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Black Sox fall two short; eight-year October run ends

BY **VERA NOWAK** · CHICAGO CITY WIRE

The way to understand how this season ended is to start with the night it hit bottom. On August 17 the Black Sox were 54-65, 11 games under .500, the lowest they had been all year. From that night to the last day of the season they went 26-17. They won seven straight from September 4 to 11, including a 13-1 win in Baltimore and a 17-2 win in New York. They finished 80-82, two games behind Denver for the last place in the Ice Conference.

So the streak ends at eight. Eight straight Octobers, built on one of the more modest budgets in the division, and the ninth came up two games short after a summer that started 12-2 and then lost its best hitter and its best power hitter to injuries in the same month. I asked Mike in September whether there was still a playoff push or whether September would become an audition.

> *"I still hope to make the playoffs but it does seem like an outside shot at this point," he said. "I knew I had pitching struggles and multiple season ending injuries now so it would be highly unlikely, but I will still try to make that final spot."*

The club played like it believed the first half of that answer. It went 14-11 in September and 5-1 in October, and with runners in scoring position after the deadline it hit .278 and slugged .535, fourth-best in baseball over those two months. Victor Gonzales, the best hitter Mike told me about in July, finished at .320 with a .412 on-base percentage, and with men in scoring position he hit .353. His two-run double beat Philadelphia 2-1 on September 17. Katsutoshi Wada, the power hitter, hit 16 home runs after the deadline and finished with 29.

What it could not do was win the close ones. Chicago went 17-30 in one-run games this season, and you do not need me to tell you how much of two games is hiding in a number like that.

The deadline was the one I described in August. Chris Kempner came from Southland and Travis Nelson from Somerville, both with half their salaries paid elsewhere, and Nelson made 12 starts with a 3.59 earned run average. Then on deadline day Mike sent Eitan Menahem to Boston for Carlos Sanchez and Boston's 2033 first- and fourth-round picks. I asked him whether that trade was about this season or next.

> *"That trade was about getting additional draft picks mainly," he said, "but having Sanchez as a replacement is only needed until prospect Matt Bell is ready to take over 2B."*

Which brings us to the part of this column I enjoy writing most.

Matt Bell spent the summer at Cape Cod, the rookie club Mike filled with this year's college draft class on purpose. He hit .414 there with 21 home runs in 311 plate appearances. Kris Cavanaugh, the outfielder I told you about in May, hit .448 with 19 home runs on the same team and is 81st on the league's own list of its top 100 prospects. And Roberto Garcia, the international signing Mike sent to Cape Cod to grow up around a winning club, made 12 starts there with a 2.29 earned run average and 68 strikeouts in 63 innings. He is 11th on the league's list. Isaiah Cunning, a starter at Springfield, is 59th.

That is the plan Mike described to me in May, when he said timing was everything: develop the college players now, so they are ready when the contracts run out. The contracts are running out now. In September he told me most of the players I had asked about were already signed to extensions, and the contracts bear him out. Shizuma Oda is signed for 2033. So are Tim Elizalde, for three more years, Dave Chapman, Andrew Halama, Juan Magana and David Espino.

> *"Hart will be gone at seasons end," Mike told me. Tim Hart hit 29 home runs and drove in 81, and with men in scoring position he slugged .585. His $13.6 million comes off the books, along with Chicago's half of Billy Perez's salary, $15 million, and the deal for Josh Foster, the catcher. All told, about $41 million of this year's payroll belongs to players who can leave this winter. About $112 million is already committed for next year.*

The winter, as I understand it, comes down to four spots. Third base needs Hart's replacement. Catcher needs a decision. Second base belongs to Carlos Sanchez until Matt Bell says otherwise, and after this summer Bell may say so sooner than anyone planned. The rotation needs the arm Mike has been asking for since July, and with that $41 million coming off, he will have some room to go and get one.

Eight Octobers is a remarkable thing for a franchise that has moved twice in eight years and spends the way this one does. I will miss writing about the ninth. But I would rather write about the club that went 26-17 when it had every reason to fold than the one that was 54-65 in August, and that is the club going into the winter.
