NEW YORK STANDARD

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Eaton slugs .328 on $40.8 million; Empire last in OPS

BY **GIL AMSTERDAM** · NEW YORK STANDARD

The Empire's on-base-plus-slugging after 48 games is .622, the worst in baseball. So is the .215 batting average. The club has scored 156 runs, 30th of 32, and it is 20-28, sixth in the Sapphire, 10 games out.

In March I wrote that keeping Travis Eaton through the winter was a mistake and that moving him was the first real decision of 2033. Here is what waiting bought. Eaton is 36. He is hitting .247 with two home runs and a .328 slugging percentage in 191 plate appearances. He is paid $40.8 million this year, the last year of the deal. In December he was a two-time MVP with one year left. Now he is a first baseman slugging .328. Every week he stays, the return gets smaller, and it was never going to be big.

In April I asked Joe what turned the season around after a 1-11 start. The answer is the schedule. The Empire lost nine straight in early April, then swept Philadelphia and Toronto at home for six straight wins, then went back to losing to good teams. Against clubs with winning records today they are 5-19. Against everybody else, 14-6. On the road, 7-17. That is a bad club that beats other bad clubs.

The two free agents have not helped. Josh Foster, three years and $55.5 million, is hitting .203. He has walked enough to get on base at .325, which makes him one of the better hitters in this lineup, and that tells you the problem. Steve Schwarz, three years and $21 million, is hitting .176. Perry Lyttle, the center fielder in the last year of his deal, is at .184. Joe Weiner is at .188 in 190 plate appearances. Jamie Woodside is at .188. That is five regulars under .210.

There are three bats worth your ticket. Sam Entwistle, 24, was player of the week on April 18 and is hitting .275. Jay Scott has six home runs and 25 runs batted in, the most on the club. Manny Ruiz, picked up from Southland on April 11 with a reliever, is hitting .167 and has also hit six home runs in 102 plate

appearances, which is either a hitter learning a new league or a hitter who only does one thing. Joe gave up an eighth-round pick to find out.

The pitching is better than the hitting, which is a low bar. Chris Colvin, 23, is 5-4 with a 3.32 and has walked 21 in 62 innings. Donovan Walker has a 3.49 and one win to show for it. The Empire's pitchers have the sixth-most strikeouts in the league and the second-most walks, and Austin Morley is 0-5 with a 7.15. The three relievers Joe bought from Virginia for $4 million on Opening Day have given him something. Tim Breckenridge is 5-2. Jason Davis has four saves and 35 strikeouts in 19 innings. Roger Butt has allowed four home runs in 13 innings.

The best news of the spring came off the field again. After David Torres at No. 4, the Empire picked again at No. 19 and took another shortstop, Jason Brett. Two of the first 19 picks in one draft, for a farm that finished near the bottom of the league last year and is near the bottom again: Oswego is 3-21. Jessie Marino, last year's first-round pick, has a 3.00 at Triple-A. No Empire prospect is on the game's Top 100.

So here is where it is. A club that lost 107 games last year is on pace to lose about 95 this year, with $80 million of budget room it did not use and a $40.8 million first baseman it did not trade. The improvement is real and it is small, and Joe owns both halves of it.

The deadline is about ten weeks away. Eaton's contract runs out in October whether anybody in that building moves him or not. If he is still in the lineup on August 1, the front office will have spent the whole season deciding not to decide. Next: two in Tampa Bay, then four with Denver, the best team in baseball, at home.