CHICAGO CITY WIRE

MARCH 28, 2033 · THE CHICAGO BLACK SOX BEAT

Black Sox sell high, keep Gonzales, bank four first-rounders

BY **VERA NOWAK** · CHICAGO CITY WIRE

The easiest way to explain this winter is to start with the one contract Mike did not let go. Victor Gonzales, who hit .320 with a .412 on-base percentage and was worth 6.1 wins last year, was a season away from free agency. In December he signed an extension that starts next year: five years and $176 million, $20 million in 2034 and $39 million in each of the four years after that. Everything else Chicago did this winter makes sense once you know that one thing was settled first.

Here is what else it did. In January Tony Mendiola went to San Diego for the Seals' first- and second-round picks in 2033 and again in 2034. The same day Tim Elizalde, Andrew Halama and Juan Magana went to Toronto, with a 2034 third-round pick, for Jason Mills, who hit 41 home runs for the Griffins last season. In February Shizuma Oda, the closer, went to Oklahoma City for a 2033 third and a 2034 second, with Chicago paying half his salary, and Jeremy Albrecht went to Huron for a 2034 second, a 2035 first and a 17-year-old pitcher named Miguel Villagomez. At the end of February Dave Chapman went to Oklahoma City too, for the Outlaws' first-round picks in 2033 and 2034 and the catcher Steve Welch, with Chicago again paying half of Chapman's salary. And Dale Downer came over from Somerville in December for a 10th-round pick.

Count it up. Of the six most valuable position players on last year's club, three were traded this winter and two more, Tim Hart and Josh Foster, left as free agents. Gonzales is the one still here. The three most valuable pitchers, Halama, Elizalde and Oda, were all traded. Back came one hitter, one catcher and a stack of draft picks. I asked Mike what he was doing, and he told me plainly.

> *"Looking to retool for a season or two when my prospects are closer to ready," he said.*

And on the pitchers: "We already had one of the worst staffs, might as well move a few pitchers for a premium hitter with value."

That second answer is the more interesting one, because it tells you how he thinks about value. Chicago allowed 701 runs last year. Elizalde threw 202 innings and won the Great Glove at pitcher, but his earned run average was 4.37. Halama was very good in 112 innings. Magana was a middle reliever. Mike looked at a staff that was not going to carry anybody in 2033 and turned three of its better arms into a first baseman who hit 41 home runs, tied for fifth in baseball. Mills is 29 and in the last year of his contract, at $20 million.

The draft picks are the part that will take longest to judge, and they start this week. The 2033 draft is under way. Chicago holds San Diego's pick at No. 14, its own at No. 15, Oklahoma City's at No. 20 and Boston's at No. 27, the last one from the Eitan Menahem trade at the deadline last summer. That is four first-round picks in one draft for a club that has built everything it has from the farm. It is the plan Mike described to me last May, when he said timing was everything: get the young players ready for the year the contracts run out.

The farm those picks join is already one of the better ones. Roberto Garcia, the 18-year-old who made 12 starts at Cape Cod last summer with a 2.29 earned run average, is 11th on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. Nate Weitzman is 56th and Edwin Rodriquez 73rd. All three are pitchers. Isaiah Cunning and Ben Nicholson, two more, are in big-league camp. Kris Cavanaugh, who hit .448 at Cape Cod with 19 home runs, is fifth in the system.

What is left for 2033 is a lineup built around Gonzales, Mills and Katsutoshi Wada, who hit 29 home runs and is owed $26 million this year and $51 million next. Ming Quan is signed through 2036. Carlos Sanchez has second base until Matt Bell is ready, the same arrangement Mike laid out at the deadline. Third base, which needed Tim Hart's replacement, has Cheuk-yan Zhào, who hit .201, and James Dominey, who is 41. Hart went to Virginia for five years and $73 million. Josh Foster, the catcher and Great Glove winner, went to New York for three years and $56 million. Behind the plate now are Welch, who hit .169 in Oklahoma City, Brad Posey and Jake O'Hara, who starts the year hurt.

The payroll is $102 million against a budget of $192 million.

Readers have asked me whether the front office gave up on 2033. I don't read it that way. A club that went 26-17 at the end of last year, with much of the team that did it now in Toronto, Huron, San Diego and Oklahoma City, was not going to win the Sapphire. What Mike has done is choose when the next good Chicago team arrives, and he has told us roughly when: a season or two.

Opening Day is at home, against Philadelphia. Then three in Boston, where Menahem plays now, and three in Montreal. Gonzales bats somewhere near the top of that lineup every day for the next six years.