MEMPHIS DELTA TIMES

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Blues take Xavier Brown first overall, sign Sanchez, open vs. champs

BY **OTIS FRAYNE** · MEMPHIS DELTA TIMES

The Blues had the first pick in the draft this year, which is what 108 losses buys you, and this week Eric used it on Xavier Brown, a center fielder. It is the first thing the franchise has been first at in a long time.

Brown will not play here this year and probably not next. He goes into a farm system that, for the first time in my memory, is worth talking about. Chris Faulk is 13th on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning, Efrain Rosales 14th, Mike Jenkins 30th. DSA Reports ranked the system tenth in December. That is better than Memphis has done at anything else in years.

The big-league club spent again. Ivan Sanchez, a center fielder from Denver, got three years and $42 million. D.J. Bakker, a starter from Virginia, got two years and $10 million. Then Kyle Croitoru, Jimmy Callahan, Jason Tapley, Jon Romero, Mike Rosen, Josh Jacobsen and Manny Ramirez, all on small deals. That is nine free agents for a club that won 54 games. I have seen this before. Memphis spent $148 million in one winter once and won 64.

Sanchez was worth 2.4 wins for Denver last season, which would have made him the fourth-most valuable player on this club. Bakker started for a division winner. Neither is the kind of signing that turns 54 wins into 80. Both make the club less bad, which is a start.

What is still here is the money already spent. Eli Bernal, the catcher, is owed $28 million this year and through 2036. Nachman Cohen, the shortstop, $21.2 million through 2035. Casey Schnake, who hit .294 and stole 42 bases and was the most valuable player on the club, $20 million through 2034. Vicente Chavez hit 28 home runs. The core of the lineup is 29 and 30 years old and paid like it. The rotation is not. Max McIntyre and Travis Byrd were the best of it last year, and neither had an earned run average under 3.60.

Jamie Bliss, who was worth 1.9 wins in right field, left for San Juan, five years and $60 million. He comes back with San Juan tonight.

This winter the Hall of Fame took Frank Vaughn, and Memphis should know his name even if it never saw him pitch here. Vaughn was a Nashville Blue from 2020 to 2024. In 2020 he made 34 starts and won 15 games for the only Blues team that ever won its division, the hundred-win club. Most of you were not here for it. I was. He was the steadiest thing in that clubhouse. He is a Galveston man in the Hall, and that is right, but he gave us the best summer this franchise has had.

Ten hundred-loss seasons in 32 years, and the last three seasons have been 115, 98 and 108 losses. I do not know what a good season looks like here anymore. I would settle for a September that matters.

Spring went 15-13 with seven ties. The payroll is $131.1 million against a budget of $158 million.

San Juan comes to Memphis tonight to start its title defense. Somebody has to be the first team to play the champions. It might as well be us. The crowds here were the smallest in the league last year, and some of those people will be in the building tonight anyway.