EL NUEVO DÍA DEPORTES

MARCH 28, 2033 · THE SAN JUAN STOGIES BEAT

Champion Stogies keep Mendoza, sign Bliss, start defense in Memphis

BY **NÉLIDA CRUZ BETANCOURT** · EL NUEVO DÍA DEPORTES

The banner belongs to San Juan now. Tonight the champions of The Big League open the season in Memphis, in front of the smallest crowds in the league, and on April 1 they come home to the Humidor to play Virginia, the club they beat in seven games on the way to the title. I expect the building to be full.

The winter was quiet. Chuck kept the pitcher who mattered most and added one bat.

Jonathan Mendoza, who went 3-1 with a 1.78 earned run average in six postseason starts, became a free agent in November and signed back with San Juan for four years and $44.5 million. Jamie Bliss, a right fielder from Memphis, signed for five years and $60 million. Chris Schimmel, a 23-year-old first baseman, signed for three years. There were no trades.

The one who did not come back is Willie Martinez, the Most Valuable Player of the final, who went 10-for-21 with two home runs and four stolen bases against Somerville. He is still a free agent this morning, unsigned. Bliss is the man who takes right field.

I asked Chuck whether this team needs a better regular season to repeat.

> *"Yes," he said. "82 wins may not be enough to make the postseason."*

He is right. San Juan won the title with 82 wins, the fewest any champion has ever had, and got into October as one of four clubs that made it at 82-80. Nobody should count on that twice. And then I asked whether this team is better than last year's.

> *"Hopefully as good," he said, "and with luck (and few injuries), a bit better."*

That is a careful answer from a careful man, and the roster supports it. Dustin Potter is still here, owed $38 million this year. He struck out 231 last season, and his single-postseason strikeout record from 2031 lasted until Chase Martin broke it in the final. Isaiah Logan, who threw 11 scoreless innings in the final, is still here. Chris Whittington won the Rookie of the Year award with a .296 average and 30 home runs, and he makes $500,000. Jason Parker hit 30 more. Mike Boller, the catcher, is signed through 2036.

The farm is strong. Adam Rall is 12th on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. Matt Giglio is 44th, Daniel Shuping 76th, Jeff Blanchard 83rd and Brandon Jones 97th. Five names. Shuping is hurt and will miss most of the season. DSA Reports ranked the system sixth in December. San Juan picks 32nd in the draft this week, last, which is where the champion picks. I will take it.

The payroll is $166.8 million against a budget of $218 million. Committed beyond this season: $332.5 million.

Spring went 14-14 with seven ties. Nobody in San Juan cared.

I wrote last year, more than once, that my hope for this roster was running ahead of its results. In October the results caught up and passed me. Nobody should expect 82 wins to be enough again, or a 0-2 hole in Somerville to be climbed out of again. Chuck says the regular season has to be better. In Memphis tonight, it starts.