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Mike puts Mills on the deadline list; Sox take three first-rounders

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When I asked Mike last month whether 0-4 in extra innings was what a retool year looks like, he answered with the calendar. "The retool comes next year when my prospect SP's are closer to ready to come up," he said. Then, about Jason Mills, the first baseman he got from Toronto for three pitchers in January: "Mills is a piece to be moved at the deadline."

That is about as plain as a general manager gets in May, and it tells you how to read the 19-29 record, last in the Sapphire and 11 games behind Boston and Montreal. This was always going to be a year spent getting somewhere else. Mike told us that in March. What he has added since is the order of things: the young starters first, then the club around them, and Mills goes before either.

Mills has done what he was brought here to do. He has 12 home runs, tied for eighth in the league, and a .371 on-base percentage. He is 30, he is in the last year of his contract, at $20 million this season, and a contender will pay something real for him in July. If you were hoping to watch him for a whole summer at our place, these next two months are the time.

The rest of the lineup is the hard part to watch. Chicago has scored 148 runs, the fewest in baseball, and has the lowest slugging percentage of the 32 clubs. Victor Gonzales, whose five-year extension starts next season, was player of the week on April 11 and is hitting .245 with a .398 slugging percentage, well below the man who hit .320 last year. Ming Quan is at .290. After that the numbers get thin quickly. Chris De Lorenzo is at .180 at shortstop. Cheuk-yan Zhào is at .138 in 102 plate appearances at third base, and the men who have spelled him there have not done much better. The club walks a lot, fifth-most in the league, and still does not score.

Then there are the extra innings. The Black Sox are 3-8 in games that go past the ninth, and when the margin is that thin and the bats are this quiet, a record gets away from you in a hurry. The low point was 14-26 on May 13. They are 5-3 since.

The pitching has a bright spot that came from inside the building, which is the way this front office has always found them. Logan Bates, a ninth-round pick in 2025 who makes the league minimum, has made nine starts with a 1.61 earned run average and has allowed one home run in 50 and a third innings. Travis Nelson has a 3.04 and 68 strikeouts, seventh in the league. David Espino has nine saves. Ramon Renteria, 23, has taken his lumps, 1-6 with a 5.72, and the club has let him keep taking the ball, which tells you what this season is for.

The best week of the year was the last week of April. Chicago swept Montreal at home, 3-2 in 13 innings, then 2-0 and 4-2, three of the four straight wins that are still the longest streak of the season. Montreal is tied for first. On a given night this club can play with anybody. It just has not done it often.

The part of Mike's plan that will matter most happened off the field. Chicago went into the draft holding three first-round picks it got in last year's trades, and used all three: Ryan Chapman, a pitcher, at No. 14 with San Diego's pick, Omar Hernandez, another pitcher, at No. 20 with Oklahoma City's, and Pat Williamson, an outfielder, at No. 27 with Boston's. Two more arms for an organization that already has three on the game's Top 100. Roberto Garcia, 18, has climbed to sixth on that list, from 11th in March. Nate Weitzman is 61st and Edwin Rodriquez 65th. Closer to Chicago, Isaiah Cunning, last summer's first-round pick, has a 1.43 earned run average in 37 and two-thirds innings at Peoria. When Mike says "next year," Cunning is one of the names he means.

Readers have written to ask whether this is a lost season. It is a season with a purpose, and the purpose has a date on it. Between now and the deadline the job is to play the young starters, keep Mills healthy and hitting, and find out who in this lineup is still here when Cunning and Garcia arrive.

Two in New Orleans, then four at home against Tampa Bay. Mills will be at first base for all of them, for now.