

Three Rivers Report

PITTSBURGH PIRATES BASEBALL · BEAT COVERAGE

THREE RIVERS REPORT

SEASON OUTLOOK · VOL. 1

PIRATES BEAT

Same Old Pirates? Not So Fast.

Twenty-eight games into a season nobody outside the clubhouse saw coming, Pittsburgh sits in first place on the strength of a rookie phenom, a bullpen that finally has teeth, and an offseason that's graded out better than anyone expected. The rotation depth and a couple of untimely injuries say the real test is still ahead.

BY DANNY KOWALSKI

PITTSBURGH — April 24

Nobody in this town was picking the Pirates to be sitting atop the Central Division on the morning of April 24. Not after four straight losing seasons. Not after a 2022 and 2021 that saw this club lose triple digits in the standings and lose the benefit of the doubt from a fan base that has watched more rebuilds than division races. But here they are anyway: 16–12, a game clear of the pack, and playing a brand of baseball that finally looks like it's pointed somewhere.

The record isn't a mirage so much as it's a preview with an asterisk. This is a team getting its two best pitching results from a rookie closer nobody talks about and a rule-5-caliber specialist reliever, while the ace everyone in Pittsburgh has built their offseason hopes around is still hunting for his best stuff. It's a lineup getting monster production from a corner bat who didn't have an everyday position in spring training, while the two-time face of the franchise is hitting under .200. Split the difference and you get a club that is exactly as good as its record says — and exactly as fragile.

BY THE NUMBERS

Record	16–12 (.571)
Standing	1st, Central Division
Batting average leader	J. Triolo, .388
Home run leaders	O'Hearn & Cruz, 5
RBI leader	R. O'Hearn, 18
ERA leader (relief)	D. Santana, 1.26
Saves	D. Santana, 10
Strikeouts	B. Ashcraft, 32

AFFILIATE	LEVEL	W-L	PLACE
Indianapolis	AAA	9–18	10th
Altoona	AA	10–13	6th
Greensboro	High-A	5–9	3rd
Bradenton	Low-A	8–6	2nd
FCL / DSL Pirates	Rookie	—	Not yet open

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

The winter that's actually working

Give the front office this much: for a team that has spent the better part of a half-decade selling instead of buying, this was an unusually productive winter. The headline move sent three players to Pittsburgh in one deal — second baseman Brandon Lowe, outfielder Jake Mangum and left-hander Mason Montgomery — and while Montgomery has scuffled to a 6.32 ERA out of the bullpen so far, Lowe has slotted in at second and given the lineup a left-handed bat capable of turning on a mistake (four homers, a dozen RBI, and counting). Mangum, cheap outfield depth with a switch-hitting bat and real speed, is exactly the kind of fourth outfielder that makes a bench dangerous instead of just deep.

Behind the headline trade, the fingerprints of a more patient front office are everywhere. Spencer Horwitz, added in a trade last December, has been steady at first (.267, on-base skills to spare). Joey Bart, acquired the year before, is the everyday catcher. Nick Yorke, picked up in a deadline deal, gives the infield a versatile, switch-capable understudy. And in the bullpen, two low-cost offseason pickups — free agent signings Dennis Santana and, from a year ago, the under-the-radar addition of sidearm-style specialist Justin Lawrence — have been arguably the two best relief investments in the division. Santana has been a shutdown closer (1.26 ERA, 10 saves already), and Lawrence has been even better on a rate basis: a 1.29 ERA with a strikeout an inning,

deployed almost exclusively against right-handed bats in exactly the matchup role the front office signed him for.

Add in the Mitch Keller extension from last February — a bet on the rotation's veteran floor that looked shaky when it was signed and looks shakier now, with Keller sitting on a 6.00 ERA through six starts — and a smaller trade with Miami in early April that shipped utility infielder Enmanuel Valdez out for two interesting low-level pieces in outfielder Dillon Head and first baseman Nathan Martorella, and you have a front office that has genuinely reshaped this roster over eighteen months instead of just talking about it.

