

Three Rivers Report

PITTSBURGH PIRATES BASEBALL · BEAT COVERAGE

THREE RIVERS REPORT

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PIRATES BEAT

Pirates Turn the Calendar to July Still in First — and Ready to Buy

Pittsburgh closes out June with a wider division lead than it carried a month ago, its first outright trade-deadline move already on the books, and the amateur draft just over a week away — the clearest signal yet that this front office plans to add, not sell, in July.

BY DANNY KOWALSKI

PITTSBURGH — July 1

Pittsburgh enters July the way it spent nearly all of June: in first place, and by a wider margin than it held a month ago. The Pirates are 48-38 (.558), two and a half games clear of the Chicago Cubs, with St. Louis (8.0 back) and a cooling Cincinnati club well outside realistic contention. The lead grew even though the last week of the month went sideways — Pittsburgh dropped two of three to close out a series at Philadelphia — because the rest of June was strong enough to bank real cushion first. More to the point, this is no longer a team just holding serve: with the trade deadline approaching and a division lead to protect, the front office made its first outright move of the summer on July 1, and the July 11 draft is now the last item on the calendar before the buying starts in earnest.

BY THE NUMBERS	
Record	48-38 (.558)
Standing	1st, NL Central (+2.5)
Batting average leader	R. O'Hearn, .299
Home run leader	O. Cruz, 16
RBI leader	O. Cruz, 45
ERA leader (relief)	D. Santana, 2.15
Saves	D. Santana, 22
Strikeouts	P. Skenes, 127

AFFILIATE	LEVEL	W - L	PLACE
Indianapolis	AAA	44-35	3rd
Altoona	AA	35-48	5th
Greensboro	High-A	45-24	1st
Bradenton	Low-A	37-32	2nd
FCL Pirates	Rookie	0-1	—
DSL Pirates	Rookie	—	Not yet open

Prospect to watch: Seth Hernandez, RHP, 19 — the system's top arm by a wide margin (74 potential) made his pro debut at the Florida Complex League this month. The sample is tiny (4.0 innings) and the line unremarkable on paper, but the arm that made Seattle ask for him on top of Marcell Ozuna in trade talks is now officially pitching games that count.

Ashcraft arrives as a true co-ace; Judd and Keller both come back to earth

Braxton Ashcraft has been the story of the rotation all month, his ERA settling at 2.33 across 108 innings — a full run better than where he sat a month ago, and now arguably the better pitcher on the staff even with Paul Skenes still striking out everyone in sight (127 strikeouts, 2.69 ERA, over 113 innings). The bad news came from the other two names in the rotation: Tommy Judd's ERA has climbed to 5.61 over his last two starts after a strong first extended look, and Mitch Keller's implosion finally reached the point of no return — a 5.88 ERA across 17 starts was enough for the front office to pull him from the rotation outright. Bubba Chandler has been activated off his rehab assignment to take the open rotation spot; his first start back was a brief one (0.1 innings) and shouldn't be read as anything more than a first test.

Keller's demotion doubles as a deadline pitch

Moving Keller to the bullpen wasn't really about saving the rotation — Chandler's activation handled that. It's about making him easier to sell. A rotation arm with a rising ERA and a contract that gets more expensive over the next two years is a hard trade; a bullpen arm with the same numbers and a lower price tag to absorb is a much easier one. Jose Urquidy, who'd been holding down that same low-cost-reliever role, is no longer on the roster to compete with him for buyers — more on that below.

The season's first trade sends Urquidy out, brings a big-league-ready arm back

Pittsburgh made its first outright move of the summer on July 1, sending right-hander Jose Urquidy to Boston for right-hander Juan Mejia. It's a modest, depth-for-depth swap on paper — Urquidy had cooled to a 5.23 ERA and was already ticketed for a change of scenery, while Mejia arrives already MLB-tested with a full extra option year left on his contract, giving the front office more roster flexibility than the departing pitcher offered. Read as a standalone trade it's a lateral move. Read as a signal, it's the first concrete evidence that this front office is willing to make moves rather than just watch the calendar — exactly the posture you'd expect from a first-place team ten days from an amateur draft and a few weeks from the real trade deadline.

A crowded infield sorts itself out

The third base and second base logjams that had been building for weeks both broke in June. Jared Triolo, squeezed out by the Nick Gonzales/Jared Triolo timeshare at third with no real path to more playing time, was optioned to Triple-A Indianapolis — a move about at-bats, not merit, for a player still rated as a 50/50 glove-first regular. On the other side of the infield, Brandon Lowe was reactivated off the injured list and immediately slotted into a real platoon with Nick Yorke at second base, giving Pittsburgh two everyday-caliber gloves at a spot that had been Yorke's alone. Triolo now profiles as a real trade chip of his own if a third-base-needy buyer calls before the deadline.

Cruz keeps the offense humming; Reynolds gets his moment

Oneil Cruz remains the offensive engine this club runs on — 16 home runs, 45 RBI and 28 stolen bases, leading the roster outright in all three, with a five-tool game that keeps forcing its way into the conversation even on a team built around its pitching. Ryan O'Hearn is the steadiest bat in the lineup at a team-best .299, even after cooling some from his May peak. Bryan Reynolds picked up the club's lone individual recognition this month, earning Pittsburgh's Player of the Week honors for the stretch ending June 15 — a quiet, professional month in left field that doesn't always show up in the box score but keeps the middle of the order honest.

The farm keeps answering the roster's questions

Beyond Hernandez's debut, the system had a productive month. Greensboro's turnaround has been real — the High-A club now sits in first place in its own league at 45-24, up from third a month ago, the single biggest jump anywhere in the organization. Termarr Johnson has fully cleared a shortstop injury and is back running his loud .350/.437/.581 line at Double-A Altoona. On the pitching side, both Cy Nielson and Jaden Woods have been pushed up from Double-A and are thriving in relief roles — Woods in particular has been nearly untouchable (16 saves, sub-1 WHIP) since the promotion. None of it is a finished product yet, but for an organization that just traded from its bullpen depth and is bracing for more moves in July, a system that keeps graduating usable arms on schedule is exactly what the front office needs behind it.

What's ahead

July opens with the draft, not the deadline. The pre-draft combine wrapped in early June, the board is built, and Pittsburgh's picks — headlined by a pair of first-round-area selections — are now just over a week away on July 11. Once the draft closes the book on the amateur side, the real conversation shifts to the deadline: a two-and-a-half-game division lead, a farm system that's already proven it can plug holes on short notice, and a front office that's shown with the Mejia trade it's willing to act. The market for Marcell Ozuna and any further pitching help will only get more serious from here.