reason this piece exists.

The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has three Cannons on it. David Drake, the 18-year-old pitcher this club took in the first round in May, is 22nd, and has made three starts at Sarasota that I will be ignoring. Mike Brou, the 21-year-old I told you to keep a tab open on, is 37th and has 64 strikeouts in 58 innings at Pasco. Jeff Raymond, a 19-year-old shortstop, is 95th and hitting .283 at Manatee. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has Robby Clem, the outfielder at Clearwater, 44th and Ryan Affrunti 76th.

Sarasota, the rookie club, is 19-9 and in first place. It is the only first-place team this organization owns, and it is full of 18-year-olds, which is exactly where you want your first-place team to be if you are running this plan.

Leo told me in May that the draft strategy was "just collecting the best talent available to us at the moment of the pick, we have a lot of gaps that need to be filled and don't have a luxury to pick and choose." Twenty-third. The gaps are filling.

Fifty-seven games left, 30 at home, 39 inside the Jade. Six apiece against Galveston and Cincinnati, the two clubs fighting for the division. We cannot win it. We can absolutely ruin somebody's week.

On pace for 60 wins. Last year was 57. That is four straight years of improvement from the worst season any team has ever had, and this time the farm agrees with the standings. Nobody is printing nicknames. Yet.