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Crabs keep Cunnane, let catcher walk, open in Toronto

BY **ROSALIND FEENEY** · BALTIMORE LEDGER-STAR

The Blue Crabs made one big decision this winter and it was about the ninth inning. Johnny Cunnane, who saved 41 games last year, signed for three years and $48.5 million: $6.5 million this season, then $21 million in 2034 and again in 2035. Nobody else of consequence arrived. There were no trades. The catcher left, and so did Tomas Ramirez, and the club that lost Game 7 in Somerville in November opens tonight in Toronto looking very much like the club that lost it.

The series against Somerville was lost by the front of the rotation. Roy Bell and Jake McHan made four starts, got 35 outs between them and allowed 21 earned runs. Sam Kutka and Antonio Amaya made the other three and allowed four. The bullpen pitched more of the series than the starters did and allowed six earned runs in 35 and a third innings. Cunnane, Manny Venegas, Michio Tanaka and Mike Van Voorhis did not allow a run between them. So the part of the staff that held up is the part that got the money, and the part that broke is coming back as it was.

Bell is 33 and in the last year of his contract, at $26 million. In the regular season he was what he was paid to be, 10-5 with a 3.00 earned run average and 22 walks in 162 innings. In October he got one out in Game 1 and Somerville scored nine runs in the first inning. Steve Westbrook is 33 too, owed $31.6 million this year and the same next year, and he finished last season with a 4.21. McHan, who went 15-6, is still on a near-minimum deal and still under club control. All three are back.

The departures were catcher Francisco Rodriguez, who signed with Huron for three years and $26 million, and Tomas Ramirez, who went to Tampa Bay for three years and $22 million. B.J. Reyna, who made $17 million last year and finished it on the injured list, signed with Southland for $1.5 million. Steve let all three go and replaced none of them from outside the organization.

Behind the plate that means Alex Mojica and Mike Inman. Mojica is 25 and hit .240 in 194 plate appearances here last year, after hitting 15 home runs in 248 at Triple-A. Inman, the club's first-round pick in 2027, has done this before: he started 114 games at catcher in 2031 and hit .189. He hit .306 in a shorter look last year. One of them is about to catch most of a season for a club that expects to play in October.

At third base the club still has Joe Suchan, at $8.6 million this year and next, after a .214 season in 471 plate appearances that came out a little below replacement. That was the softest spot in the lineup last year, and nothing was done about it.

The rest of the lineup is the one that won 94 games. David Peck, 25, was worth 5.2 wins last year and is still on a minimum salary. Danny Gaona stole 54 bases. Victor Barboza hit 19 home runs in 419 plate appearances and is signed through 2035. Matt Lamberson won the Great Glove in left field, the club's only major award from 2032, and has three years left at $17.5 million a year. Fabio Cardia hit .309 as the designated hitter and is back on a one-year deal at $3.1 million.

The farm is where something new could come from. Rick D'Amore, the 11th overall pick in 2029, is 29th on the game's Top 100 prospect list as of this morning, the only Baltimore name on it. He hit .296 with 16 home runs at Double-A last year and .344 in a month at High-A, and he is in big-league camp. Danny Cox, a 15th-round pick, hit .315 at Triple-A last year and got 26 plate appearances here. Both are infielders. Neither plays catcher, which is the position that opened up.

The payroll is $162.2 million against a budget of $218 million. There was room to spend this winter, and Steve spent it on one reliever. Last year this roster came within one game of the final.

Spring went 15-17 with three ties. I have never seen a Baltimore spring mean anything. The club has been to the postseason nine times in 10 seasons since 2023 and three times as far as the conference championship series.

Tonight is Toronto, three games on the road. Then Somerville comes to Baltimore on April 1, the first of 12 meetings. The last time the two clubs played, it was 7-1 in Game 7, and Bob Reyes allowed one hit in six innings. He is signed there through 2038 now. Nobody here has forgotten the second inning.