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Sox lose 14 straight, then spoil September for two contenders

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It is worth remembering how close this got before it got away. On September 9 the Black Sox beat New York 5-2 at our place, Isaiah Cunning won his start, and the club was 65-74 and part of a four-way tie for the last wild card in the Ice. Two days later it was a game out, and I asked Mike whether he was still trying to get in, after he had sent Jason Mills and Travis Nelson to Phoenix for two first-round picks.

> *"I always want to be in the playoffs even if I am in a rebuild year with a shot," he said, "but I'm not expecting to make the playoffs."*

The day after that 5-2 win, the club lost 7-5 to New York. It did not win again until September 26. Fourteen straight: two to New York, three in Philadelphia, three at home to Boston, three to Montreal, three to Somerville. Four of them were by one run or went extra innings. Nine of them came against the three best clubs in the division. The sim that ran September 12 through 25 went 0-12, and by September 29 the club was mathematically out. It finished 69-93, seventh in the Sapphire.

Then it did something I liked a great deal. Toronto came here on September 26 needing wins, and Logan Bates and the bullpen shut them out, 4-0. The next night it was 3-1. On September 30 the club went to Baltimore, another team chasing the same spot, and won 3-2 in 12 innings and 6-2. Both of those clubs got in anyway. They will remember who made them sweat.

Mike told us in the spring that this was a retool, a season or two while the young players got closer, and the deadline was where you saw it. Mills went on July 18. On August 1 Nelson went to Phoenix with $2.55 million in cash for Phoenix's 2034 first-round pick. Chicago now holds two Phoenix first-rounders, 2034 and

2035, on top of its own. Jeff Whittington, the young arm in the Mills deal, was the ninth pick in this year's draft.

The same day Mike picked up Jahiem McDonald from Southland for a 2035 seventh-round pick. McDonald hit 14 home runs in 56 games here, and he was player of the week in the Ice on August 8. He also hit .184. I asked whether he was the first baseman next year.

> *"Yes," Mike said. "Bob Hutton is a year or 2 away from being ready so he will be my 1B for the immediate future."*

The lineup was the hard part all year and stayed that way. The club scored 553 runs, the fewest in baseball, and slugged .356, also last. Katsutoshi Wada hit 33 home runs. Victor Gonzales stole 45 bases and hit .266, and his five-year extension begins in the spring. Dale Downer, who re-signed on August 19, played center every day. Chris De Lorenzo stole 47 bases and hit .190.

The arms from inside the building are why this was a 69-win club and not a 59-win one. Bates finished 10-14 with a 3.48 in 183 and two-thirds innings, on the minimum. David Espino finished with 32 saves and a 1.97, and he is signed through 2037. Kyle Mittiga had a 2.32 in 65 games. Ramon Renteria, 24, took the ball 33 times and threw 197 innings. His 4.84 is not pretty, and nobody else on the staff took more turns. Cunning, who started his big-league life with a 10.80 in two starts in July, had a 4.23 in his 11 starts after the deadline.

The rest is further down and getting closer. On the game's Top 100 at the end of the season, Roberto Garcia is fourth and Ryan Chapman 12th. Edwin Rodriquez is 59th and Nate Weitzman 72nd.

One more thing about those picks. In August Dana Whitcomb reported that the league is talking about four new clubs, as early as 2036. If that happens, a first-round pick in 2035 is one pick among 36 clubs instead of 32. I asked around the building whether anyone had done that math. Nobody wanted to talk about it yet.

Mike spent this summer collecting the future. The 14 losses in September were the price of it, and the two wins over Toronto were a reminder that the young arms can already pitch in a game that matters to somebody.