Skenes, and the gap between stuff and results

Paul Skenes is still Paul Skenes — 30 strikeouts in 32.1 innings, swing-and-miss stuff that scouts around the league still call the best in the organization by a mile — but a 4.18 ERA and a 1-1 record are not what anyone in the clubhouse expected out of the presumptive staff ace. Talk to anyone who's watched him closely and the read is the same: the stuff hasn't gone anywhere, the results just haven't caught up yet. That's a bet worth making on a 22-year-old with this kind of arm. It's also the single biggest swing factor in whether this season is a fluke or a foundation, because right now this rotation does not have much behind him. Braxton Ashcraft has been the pleasant surprise (3.18 ERA, a 32-to-9 strikeout-to-walk mark that suggests it's real), but Jose Urquidy is at 5.92, Keller at 6.00, and both Bubba Chandler and Jared Jones — the two arms most likely to stabilize the middle of that rotation — are currently unavailable. Chandler lasted a third of an inning into his first start of the year before landing on the injured list for what the club is calling a four-month recovery, and Jones hasn't thrown a pitch yet in 2025. Until one or both of them are back, Pittsburgh is a rotation with an ace, one legitimate surprise, and three innings-eaters trying to hold the fort.

The Griffin effect

If there's one storyline that's changed the temperature in this city more than the record has, it's the 19-year-old manning shortstop. Konnor Griffin was never supposed to be in a major league lineup this early — not at his age, not with the usual player-development caution a franchise applies to a talent this valuable — but a five-for-five night on April 6th, part of a .275 start with 12 stolen bases and a strikeout rate that belies his age, forced the issue. Fans who've spent years being told to be patient and watch the farm system are, for the first time in a long time, watching the payoff arrive in real time instead of in a scouting report. There's a real argument for handling him carefully — the league will make its own adjustments, and a rookie this young will hit rough patches — but for a fan base starved for a face-of-the-franchise position player, Griffin is already it.

He's not carrying the offense alone. Ryan O'Hearn, plugged into an everyday right field job the roster didn't really have an obvious answer for entering the year, has been the best hitter on the team by results (.333, five homers, 18 RBI) even if the defensive fit remains a work in progress. Jared Triolo, deployed all over the infield, is hitting .388 in part-time work. And on the other side of the ledger, both Bryan Reynolds (.185) and Bart (.158)

have been the lineup's biggest question marks — exactly the kind of slow starts from established players that a first-place team can absorb in April and a pretender can't in July.

What's coming behind them

The farm system that's supposed to keep this window open is off to a mixed start of its own. Triple-A Indianapolis has been the story's one real sour note — a 9-18 start, last place in the International League — but that roster is stocked with exactly the kind of near-ready pieces (catcher Rafael Flores Jr., corner bat Jhostynxon Garcia, newly acquired infielder Tyler Callihan) that make an early record less alarming than it looks. Double-A Altoona is a game under .500 but finally features Termarr Johnson, the club's 2022 first-round pick, at shortstop — a former top prospect the organization has been waiting on for two years. High-A Greensboro is treading water. Low-A Bradenton, by contrast, is the system's best story right now at 8-6, and it's not a coincidence that it's the level closest to 18-year-old center fielder Edward Florentino, a switch of tools and instincts that scouts in the organization rate as a potential everyday regular down the road.

The complex leagues haven't started yet, but when the Florida Complex League opens, all eyes will be on Seth Hernandez, the club's prized 18-year-old right-hander and the highest-upside arm in the system by a wide margin. He won't pitch in Pittsburgh this year, or probably next, but a franchise this deep into a rebuild lives and dies by names like his showing up on schedule.

What Pittsburgh is allowed to expect now

Ask around PNC Park on a Tuesday afternoon and the mood has shifted in a way it hasn't in years. Nobody's talking division title with a straight face yet — not with the rotation this thin behind Skenes and Ashcraft, and not with two of the system's best young arms currently rehabbing instead of pitching — but the word "contender" is being used out loud again, which by itself is new. The honest version of this season's ceiling is a wild-card race that goes into September, built on an elite closer, a shutdown matchup reliever, a rookie shortstop playing above his age, and just enough offense to cover for a rotation that needs Jones and Chandler back healthy to be more than four deep. The floor, if the early hot streak cools and the rotation's ERA problems don't resolve themselves, is a step back toward the pack by Memorial Day.

What's different this time isn't just the record. It's that for the first time in this rebuild, the roster and the farm system are pointing the same direction at the same time. That's worth something in this town, even before another pitch is thrown.