ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

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North Stars stand pat over budget, lose Reiser, Christensen, Weasner

BY **ADA BRIGHTBILL** · ROCHESTER POST-EXPRESS

The North Stars did not sign a major league free agent this winter and did not make a trade. They lost four players from last year's roster who were worth at least a win: Jim Reiser to Boston, Mark Christensen to Myrtle Beach for two years and $46 million, Kevin Weasner to Phoenix for five years and $74 million, and the catcher Danny Sanchez to Tampa Bay. Christensen won 15 games and threw 213 innings. Reiser hit 29 home runs.

I asked Keven why he stood pat. He answered with a question.

> *"Why stand pat? Have you seen our budget?" he said. "I need mafia support at this point."*

I have seen it. The budget is $216 million. The payroll this morning is $220.7 million. Rochester is the only club in the league spending more than its budget, and it is doing that without having added anybody. The money was spent before the winter started: Vince Hernandes at $55 million in the last year of his deal, Tim Liddick's five-year, $180 million extension beginning this season at $36 million, Joey Reek's beginning at $19 million and rising to $35 million, Dave Smith at $22 million and Alex Rojo at $20 million through 2034. Committed beyond 2033: $362.5 million, the most of any club.

That is the roster Keven inherited and then extended, and it is still a very good one. Reek won the Pitcher of the Year award with a 2.72 earned run average and 216 strikeouts in 201 innings. Liddick, Jeff Williams and Jorge Garcia all won the Platinum Stick. Garcia was worth 6.4 wins and finished third in the Most

Valuable Player vote, and he is paid $6.25 million in the last year before free agency. Rochester scored 820 runs last year, the most in baseball. Most of the people who scored them are back.

The goal, Keven said, is "to win a championship before the older part of the core is cooked. We'll be fine."

The older part of the core is easy to name: Hernandes, Smith, Rojo and Lyle Egner, who hit .303, all 30 or older. The younger part is Reek, Liddick and Williams, who hit 35 home runs and is not yet eligible for arbitration. Reek and Liddick are signed through 2037.

In October, after Baltimore swept the club out of the first round, Keven told me it had been "an embarrassing and disappointing end," that "the best offense in baseball" had been "figured out," and that with "no farm and very limited funds" the organization would "look in the mirror this offseason and decide what the future looks like." The winter's decision, as far as the roster shows it, was to keep this team together for one more run at it.

The farm is the part of that answer I have been writing about for 13 years, and it has not moved. The Farm Report and DSA Reports both ranked the system last in the league in December. There is still no North Star on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. Chris King, a pitcher at Double-A, is first in the system. The North Stars pick 21st in the draft this week.

The Hall of Fame took Eric Ryan through the Veterans Committee this winter. He pitched one season for this franchise, in 2012, when it was the Winston-Salem Camels and lost 101 games. I remember him. Nobody else here will, and I will write it down anyway.

Spring went 12-18 with five ties. Rochester opens in Galveston, the club that won 102 games last year, then goes to Cincinnati, which won 100. Six games on the road against the two clubs that finished ahead of it in the Jade.

Ten years, ten Octobers, three championships. The man in the chair says it is fine. He has one more season of this lineup at this price before Hernandes and Garcia can leave, and he has told us plainly that he means to use it.