

WINTER MEETINGS WRAP-UP

The Bill Came Due, and Detroit Paid It Down: A Winter Meetings Report Card

Skubal is gone. So is a backup catcher nobody was going to miss. In their place: five trades, a rotation spot for Andrew Weems, and a payroll that finally looks like the one ownership asked for.

By **Marcus Delaney**, Tigers Beat Writer

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A week ago, the front office walked into Nashville with a short shopping list and a longer one of things it was willing to move. It leaves with both lists mostly emptied. Tarik Skubal, the ace who beat Pittsburgh twice in October, is a Toronto Blue Jay. Eury Perez is a Minnesota Twin. A backup catcher nobody outside the clubhouse will remember is a Chicago Cub. And the payroll sheet that opened the winter nearly \$62 million over the club's own budget now sits about \$10 million over it — three percent, not eighteen. For a team that spent the last several years operating under a legacy exception just to keep the roster together, that's not a minor correction. That's the diet actually working.

The headline move closed on the meetings' first day. Skubal, who slid from a 74-grade arm to a 68 over the last eighteen months and was reportedly seeking a five-year, \$164 million extension this winter, went to Toronto for a return built entirely around cost control: 2B/SS Cristopher Polanco, a bat the front office believes can back up Kevin McGonigle at shortstop as soon as next season; 3B/SS/2B Mario Pulido, a glove-and-legs project with a broken bat and 80-grade speed; third baseman Cameron Garfias as pure organizational depth; and a fifth-round pick. None of it replaces Skubal's production in a vacuum. All of it replaces his \$37.6 million salary, and none of the three cost-controlled names clog a 45-man roster that had other business to attend to this week.

That other business: two same-day deals that reshaped the pitching staff without touching the top of it. Eury Perez, who profiled as more fringe reliever than the frontline starter his role once suggested, went to Minnesota along with a throw-in arm and a pick for first baseman Justin Dixon and shortstop Steve Finch — two 20-year-old, Extreme-risk lottery tickets, but Finch in particular addresses a shortstop depth question that's dogged this org's farm system all year. And in the deal that actually explains the other two, Detroit sent a modest package of blocked prospects to San Diego for Alex Philpott, a 27-year-old, cost-controlled mid-rotation arm who threw 195.2 innings of 2.90 ERA ball in 2031. Philpott isn't a name Tigers fans knew a month ago. By spring, he may be the fourth man in the rotation.

"We didn't trade an ace to get worse. We traded a 35-year-old's next contract to get younger, cheaper, and deeper all at once." — a front-office voice close to the Winter Meetings talks

The move that frees the roster spot everyone's been waiting on didn't require a press release. With Perez gone and Philpott in the fold, Detroit has the rotation room to call up Andrew Weems, the Toledo arm the front office has been quietly excited about since midseason, with Pat Dellinger sliding into the same tier of MLB-ready insurance behind him. The math now reads Guo-fang Hou, Jackson Jobe, Alex Philpott, Cristopher Sanchez, and Weems as the five, with Dellinger and a deep bullpen — Bradgley Rodriguez closing, with Torreyeva, Ning, and Zarraga in front of him — as the safety net if anyone falters. It's a rotation that traded a name for depth, on purpose.

The one trade that didn't get its own headline this week actually happened before the meetings opened. On December 5th, Detroit sent catcher Ji-hwan Pho — expendable the moment Jaden Fauske arrived in the Justin Crawford deal last month — to the Chicago Cubs for a trio of low-cost org arms and bats: catcher Jared Waite, outfielder John Johnson, and right-hander Chris Harl. None of the three is a name to circle on a prospect list. All three are exactly the kind of no-cost churn a front office should be doing at the edges of a 40-man while it's busy closing bigger deals elsewhere — Waite in particular gives Toledo a ready-made injury replacement behind Fauske if the rookie stumbles.

WHAT DIDN'T MOVE

Cristopher Sanchez and Cody Bellinger enter 2032 exactly where they started the winter: on the roster, on expiring value, and unmoved. Bellinger's full no-trade clause still points to essentially one partner in the Dodgers, who came back to the table after freeing cap space but didn't find a match. Sanchez's own no-trade stands unwaived. Both are walk-year business for July, not December — the front office is content to carry either contract to the trade deadline, or to Opening Day if it comes to that, rather than force a bad return now.

By The Numbers

PAYROLL VS. BUDGET

\$342.2M

down from \$393.5M · budget \$332M

2032 PROJECTED PAYROLL

\$317.5M

already under the \$332M budget

45-MAN ROSTER

41 / 45

after the Rodriguez protect

The Five Deals

Toronto	Skubal out
Minnesota	Perez out
San Diego	Philpott in
Philadelphia	Crawford in
Chicago (NL)	Pho out

Still On The Board

Sanchez, LHP	Held
Bellinger, OF	Held
Linares, 2B	Shopping
Warwick, 2B	Shopping
Phipps, SS	Rule 5 TBD

Fan Pulse

FAN INTEREST

79

down from 97 pre-Meetings — the Skubal trade has a cost

The Nakagawa pursuit — the opener-to-starter reliever project floated earlier this winter — also quietly ended; his price climbed past what the roster's actual bullpen need justified, and Detroit walked.

THE RULE 5 DECISION

With the 45-man settled at trade-deadline shape, the org turned to protecting it. AA right-hander Omar Rodriguez, a 60-potential arm who's climbed the system quietly, earned the addition; catcher Cam Dempsey was left unprotected as a player nobody's expected to burn a big-league roster spot on. One name is still an open question heading into the holidays: shortstop Jamie Phipps, whose value is tied less to his own ceiling than to how thin things still look behind Kevin McGonigle. A decision is expected before the Rule 5 Draft on December 22nd.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Nobody in Detroit is pretending this was a painless week. Trading the co-ace of a championship rotation never reads as small, and a fan base that watched Skubal beat Pittsburgh twice in October is entitled to some heartburn about seeing him in a different uniform in March. But measured against the job the front office actually set out to do — get younger, get cheaper, keep the parts of the roster that won a title — this was close to a clean sweep. The payroll problem that's shadowed this front office for years is, for the first time in a while, no longer the story. What's left is smaller and more manageable: one shortstop decision before the Rule 5 Draft, two blocked infielders still looking for a trade partner, and two expiring contracts riding out the string until July. Compared to where this thing stood on December 1st, that's not a rebuild. That's a tune-up.