NEW YORK STANDARD

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Empire buy Foster, keep Eaton, take shortstop fourth

BY **GIL AMSTERDAM** · NEW YORK STANDARD

Travis Eaton is still here. He is 36, he is owed $40.8 million this season, and it is the last year of the deal. In October I wrote that one year left made him easier to move than he was in August, if anybody in that building meant it. The winter came and went. Nobody moved him.

So this is the club that lost 107 games, minus a few pitchers, plus two free agents. Josh Foster, the catcher, signed for three years and $55.5 million, about $18.5 million a year. He won the Great Glove at catcher in Chicago last year and was worth 2.8 wins, more than anybody on the Empire. Steve Schwarz, a 31-year-old shortstop, signed for three years and $21 million out of Big Horn, where he was worth 0.8 wins before a knee injury in September.

Foster is a real player. Look at what he is joining. Last year the Empire scored 561 runs and allowed 847, a run differential of minus-286. One catcher does not fix that.

The pitching staff that allowed those 847 lost Tommie Gould, who was its most valuable pitcher at 1.9 wins and is still unsigned, and Eric Johnson, who went 5-19 and signed with Montreal. Nobody came in to replace them. The rotation is whatever is left: Chris Colvin, who went 8-12 with a 4.84, Donovan Walker, Justin Timms, who had a 5.29 at Triple-A, and whoever else gets the ball. That is my guess. The real one comes with tonight's lineup card. It will not be much better.

The payroll is $98.1 million against a budget of $178 million. That is $80 million of room in a winter when Denver gave one pitcher $150 million. Joe had the room to buy an arm and did not.

The one thing that happened this winter that matters past September happened this week. The draft is on, and New York picked fourth: David Torres, a shortstop. I have not seen him play. Neither has anybody in this city. He is the best thing the farm got all year, and the farm needed it. The six affiliates finished second-worst

in the league last year, and DSA Reports ranked the system 30th of 32 in December. Timms is the only Empire name on the game's Top 100 this morning, at 98th. Jessie Marino, last year's first-round pick, fell off it.

Here is what is worth watching. Perry Lyttle won the Great Glove in center field and hit .218, and he is in the last year of his deal. Jay Scott hit 20 home runs. Mike Higginbottom slugged .527 in 194 plate appearances and makes $1.6 million. Sam Entwistle is 24. Foster will catch every young pitcher this organization has, and that might be the best use of the money.

The Empire open in Boston, then come home for Montreal, then go to Somerville. That is nine games against three clubs that played in October. In 2031 this club lost 101. In 2032 it lost 107. I covered the 2010 Griffins, 98 wins and a ring, in this town.

Eaton bats somewhere in that lineup tonight, on the last year of a $204 million contract. Whether he finishes the season here is the first real decision of 2033. It should have been made in December.