TORONTO SPORTING LIFE

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Griffins move Mills and Henderson, remake staff, open vs. Crabs

BY **HOLLIS WEIR** · TORONTO SPORTING LIFE

Brandon has had this job for eight months now, and he has changed a lot. The Griffins who open at home tonight against Baltimore have a new shortstop and about ten pitchers who were not here last season. Jason Mills, who hit 41 home runs, is in Chicago. Ken Henderson, who threw 204 innings, is in Virginia.

I asked Brandon whether pitching was the priority. He gave me a straight answer, and it was a different one.

> *"I think the main priority was getting some budget space," he said. "We have the 29th ranked budget in the league so we can't afford to have multiple guys earning 20mil +. After moving Henderson and letting a few guys walk in free agency, pitching was definitely a priority as well but the main priority was to just get some space to work with."*

He did get it. The payroll this season is $78.5 million. Last October about $78 million was already committed for 2033, and most of it belonged to four people: Mills and Henderson at $20 million each, Jose Figueroa and Alex Moralez. Two of those four are gone, and Figueroa went too. Only Moralez is left, at $15 million, which makes the 25-year-old who hit 37 home runs and finished third in the Rookie of the Year voting the highest-paid player on the club.

Here is who came back. For Mills, Chicago sent three pitchers: Tim Elizalde, who won the Great Glove at pitcher last year and threw 202 innings, Andrew Halama, who had a 2.96 earned run average, and Juan

Magana. For Henderson, with Toronto paying 35 percent of his salary, Virginia sent Albin Giolitti, a 28-year-old starter, plus its first- and fifth-round picks in this year's draft. Chris Gresham went to Mexico City for two picks in 2034. Then Brandon signed Daniel Frandsen, a shortstop who was worth 2.9 wins in Galveston, and a handful of veteran relievers on one-year deals, among them Chris Ruggiero, who is 37, and Jason Howell, who is 36. Halama has already signed for three more years at $4 million a season, starting in 2034.

So pitching did get done, even if it came second. And it needed doing. In August I wrote that this club hits plenty of home runs and gave up more of them than anybody in the league. In October Brandon told me the defense as a whole had to improve, and then he said the part I have thought about all winter: "the defense wont stop HRs, so some of the guys that cant keep it in the park will have to go." Toronto allowed 245 home runs last year, the most in baseball. Henderson gave up 37 of them in 204 innings. Elizalde gave up 21 in 202, and Halama four in 113. Giolitti allowed 21 in 175 for Virginia.

The spring had bad luck in it. Magana, who was going to close, tore the meniscus in his knee on March 20 and is expected to miss three to four months. Dave Morales strained a hamstring and is out about five weeks. Qu-bing Jiang, the center fielder, who was worth 3.1 wins last year, hurt his elbow in a collision on a base on March 16 and was expected to miss about two weeks. Spring finished 12-19 with four ties.

The draft started this week, and Toronto picked fifth: Dave Whelan, a shortstop. Virginia's pick, the 28th, is still to come. The farm already had four names on the game's Top 100 this morning, Chase Williams 51st, David Tucker 55th, Mike Larson 67th and Nick Knight 86th, and Ron Turner, the 19-year-old I keep telling you about, is fifth in the system after a summer at Double-A.

And the other question, about what counts as progress after 74 wins.

> *"Playoffs is progress!" Brandon said. "I want to make a playoff push. We have new faces in here but we have a lot of returning players as well and I think we can be competitive this season."*

The last October this city saw was 2022. The Sapphire sent four clubs to the postseason last year, and Toronto finished sixth, 32 games out. It is a long way to go in one winter. It is also the first spring in years that the man in charge has told me exactly what he is trying to do, and that is worth something to the people who buy tickets here.

Baltimore tonight, then Philadelphia, then Boston. Two of those three were in October last year.