NEW YORK STANDARD

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Empire finish 68-94, give Lyttle three more years

BY **GIL AMSTERDAM** · NEW YORK STANDARD

Minus 201. That is the run differential. The Empire scored 574 runs and gave up 775, and only three clubs in baseball gave up more. They finished 68-94, last in the Sapphire, 30 games behind Somerville, last of 16 in the Ice. They are not the worst team in baseball. Memphis and Spokane saw to that. That is the good news.

On August 1 I wrote that whatever happened to Travis Eaton at the deadline was Joe's. Nothing happened to Travis Eaton at the deadline. Eaton and his $40.8 million salary stayed right here. Eaton hit .295 in 25 games after the deadline and played 126 in all. The deal ends this month. Joe spent a year deciding not to decide, and then the year ran out.

The one thing he did move was Josh Foster. Three years and $55.5 million last winter, a .189 average here, and on August 1 Foster went to Milwaukee for a 2034 fifth-round pick. Milwaukee took all of the money. I will give Joe that one. It is the best trade this front office made all year, and it was getting rid of its own mistake.

Then, on September 20, the club gave Perry Lyttle a three-year extension, $8.4 million. Lyttle played center field all season and hit .209 with a .258 on-base percentage. He is a fine glove. He has two Great Gloves. He also batted 587 times for a club that finished 30th in runs. I asked Joe in September what was working, after an 8-4 sim.

> *"Even a blind squirrel finds a nut," he said. "A good couple weeks doesn't equate to a good season."*

He was right, and fast. The club went 3-9 the next sim. It lost nine straight from September 17 to 26, including 10-1, 13-2 and 9-6 in Baltimore. It went to Toronto on September 30 and lost 10-0 and 10-0 on back-to-back nights. It was eliminated September 27.

Here is what was working. Joe Pruitt. In his last 12 starts Pruitt went 6-1 with a 2.30 earned run average, 89 strikeouts in 78 and a third innings. On October 3 he threw seven and two-thirds innings against Chicago, gave up one hit and struck out 13. He finished 10-3 with a 3.25. I asked Joe whether Pruitt is his ace next year.

> *"Hopefully Pruitt is at or near the top of the rotation for years to come," he said. "Clearly it's been a difficult transfer from having Perez and Lott front line a rotation."*

That is honest. It is also a GM telling you his rotation is one man. Chris Colvin, 23, gave him a second: 10-14, 3.47, 195 strikeouts. After those two it falls off a cliff. Greg Tucker finished at 5.82. Juan Castillo went 0-8 after the deadline with a 7.99 and finished 4-16. Justin Timms, the one young arm I said in August was a reason to buy a ticket, gave up 13 home runs in 60 and a third innings after it and had a 6.41. I was wrong to sell you that ticket. The staff gave up 236 home runs, second-most in baseball, and blew 28 saves. Colin Shimel gave up 16 home runs in 36 innings of relief after the deadline. Sixteen. In relief.

The lineup had two men. Sam Entwistle, 25, hit .312 after the deadline and .293 for the year. Toby Newman, 23, hit .290 in 67 games. Cole Rapin, the best thing that happened here in June, broke his elbow in July and is still out. Steve Schwarz, three years and $21 million, hit .168. Joe Weiner, the first-round pick, hit .211 and slugged .309. Manny Ruiz hit 21 home runs and .195.

The farm has David Torres, 29th on the game's Top 100 at the end of the season, and Billy Lozoya, 60th. That is the list.

Thirteen more wins than last year. Last winter Joe had room to spend and spent it on Foster and Schwarz. This winter he has more of it. That should worry you more than it excites you.