

S T . P E T E R S B U R G , F L O R I D A

THE TROP REPORT

"A New Team, A New Home, A New Season"

VOL. 1, NO. 3

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 1998

DEVIL RAYS 16-23, 5TH AL EAST

FRONT OFFICE STRIKES GOLD: FRANCO SIGNED, FARM SYSTEM RESTOCKED IN BUSIEST STRETCH YET

A rough 4-7 skid drops the club to 16-23, but the checkpoint's real story is off the field — Julio Franco steps in at second base, Harry Hopper gets his first big-league look, and a systematic scouting sweep turns up four legitimate finds on minor-league deals.

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If the April Wrap-Up edition of this paper was about a rotation arm stepping up and a division proving tougher than expected, this one is about a front office that stopped watching and started acting. The won-loss record took another step back — the Devil Rays are 16-23 after a 4-7 fortnight, now 11.0 games behind a Toronto club that has pulled away from the pack at 28-13 — but the two weeks between checkpoints were the busiest yet for the organization building around this club.

The headline move: second baseman Aaron Ledesma, hitting a modest .235 through the season's first six weeks, was designated for assignment to clear a spot for Julio Franco, a 39-year-old veteran signed to a one-year, \$1.7 million contract. It's exactly the kind of low-risk, high-character addition an expansion club in its first year ought to be making — a respected, well-traveled name who gives the clubhouse a steady hand and gives the fanbase someone to recognize, without tying up money or years the organization can't spare yet. He's made an immediate first impression, hitting .368 in his first 19 at-bats in a Devil Rays uniform.

The injury report, unfortunately, got longer before it got shorter. Paul Sorrento, the everyday left fielder, is now expected to miss roughly six weeks, and Tony Saunders remains parked on the 60-day disabled list with no firm return date yet. Reliever Dave Eiland, who has struggled to a 13.15 ERA in his early outings, joined them on the DL as well — leaving the pitching staff thinner than it's been all season.

Sorrento's absence opened the door for the kind of call-up this paper has been waiting to write about. Harry Hopper, a 22-year-old outfielder who sits atop the system's position-player rankings at a scouted 79 potential, was recalled from AA Orlando to man left field. The plan, as described by the front office, is to give him a real look — up to three weeks — before any decision gets made, with fellow farmhand Carson Miller at AAA Durham as the fallback option if Hopper needs more seasoning. It's an early audition for the best pure prospect the organization has, and worth watching closely.

On the field, Jason Johnson continues to be the rotation's best story, his ERA now down to 3.16 while filling Saunders's turn, and

BY THE NUMBERS

Record	16-23 (5th, 11.0 GB)
Games played	39
Franco	.368, 19 AB
McCracken	.312, 154 AB
Boggs	.311, 135 AB
Trammell	.293, 9 HR
Johnson	3-1, 3.16 ERA
Coles	4-2, 4.50 ERA
Hernandez	8 SV, 4.50 ERA
Hopper	.192, 1 HR (26 AB)

AL EAST STANDINGS

Toronto	28-13
Baltimore	26-13
Boston	24-17
New York	23-17
Tampa Bay	16-23

"It's exactly the kind of low-risk, high-character addition an expansion club in its first year ought to be making."

Franco wasn't the only addition. In the same stretch, the front office's pro scouting tandem ran a full sweep of the league's available free agents looking for organizational depth at positions the system was thin at — and came back with four real finds, all signed to minor-league contracts. Catcher Enrique Ortiz and second baseman Manny Agundis both head to AAA Durham; catcher Nick Moses lands at AA Orlando; and shortstop Miguel Romero, the most talked-about of the four, signs at Durham as well after Tampa Bay outlasted Pittsburgh in a genuine bidding war for his services. None of the four will factor at the big-league level this season, but all four are the sort of names a first-year system needs if it's going to have any pipeline at all a few years from now.

Tony Coles has built the best record on the staff at 4–2 as he continues to develop toward what remains the highest ceiling on the pitching staff. Closer Roberto Hernandez has cooled since the last checkpoint — his ERA has climbed to 4.50 — but he's kept racking up saves, now up to eight on the year, and remains the most obvious trade chip on the roster if the club is out of contention come July.

It would be easy, watching the record slide from 12–16 to 16–23, to read this checkpoint as a bad one. But that misses what's actually changed in the two weeks since the last edition of this paper. A month ago, the front office was still figuring out what it had. Now it's actively shaping it — cutting a replaceable veteran loose the moment a better option at his price point became available, winning a bidding war against a division rival for a legitimate infield prospect, and giving its best position-player prospect a real chance to prove himself in the big leagues months ahead of schedule. That's not the profile of a club standing still.

None of it changes the shape of the season. Toronto and Baltimore remain in a different tier entirely, and the Devil Rays are still going to lose more than they win for a while yet. But the gap between "rebuilding" and "aimless" is exactly the kind of activity this checkpoint produced — and for a fanbase still getting to know this team, a popular, well-regarded veteran like Franco taking the field every day is worth something on its own, regardless of what the standings say.

The Manager's seat, for what it's worth, remains the one item still unresolved on the org chart — open since Opening Day and still the first order of business whenever the front office turns its attention back to the dugout.

STATE OF THE CLUB

2B Julio Franco signed to a one-year, \$1.7M contract after Aaron Ledesma was designated for assignment.

Four MiLC signings add organizational depth: C Enrique Ortiz and 2B Manny Agundis (AAA Durham), C Nick Moses (AA Orlando), and SS Miguel Romero (AAA Durham, won over Pittsburgh in a bidding war).

LF Paul Sorrento on the DL, roughly six weeks; **CF/LF Harry Hopper** (79 POT) recalled from AA Orlando for a planned three-week look, with Carson Miller (AAA) as the fallback.

SP Tony Saunders (60-day DL) and **RP Dave Eiland** (DL) round out three key absences on the pitching side.

The **Manager's seat** remains open, unchanged since Opening Day.

Next checkpoint: May 31, full refresh.