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Mudcats keep Barnes, buy Smith and King for one year, open in Fort Collins

BY **THÉO DELACROIX** · TIMES-CRESCENT

In October I wrote that this club was starting over. Ryan did not start over. He spent the winter buying veterans, one year at a time.

Joe Barnes went to free agency in November, the most valuable pitcher on a club that lost 100 games, and Ryan brought him home for five years and $137.5 million, $27.5 million a season through 2037, with a player option. Then, in January, came Jimmy Smith from Huron for one year and $27.5 million, and Joel King from Somerville for one year and $20 million. Joe Harris, an outfielder from Fort Collins, signed for three years and $45 million, front-loaded at $20 million this season. Beau Harrington and Jose Figueroa came on small one-year deals.

A front office that was selling at the deadline last summer has $47.5 million this season in two pitchers who are signed for this season only. What the moves say on their own is plain enough. Smith made 28 starts for Huron and Montreal last year with an earned run average under three. King had a 1.50 earned run average in 36 innings for Somerville after the deadline. Neither is a long-term piece. Both are the kind of pitcher a club buys when it thinks this year matters. Barnes is the long-term piece, and the length of his deal says Ryan believes the next good Mudcats team includes him.

Harris is the one I cannot square. He was worth almost nothing in Fort Collins last year, .225 with 17 home runs in 569 plate appearances, and he is paid more this season than Andy Chenault, who won the Platinum Stick at shortstop and was worth 5.2 wins.

Chenault is the one fixed point in this lineup, signed through 2035. Mark Williams hit .274 with 19 home runs at third base. After that it thins. Pat Vargas hit .208 at second. Eric McReynolds, who was a first-round pick of this club in 2015 and hit .173 last year, has retired. I wrote in October that the 2014 and 2017 clubs

had finally gotten old. McReynolds was not one of them, but he came up in their shadow, and I was sorry to see him go quietly.

The young players are still the long-term story. Michael Herr, a shortstop, is 74th on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning, and Jorge Oviedo, a second baseman, is 89th. Kevin Zaragoza, last year's first-round pick, went 7-2 with a 2.18 at Lake Charles in his first summer and is in big-league camp at 18. Dave McCloy hit 17 home runs at Triple-A last year. And this week New Orleans used the 11th pick in the draft on Logan Shattuck, a third baseman.

The payroll is $149.8 million against a budget of $214 million. Committed beyond this season: $173 million, $110 million of it to Barnes.

Spring went 11-22 with two ties. I have seen bad springs before good summers in this city. I have not seen one this bad.

Before 2030 this franchise had never had two losing seasons in a row. It has now had three. Ryan has written his own lineup card since 2008, and the card he fills out tonight in Fort Collins will have more new names on it than any I can remember. Then the Mudcats come home to play Tampa Bay, which lost 103 last year, and Cincinnati, which won 100.