THE BEACON REPORT

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Bargain rotation carries Beacons to share of Sapphire lead

BY **MARTY SOWERBY** · THE BEACON REPORT

Plus-73. That is the run differential after 48 games, 234 scored and 161 allowed, and it is the number I care about more than the 30-18 beside it. Last October I wrote that my model had this club about six wins worse than its record all summer. Run the same arithmetic on this season and it says the opposite: a team that has scored and allowed what Boston has should be about 32-16. The Beacons are tied with Montreal for first in the Sapphire, two games up on Somerville, and on the underlying numbers they have been a little unlucky to be only that.

Start with the rotation, because that is where the money is not. Mike Fuentes, Tyler Jackson, Juan Hernandez, Bill Ramirez and Jimmy Gant have made 47 of the 48 starts. Their combined salaries this year come to about $14.5 million. Starters' earned run average: 2.86, third in the league. Fuentes, an 18th-round pick, is 6-1 with a 2.31. Jackson is 4-3 with a 2.48 and 67 strikeouts, eighth in the league. Hernandez opened 4-0 with a 0.55 and has come back to 5-1 and 2.93, which is closer to what he is. Gant, the second overall pick in 2031, took the fifth turn and has struck out 60 in 49 innings. The staff has the second-most strikeouts in baseball.

In March I said the back of the rotation got better if Josh Owens took Anthony Anderson's turn. Neither happened. Gant took the turn, Anderson went to the bullpen and has a 2.01 there, and Owens has pitched eight times in relief: 18 and two-thirds innings, a 6.27 earned run average, 13 strikeouts. That is 6.3 per nine, almost exactly the rate he posted at Triple-A last year, the number I kept coming back to when every list had him first. The game's own list no longer has him in its top 100. Carl Johnson (82nd) and Eric Behnke (96th), both at Herman, are the two Boston names on it now.

The offense gets on base. The club leads the league in walks with 179 and is second in on-base percentage at .333 and second in runs. Luis Martinez leads the league with 42 runs batted in, is third with 14 home runs, and was player of the week on April 4. He is a free agent in November. Danny Hernandez is hitting .330 with a .422 on-base percentage and has scored 34 runs with three home runs. Edgar Tyler has played every game at designated hitter and is at .283.

Jim Reiser, the late one-year signing, is hitting .219 with seven home runs and 32 runs batted in. I guessed he would split right field and designated hitter. He has played center. The power has not shown up much and the runs batted in have. Carlos de la Rosa is at .221 with a .335 on-base percentage, the same shape as last year with less batting average.

Troy Hutchinson, whose four-year extension starts next season, broke a bone in his elbow running the bases on April 11. The estimate was four months, which makes it an August return at best. Kevin Smith and Tony Williams have covered: Williams, 24, is hitting .369 in 73 plate appearances. Eitan Menahem, who cost the club this year's first-round pick when he came over from Chicago last summer, separated his shoulder on April 17 and is still out. Chicago used the pick, 27th overall, on an outfielder named Pat Williamson.

The bullpen is the one part of the staff that is merely league-average, 14th in earned run average. Danny Stanescu has 13 saves, tied for the league lead with four other closers, and a 1.25 earned run average. Nick Luke came back from the bone spur and has a 4.22 in 10 and two-thirds innings, on $19 million this year. Konrad Palaszewski, who had a 2.16, has a sore elbow and a setback on May 20.

Here is the problem in one line: 1-5 against Somerville. The Beacons lost two of three in Somerville in April and were swept at home May 6-8, giving up 23 runs in those three games. Against the rest of the division they are 20-10. Against clubs that are over .500 today they are 6-6; against everybody else, 23-11. The schedule so far has been kind, and the model does not adjust for that.

Two in Las Vegas, then four at home against Rochester. The club went 9-3 in the last sim with a six-game winning streak in the middle of it. JP built a roster that could be in first place in May for about $15 million in starting pitching. Whether it is still there in September comes down to the games left against one club.