

Three Rivers Report

PITTSBURGH PIRATES BASEBALL · BEAT COVERAGE

THREE RIVERS REPORT

MONTHLY RECAP · VOL. 3

PIRATES BEAT

Pirates Stay Hot and Widen the Gap as May Turns to June

Pittsburgh's lead over Chicago held all month while a rookie catching tandem and a fresh face in the rotation papered over Joey Bart's departure and Mitch Keller's collapse — and with Marcell Ozuna and Keller both now quietly on the trade market, the farm system just proved it can supply the answers on short notice.

BY DANNY KOWALSKI

PITTSBURGH — June 2

Pittsburgh enters June the way it's spent every day since Opening Day: in first place. The Pirates are 33-26 (.559), a game and a half up on the Chicago Cubs (32-28), with Cincinnati and St. Louis tied at 8.0 back and Milwaukee right there with them. It's a smaller cushion than the club held a month ago on paper, but a much sturdier one in practice — this time it survived a genuine roster shake-up at catcher and a rotation collapse from a should-be innings-eater, and the lead never really wavered.

BY THE NUMBERS

Record	33-26 (.559)
Standing	1st, NL Central (+1.5)
Batting average leader	R. O'Hearn, .331
Home run leader	O. Cruz, 11
RBI leader	O. Cruz, 36
ERA leader (relief)	Y. Ramirez, 1.65
Saves	D. Santana, 16
Strikeouts	P. Skenes, 77

AFFILIATE	LEVEL	W-L	PLACE
Indianapolis	AAA	27-29	5th
Altoona	AA	21-34	6th
Greensboro	High-A	23-21	3rd

Bradenton	Low-A	24-20	2nd
FCL / DSL Pirates	Rookie	—	Not yet open

Prospect to watch: Seth Hernandez, RHP, 18 — the system's top arm by a wide margin (73 potential), still awaiting his pro debut once the Florida Complex League opens, and already good enough on paper that Seattle wanted him included on top of Marcell Ozuna in trade talks this month.

The Cruz breakout

If April belonged to Konnor Griffin, May belonged to Oneil Cruz. The center fielder is up to 11 home runs, 36 RBI and 23 stolen bases on the year and now leads the club outright in all three — a five-tool line that's quietly become the engine of this offense. Ryan O'Hearn has been steady right alongside him at a team-best .331, and Griffin himself, while a shade cooler than his blistering April, is still holding down shortstop at 19 years old without missing a beat.

The catcher spot finally gets settled — by trading away the incumbent

The most consequential move of the month arrived on May 24: Pittsburgh sent Joey Bart, hitting just .188 with little power to show for it, to Tampa Bay for a three-player return of upper-level depth (Edward Olivares, Raynel Delgado and Blake Sabol). It was an admission that the catching search wasn't going to be solved by patience. Instead, it's being solved from underneath: rookies Rafael Flores Jr. and Omar Alfonzo have taken over a timeshare behind the plate and, so far, have made the position an actual strength — Flores at a scorching .330/.383/.569 and Alfonzo right there at .277/.330/.485, both in still-small samples but both a clear upgrade on what came before.

Judd stabilizes the fifth spot; Keller's deal looks worse by the month

Tommy Judd has claimed the fifth rotation job and given the staff a real building block there: a 3.81 ERA over his first extended big-league look. Paul Skenes (3.11 ERA, 77 strikeouts in 75.1 innings) and Braxton Ashcraft (2.73 ERA, a 73-to-18 strikeout-to-walk mark) have both taken another step forward from where they stood a month ago. The problem remains Mitch Keller, whose ERA has climbed to 6.37 across 65 innings — a rough return so far on a contract that only gets more expensive over the next two seasons, and a big reason his name is now out there in trade conversations of its own. Jose Urquidy (5.08 ERA) profiles as bullpen depth and a modest trade chip rather than a building block. Bubba Chandler and Hunter Barco remain out on the 60-day injured list.

The farm answers back

This month's full farm system review (Tom's curated shortlist, 58 names covered) landed at a useful moment: the system has already delivered the answers at two of the organization's thinnest big-league spots. Beyond Flores and Alfonzo at catcher, Jhostynxon Garcia has taken over in right field and is hitting .283/.341/.442 in his own audition. One level down, Termarr Johnson is running a .360/.441/.618 line at Double-A Altoona with more walks than strikeouts — the loudest bat in the system this month — and Triple-A right-hander Wilber Dotel (2.69 ERA) has emerged as the clear call-up option once Keller is moved. Seth Hernandez, still a level away from his first pro pitch, remains the system's headline long-term asset.

Quiet on the transaction log, busier behind the scenes

Aside from the Bart trade, the active roster went largely untouched in May. But two names are now working their way toward the July deadline: Marcell Ozuna, who's scuffled to a .214 average and been shifted into a bench role rather than dealt outright at a discount, and Keller, whose rising price tag makes him a sell candidate even with Dotel already lined up behind him. Second baseman Brandon Lowe was set to be recalled from Triple-A this month before

a four-week injury put that plan on hold — which, as it turns out, buys extra time for both trade conversations to develop before any roster crunch actually has to be resolved.

What's ahead

June will be a market-testing month more than anything else: watching whether Ozuna's bat recovers enough to fetch a real return, whether a Keller trade produces a big-league-ready arm or leaves Dotel to step straight in, and whether the division lead — unspectacular on paper at a game and a half — keeps proving sturdier than it looks.