

SPRING TRAINING PREVIEW

Camp Opens on a Champion — and on a League Nobody's Seen Before

The 45-man is set, the payroll is corrected, and a 52-man camp reports to defend a title. The bigger story might be the two new logos across the diamond: Detroit's division now runs through Salt Lake City, and the league has a Nashville team for the first time ever.

By **Marcus Delaney**, Tigers Beat Writer

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Fifty-two players reported to Lakeland this week, and for the first time in franchise history, not one of them knows exactly what the league they're about to play in looks like. The 32-team, four-division realignment that occupied the front office all winter is no longer a plan on a whiteboard — it's live, with the expansion Salt Lake City Cutthroats parked in the AL West (same league as Detroit, different division) and the Nashville Stars, the sport's first team in Tennessee, settling into the NL South. Every other storyline this spring is really a subplot to that one: a defending champion breaking camp into a league it has genuinely never seen before, against two rosters nobody in the sport has scouted yet.

On the roster itself, the questions are smaller and more familiar. The 45-man is the same group that hoisted the trophy in October and then went through a real offseason diet: Tarik Skubal is a Blue Jay, Eury Perez is a Twin, and the payroll that opened the winter near \$394 million sits at \$348.1 million against a \$332 million budget heading into games — about 4.9% over, still inside the house's 25% ceiling, with the 2032 full-season projection (\$326.3 million) already under it. The international bonus pool that closed out the winter added two more names to the org, seventeen-year-olds Humberto Huertas and Jim Little, both reporting to extended camp at the Florida Complex — years from Detroit, but exactly the kind of investment the front office wanted to be making again.

THE ROTATION'S REAL BATTLE

Guo-fang Hou, Cristopher Sanchez, Alex Philpott, and Andrew Weems all report as safe bets for regular turns. The fifth spot is not a formality. Jackson Jobe held it as recently as the Winter Meetings; early camp arms have the club's own rotation math instead pointing toward Angel Bello, a name that barely registered on anyone's

By The Numbers

SPRING CAMP ROSTER

52

45-man plus non-roster invites

PAYROLL VS. BUDGET

\$348.1M

vs. \$332M budget · ~4.9% over

2032 PROJECTED PAYROLL

\$326.3M

already under budget

The New Look League

Salt Lake City Cutthroats	AL West
Nashville Stars	NL South
Detroit's division	AL North
League size	32 teams

Camp Battles

Rotation, 5th spot	Bello / Jobe / Dellinger
Rodriguez, Phipps	First camp as 45-man
Ticket price	\$46

Prospects To Watch

Pablo Tolo, IF	AAA · NRI
David Becerra, RHP	AAA · NRI
Huertas & Little	FCL, both 17

offseason radar, with Jobe and Pat Dellinger both still very much in the conversation as camp innings pile up. Nothing here is settled by the calendar — it'll be settled by who's actually getting outs when exhibition play starts in earnest.

PROSPECTS GETTING A LOOK

Two names from the farm earned a trip to major-league camp on non-roster looks this spring. Pablo Tolo, the 20-year-old at the top of the org's own Dev Lab prospect list and the best pure hit tool in the system, gets his first extended look against big-league arms — not a bet he makes the club out of camp, but exactly the kind of exposure a 2033 timeline calls for. Right-hander David Becerra, 24 and knocking on Toledo's rotation door, is in the same boat: an arm the org wants MLB coaches and evaluators looking at directly rather than by scouting report. Rule 5 protects Omar Rodriguez and Jamie Phipps are also in big-league camp for the first time as 45-man players rather than names on a protection list, which is its own kind of milestone.

"Nobody in this camp has played a real game against Salt Lake City or Nashville. That's true if you've been in the league twenty years or two weeks." — a front-office voice at the start of camp

The extensions signed over the winter — Juan Torreyeva and Ethan Petry, both locked up through at least 2035 — mean the position-player core reporting to camp is essentially the championship group, augmented rather than rebuilt: Justin Crawford and Jaden Fauske now everyday pieces after coming over in the Philadelphia deal, Cristopher Polanco and the rest of the Skubal return getting their first real look in Tigers colors, and Cody Bellinger and Cristopher Sanchez both still around on expiring deals the front office is content to ride out. Ticket price is up to \$46 for the season, a conservative bump given some fan frustration over the Skubal trade even with a title still fresh.

WHAT'S ACTUALLY AT STAKE

A repeat is the obvious storyline for any defending champion, and Detroit has as good a case as anyone: a corrected payroll, a deep bullpen, and a lineup that got younger without getting worse. But this spring carries an extra layer no team in the sport has dealt with before — two brand-new rosters, two brand-new front offices, and zero data

on either one. The schedule itself is proof of how different this year is: a freshly generated 2,592-game slate, rebalanced for the new division shape, with the All-Star Game landing on July 27 in a gap nobody had to force. Whatever else happens this spring, Opening Day arrives in a league that, on paper, has never existed until now.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Every camp report doubles as a snapshot, and this one reads like a team with almost nothing left to figure out about itself — the roster's set, the payroll's corrected, the extensions are signed, and the only real position battle is a single rotation spot. What nobody can snapshot is the rest of the league. Detroit opens the season having won it all, in a division that now runs through a team that didn't exist a year ago, in a sport that just got two cities bigger. That's not a threat to the roster the Tigers built this winter. It's just the honest disclosure that comes with any brand-new map: everyone starts from zero on the parts nobody's played yet. A spring wrap-up follows just before Opening Day, once games actually start counting toward something.