BAY SPORTS DAILY

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Cannons stop selling cash, buy four regulars

BY **JUNIOR ESCAMILLA** · BAY SPORTS DAILY

For years this franchise sold cash. This winter it spent some. I need everybody to sit down.

Gustavo Lopez, a left fielder from Fort Collins, five years and $58.5 million. Tomas Ramirez, a third baseman from Baltimore, three years and $22.5 million. Jim Leach, a shortstop who is 34, three years and $15.8 million. Danny Sanchez, a catcher, three years and $12.9 million. Then a stack of one-year deals for Nick Hancock, Victor Rodriguez, Chris Ricks and Bill Suarez. That is four new everyday players for a club that went 59-103.

Are they good? They are fine. That is the honest answer. Lopez was worth 1.2 wins last year, Ramirez and Sanchez 1.0 each, Leach 0.9. None of them is a star. Sanchez fills a real hole, though. Juan Rodriguez, our catcher, had 488 plate appearances at 37 and hit .146, and he has retired. Billy Kern, the best position player on the club at 1.9 wins, is unsigned.

Leo also went shopping in Somerville. Twice. In December and again on New Year's Eve the Cannons sent the Moneyline a pile of late-round 2034 picks and got back nine minor leaguers: Javon Capers, Jimmy Howard, Matt Komar, Devin Pilon, Randy Chilton, Aaron Gersdorf, Tim Roblee, Terrell Moody and Ruben Mosqueda. Howard is already fifth in the system. I made the graphic.

The real reason to watch this team is still two levels down. No nicknames. David Drake, last year's first-round pick at No. 5, is 20th on the game's Top 100 prospect list this morning. He is 19 and threw 21 innings in rookie ball last summer. Mike Brou is 33rd and is still hurt, with about three months left on the injury he has had since last July. Jeff Raymond, a shortstop, is back on the list at 48th after falling off it in the fall.

And the draft. Tampa Bay picked 10th this week and took Jeff Yocom, a pitcher. That is two straight top-10 picks spent on arms.

Justin Davis is still the ace. He went 14-10 with a 3.56 and threw 202 innings, and he is signed through 2036 at $23.2 million a year, the biggest contract on the club. Chris McMillian hit 35 home runs. Collin Yates hit 18. After that, the lineup is mostly the new guys.

Here is what has not changed. The payroll is $96 million against a budget of $162 million. It is still among the smallest in the league. Six straight seasons of 100 losses, and the division still has Galveston, Cincinnati, Rochester and Denver in it. My bar: a good season is fewer than 100 losses. A great season is fewer than 90. I am not ready to say a word bigger than that.

Spring went 16-17 with two ties, which for us is basically a pennant.

Opening Day is at home, against Cincinnati, which won 100 games. Then we go to New Orleans, which lost 100. That second series is the one I have circled. Somebody in this division has to finish behind us for once.
