

PIRATES BEAT

Pirates Hold the Division as April Turns to May

Pittsburgh closed the season's first month a game and a half up in the Central, riding a teenage shortstop, a lockdown bullpen, and vintage stretches from a couple of winter pickups — while Bubba Chandler is joined by Hunter Barco on the injured list and the rotation's depth gets thinner still.

BY DANNY KOWALSKI

PITTSBURGH — May 2

Pittsburgh closed the books on the season's first month the same way it opened it: in first place. The Pirates enter May at 18–15 (.545), a game and a half clear of the Chicago Cubs (16–16), with Milwaukee (15–16) at 2.0 back, Cincinnati (14–17) at 3.0 and St. Louis (13–19) at 4.5. It is, by a wide margin, the best position this club has occupied at this point on the calendar in years.

The lineup is doing it with speed and thump — 38 home runs and 40 stolen bases through 33 games, a .262/.327/.416 team line — while the pitching staff has been carried almost entirely by its bullpen. That imbalance is both the reason Pittsburgh is where it is and the biggest question mark hanging over whether it stays there.

BY THE NUMBERS

Record	18–15 (.545)
Standing	1st, Central Division (+1.5)
Batting average leader	J. Triolo, .360
Home run leader	O. Cruz, 6
RBI leader	R. O'Hearn, 18
ERA leader (relief)	D. Santana, 1.13
Saves	D. Santana, 10
Strikeouts	B. Ashcraft, 41

AFFILIATE	LEVEL	W–L	PLACE
Indianapolis	AAA	13–18	7th
Altoona	AA	11–16	6th
Greensboro	High-A	7–11	4th
Bradenton	Low-A	9–9	3rd
FCL / DSL Pirates	Rookie	—	Not yet open

Prospect to watch: Seth Hernandez, RHP, 18 — the system's top arm, still awaiting his pro debut once the Florida Complex League opens.

The Griffin effect keeps compounding

Konnor Griffin is still the story that has changed the temperature in this city more than the standings have. The 19-year-old shortstop is hitting .286 with 6 home runs, 13 stolen bases and 20 runs scored in 33 games — a power-speed line that looks less like a hot streak and more like the real thing with every week that passes. Ryan O'Hearn has been right there with him: .320 with 5 home runs, 18 RBI and a .950 OPS out of an everyday right-field job the roster didn't really have an answer for in spring training. Jared Triolo, deployed all over the infield, has cooled only slightly from his hot start and is still hitting .360 with a .968 OPS and 6 steals. Jake Mangum (.343) has given the bench speed and a switch-hitting bat, and in a tiny 37-at-bat sample, Omar Alfonzo has been outright unfair at .432/.463/.757.

The cold spots a first-place team can still absorb

Bryan Reynolds is still what he was at the time of the season outlook: cold. The two-time face of the franchise is hitting .183 with a .556 OPS, arguably the single biggest swing factor in whether this offense keeps producing enough to cover for a thin rotation. Joey Bart has crept up from .158 to .188 but remains a well-below-average bat behind the plate, and Marcell Ozuna is hitting just .227 with modest power. Henry Davis's audition as a second catcher didn't last: an 0-for-8 stretch behind the plate ended with an option back to Triple-A Indianapolis, leaving Bart as the everyday catcher by default rather than by performance.

A bullpen carrying a rotation

Paul Skenes' ERA has come down half a run since the preseason outlook — from 4.18 to 3.79 — with a 2–1 record and 35 strikeouts in 38 innings. The stuff was never the question, and the results are slowly catching up to it. Braxton Ashcraft remains the rotation's other real building block: a 3.38 ERA and a 41-to-10 strikeout-to-walk mark that says his surprise start is real, even if he's stuck with a tough-luck 1–3 record to show for it. Behind those two, it is still thin. Mitch Keller has trimmed his ERA from 6.00 to 5.68 without convincing anyone the extension is paying off yet, and Jose Urquidy is stuck at 5.79.

The bullpen keeps doing the heavy lifting. Dennis Santana has been a shutdown closer all month — his ERA has dropped further, to 1.13, with 10 saves already banked — and Justin Lawrence (2.25, a strikeout an inning) and Yohan Ramirez (2.81, 21 K in 16 IP) have been nearly as good. Mason Montgomery has cut his ERA from 6.32 to 5.50 without officially turning the corner, and Gregory Soto has walked nearly as many hitters (10) as innings pitched (12). The rotation depth chart took another hit in April: Bubba Chandler, who lasted a third of an inning into his first start before landing on the injured list, remains out on a four-month recovery timeline, and he's now joined there by swingman Hunter Barco (7.50 ERA before his own 60-day IL stint). Jared Jones still hasn't thrown a pitch in 2025. Until one of them is ready, Skenes and Ashcraft are holding up a rotation that doesn't have much behind them.

A quiet month on the transaction log

Pittsburgh's lone trade of the month came early: on April 1, the Pirates sent utility infielder Enmanuel Valdez to Miami for outfielder Dillon Head and first baseman Nathan Martorella. Otherwise, the roster news was mostly subtraction — Henry Davis's brief call-up and swift return to Indianapolis was the most notable in-season move, with the winning core on the active roster otherwise left alone.

Down on the farm

The system that's supposed to keep this window open remains a mixed bag. Triple-A Indianapolis has climbed only marginally to 13–18 and sits seventh in its league. Double-A Altoona is 11–16. High-A Greensboro is 7–11. The bright spot is still Low-A Bradenton, a .500 club at 9–9 and the level closest to the system's most talked-about position-player prospect. The complex leagues remain dark — the Florida Complex League isn't set to open until late June — which means top pitching prospect Seth Hernandez still hasn't thrown his first professional pitch.

What's ahead

May will say a lot about whether April was a foundation or a fluke. Chicago is only a game and a half back, and the rotation still has no clear fourth or fifth starter until Chandler, Barco or Jones is healthy. For now, the Pirates enter the season's second month the way they spent its first: on top of the Central.