

OFFSEASON FINALE

Two Signatures, One Lost Catcher, and a Winter Officially in the Books

The board's top target signed for exactly what he was worth. A name nobody ranked signed just as fast. And when the international bonus math was finished, Detroit had spent every last dollar of it — not a cent more, not a cent less.

By **Marcus Delaney**, Tigers Beat Writer

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The last box on this winter's to-do list didn't need a trade call or a scouting argument — just two signatures and a five-day waiting period. When the international free agent signing period closed at midnight on January 21st, Detroit had used every dollar of its \$5.2 million bonus pool on exactly two players, and both of them said yes before anyone had to ask twice. It caps an offseason that opened in early November with a get-younger, get-cheaper mandate and closes here, days before pitchers and catchers report, with essentially every line item checked off.

The headline name is catcher Humberto Huertas, the board's top-ranked target all winter. Detroit's opening offer — a \$4.00 million bonus against his \$3.60 million ask — beat his own number outright, and he signed without so much as a counter. A switch-hitting bat with framing grades that had player-development staff talking since the board first went up, Huertas was the class's headline get before the ink was even dry. The second name arrived from well outside the ranked group: right-hander Jim Little, who took a \$1.20 million offer the moment it landed and signed just as fast. Between the two of them, the pool was spent to the dollar — \$5.2 million committed against a \$5.2 million allocation.

A POOL SPENT IN FULL

The math here is simple and, in hindsight, a little unforgiving: once Huertas's bonus cleared \$4.00 million, exactly \$1.2 million was left in the pool — which is precisely what it took to sign Little. There was never a version of this winter where Detroit landed a third name off the board's other 13 targets; the moment the top offer went out, the rest of the list became academic. It's not a mistake so much as a lesson the front office has already filed away: Tom's call afterward was that next year's board needs more room to maneuver, expanding

By The Numbers

IAFA POOL COMMITTED

\$5.2M

of a \$5.2M allocation · zero left over

RULE 5 RESULT

1 Lost

Stiver · no picks made

45-MAN PROTECTS

2

Rodriguez & Phipps

The Two Signings

Humberto Huertas, C	\$4.00M
Jim Little, SP	\$1.20M
Negotiation	None needed

Rule 5 Ledger

Rodriguez, SP	Protected
Phipps, SS	Protected
Dempsey, C	Exposed
Stiver, C	Lost

Heading To Camp

2032 PAYROLL VS. BUDGET

\$342.0M

vs. \$332M budget · ~3% over

TICKET PRICE

from a top-15 list to a top-25 that includes at least ten lower-demand, lower-cost names — so a single early commitment doesn't leave the rest of the pool with nowhere to go.

\$46

up from \$44

THE RULE 5 LEDGER

A month earlier, on December 22nd, the org made its protection calls ahead of the Rule 5 Draft. AA right-hander Omar Rodriguez, a 60-potential arm who's climbed the system quietly, and shortstop Jamie Phipps, whose value is tied to how thin things still look behind Kevin McGonigle, both earned 45-man addition. Catcher Cam Dempsey was left exposed as a player nobody expected to cost a big-league roster spot — and he wasn't lost. Detroit's only actual loss was catcher Dan Stiver, a 2027 draftee whose development had stalled well short of a real roster consideration. Detroit made no picks of its own.

"The pool doesn't care how you ranked anybody. Once the top offer goes out, the rest of the math writes itself." — a front-office voice close to the IAFA signings

Neither decision required much debate by the time it arrived. The Rule 5 calls were close to consensus inside the front office weeks before the deadline, and the IAFA math left no real choice to make once Huertas's offer was accepted — a rare case this winter where the hardest work was done well in advance of the deadline that made it official.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Stack this against where the winter started and the shape of the offseason comes into focus. November and December handled the big, visible moves — five trades, two extensions, a coaching staff turnover, a payroll correction from nearly \$62 million over budget down to about \$10 million over it. January handled the quieter, more mechanical business: who's protected, who signs, who's left on the board. Both mattered. The schedule itself got a full rebuild along the way too — a 32-team, four-division realignment that regenerated cleanly at 2,592 games, with the All-Star Game slotting itself into an open week in late July without anyone having to force it. None of that shows up in a box score, but all of it is why camp opens with a settled 45-man, a payroll inside the house cap, and nothing left hanging over from the winter. Pitchers and catchers report soon. For the first time in a while, there's nothing left on the to-do list waiting for them.