

THE TROP REPORT

Official Dispatch of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays · "A New Ballclub in the Sunshine State"

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Rebuild Grinds On As Rays Reshape Roster Around Youth

Club goes 6-10 in back half of May, falls to 14.5 back — but the front office spent the month looking ahead, not behind

BY RAY DELGADO · TROP REPORT STAFF WRITER

The losing continued through May in St. Petersburg: the Devil Rays went 6-10 over the back half of the month to fall to 22-33, 14.5 games behind a Toronto club pulling away at the top of the American League East. A win to close the month has Tampa Bay on a modest one-game streak into June — a small mercy in a difficult stretch.

But if the won-loss column told a familiar story, the transaction wire told a different one. May was the busiest month of roster activity the young franchise has seen. General manager Rafael Whitter's front office spent it doing exactly what a last-place club in its first season ought to: finding out what it actually has, position by position, rather than propping up placeholders who won't be here in 1999.

The clearest example arrived in left field. Bobby Ontiveros, who opened the season on the roster, was designated for assignment after a brutal 1-for-20 look. In his place: Carson Miller, a 25-year-old up from AAA Durham with a 61 Potential grade and a .281 Triple-A average. Miller had yet to record his first Tampa Bay at-bat as of this printing, but the swap was a clean example of the club's approach this season — evaluate, don't protect.

Center field quietly became the most interesting position on the roster. Harry Judd — the 22-year-old formerly known as Harry Hopper before a front-office paperwork change this spring, still the same ballplayer underneath — has taken the everyday job and is playing like the system's best prospect should: .279 with 5 home runs and 15 RBI in 86 at-bats, with a clean glove (+1.36 Zone Rating) for a converted outfielder. His 80 Potential remains the highest of any position player in the org — a real building block already in the uniform.

Shortstop picked up a name too. With Jerome Walton landing on the DL in center, the club called up Miguel Romero, a 20-year-old utility piece from AAA Durham, rather than replacing Walton like-for-like. Romero has stuck on the active roster since, giving Kevin Stocker's glove-first profile (elite defense, a .167 bat) some real long-term competition.

On the financial side, second baseman Julio Franco's two-year extension — \$2.0M in 1999, a \$4.0M team option for 2000, no-trade clause — is now signed. A deal built around clubhouse presence

as much as performance, with the downside capped: the no-trade blocks a deal, not a release.

"We'd rather find out what's actually in this system before the draft gets here than spend June protecting guys who won't be part of the next good Devil Rays team."

The rotation remains the season's clearest problem, and it's about to get a shakeup. Dennis Springer, 33, has continued to scuffle — 2-4, 4.97 ERA, a troubling 21 K/20 BB line. A DFA is planned for early June, with a fresh arm to follow. Ryan Rupe (AAA Durham, 3.88 ERA, real development runway in his 47 POT) is the leading option, with Danny Quinones (AA Orlando, the system's best control artist at 3.45 ERA) waiting if Rupe needs more seasoning.

Elsewhere, Tony Coles is the rotation's clear bright spot — 3.56 ERA, 5-3, still building toward an 80 Potential ceiling, the highest in the org. Roberto Hernandez has quietly had the bullpen's best month, ERA down to 3.38 with 10 saves, keeping him squarely in the conversation as the club's most obvious trade chip if July arrives with Tampa Bay out of the race.

The front office's Farm System Review, refreshed this week directly from the organization's real prospect shortlist for the first time, carries the full month-over-month picture on the 125 players the club is tracking org-wide. Angel del Castillo's power surge at High-A St. Petersburg and a breakout from shortstop Michelangelo Giacomini headline this edition, while Eric Wicklund — still tied for the system's top ceiling at 80 Potential — waits for the Appalachian League to get underway at Rookie-level Princeton.

For a club with no illusions about contending in 1998, May was the season working as designed. The losses piled up, but so did the answers: which young players can hold their own, which veterans have given what they're going to give, and which arms deserve a look before the July 5th draft reshapes the pipeline again. June opens with Springer's rotation spot the last open question — and, as always in St. Petersburg this season, more churn almost certainly still to come.

BY THE NUMBERS

6-10

Record since the May 14 checkpoint

14.5

Games back of first-place Toronto

4

Roster moves in May: Ontiveros DFA, Miller call-up, Walton to DL, Romero call-up

.279

Harry Judd's AVG since taking over center, 5 HR in 86 AB

3.38

Roberto Hernandez's ERA, 10 saves, the pen's clear bright spot

AL EAST STANDINGS

Club	W	L	GB
Toronto	37	19	—
Boston	34	20	2.0
Baltimore	32	23	4.5
NY Yankees	31	24	5.5
Tampa Bay	22	33	14.5

STATE OF THE CLUB

Rotation: Coles (3.56 ERA) is the bright spot; Springer's DFA looms in early June, Rupe the favored call-up.

Bullpen: Hernandez (3.38 ERA, 10 SV) is the trade chip to watch if July arrives with no race left to run.

Lineup: Judd has seized center field; Miller and Romero both up, both still waiting on real MLB sample size.

Farm: 125 players tracked org-wide; del Castillo and Giacomini the names trending hottest this issue.