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Ruiz's $150 million is back-loaded; Jay calls Denver a 92-win club

BY **CAMILLE OSSORIO** · DENVER HERALD

Marco Ruiz's contract is five years and $150 million, the largest anybody signed this winter. Read the years before the total. He is paid $10 million this season, $20 million next, then $30 million, $40 million and $50 million in 2037, with a player option. Denver bought an ace and pushed almost all of the bill past the point where its three biggest contracts end.

Those three are Kevin Porter at $30 million, Victor Baez at $28.5 million and Jose Nolasco at $25 million. All three end after this season. That is $83.5 million coming off at once, and the Ruiz deal starts climbing in exactly the years it is gone. Whatever else you think of Jay, the arithmetic was done on purpose.

In October I wrote that "future me," Jay's phrase for the budget problem, had arrived. He spent the winter solving it this way: one big contract that does not cost much yet, and a lot of small ones. Eddie Alonso, a reliever, signed for five years at $8 million a year. Ruiz and Alonso both came into the league this winter, so there is no line here to grade them on. Danny Adams, a shortstop worth 4.1 wins for Galveston last year, signed in March for one year and $8 million, which is the best value of the winter on this roster by a distance. Then a long list of one-year arms: Brian Cronk, Jesus Garcia, Jeff Zullinger and others.

The trades were small. Gregg Quinn went to Huron for Luigino Sacchi, an outfielder who hit .285 at Triple-A. Quinn was one of the two relievers Jay used as his "stopper" last year. Mike Karr went to Mexico City for a fourth-round pick. Salvatore Paez went to Vancouver for another fourth. Denver also paid Milwaukee $7 million for its 2033 second-round pick. Marty Kilby, who was worth 3.5 wins, signed with Vancouver for two years and $34 million. Tom Everette, who hit .318, is still unsigned. Steve Kuznicki, 80 innings out of the bullpen, retired.

Jay told me in October that he had learned nothing from the season, and that he would "try to find as many average or better pitchers as I can without straining the budget too badly." Then this month I asked him whether this is a championship team again.

> *"For sure this is a championship team," he said. "We should have won more than 82 last year. Ruiz strengthens the rotation quite a bit, the bullpen is much better this year, the offense should be about as good. I think it's a 92 win team."*

Grade the claims one at a time. "We should have won more than 82": yes. Denver scored 757 runs and allowed 701, the run differential of an 87-win team, and lost 29 save chances, the most in baseball. Some of that was luck and some of it was a bullpen Jay himself said had no good relievers. "The offense should be about as good": also yes. Porter, Baez, Emilio Della Mea and Nolasco are all back, and Everette's 23 home runs are replaced by Adams' 22. "The bullpen is much better": that one I cannot grade yet, because Alonso has never thrown a pitch in this league.

Getting from 87 to 92 is the rotation's job, and the rotation is where the money went. Matt Ware and Jonathan Miller threw 400 innings between them with earned run averages over four. Ruiz should go at the top. The rest of the order is mine to guess and the club's to announce tonight.

The farm will not help this year. DSA Reports ranked it 24th in December, and the only Denver name on the game's Top 100 this morning is Gustavo Perez, a 21-year-old outfielder at Low-A, 71st. Denver picks 18th in the draft this week, and has Milwaukee's second-round pick on top of its own.

The payroll is $190.1 million against a budget of $222 million. The Hall of Fame took two pitchers this winter who wore this uniform for part of their careers, Eric Ryan from 2010 to 2013 and Frank Vaughn in 2018 and 2019. Both went in as Galveston men.

Denver has six titles, the most in the league, and two of them in the last five years. It also has a 2032 that ended in the first round to Somerville. Jay says 92. Las Vegas comes in for three tonight, then Fort Collins.