

A Brave New World Emerges in Atlanta

By JAY JAFFE

The Atlanta Braves are at it again, sitting atop their division and likely on the way to a record 14th consecutive playoff appearance. Three weeks ago they wrested control of the NL East from the upstart Washington Nationals in a three-game sweep that began with the two teams tied for first. All told, the Braves and Nats have swung 10 games in the standings since July 3.

But it's hardly been business as usual this season for Atlanta. Instead of relying on star power, the Braves have patched through several key injuries using the fruits of their farm system, enabling them to ascend the strongest and most balanced division in the majors. This might be the most impressive job that GM John Schuerholz, manager Bobby Cox, and pitching coach Leo Mazzone — the triumvirate behind the team's dominance of the NL East since 1991 — have ever done.

The Braves' remarkable run represents the ability of an organization to retool on the fly, turning over a roster multiple times without sacrificing the ability to win now. Schuerholz has built from within using excellent scouting and drafting, astute trades, and smart free-agent picks to fill the gaps. That they have only one World Championship to show for this era is somewhat beside the point. Building longevity in a winner is a testament to a great, well-rounded organization.

Entering the season, one might have been forgiven for thinking the run would end because Schuerholz was losing his marbles. The Braves outbid several other teams to obtain ace Tim Hudson in a trade with the A's, but they gave up Dan Meyer, the team's top pitching prospect. Earlier that week, Schuerholz had sent fireballer Jose Capellan, the team's second-best pitching prospect, to Milwaukee in a deal for Danny Kolb, a groundball-inducing, low-strikeout journeyman who had lucked into the Brewers' closer role. The move

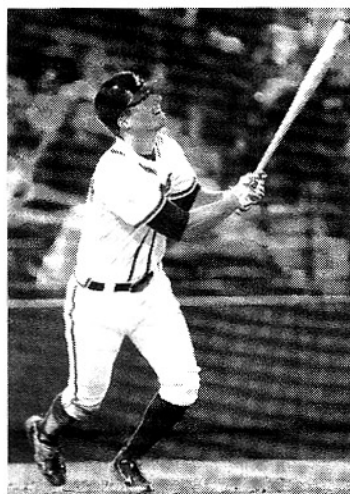
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smacked of panic— Schuerholz was grabbing a closer, any closer, to replace John Smoltz, who had demanded to return to the starting rotation.

But the most questionable facet of Schuerholz's offseason plan was the duo he signed to play the outfield corners. In left was oft-injured, 38-year-old Brian Jordan, a mainstay of the team's lineup from 1999–2001, but a shadow of his former self. In right was Raul Mondesi, once a star with 30-homer power, 30-steal speed, now undone by years of poor conditioning.

By mid-June, the Braves' blueprint was in tatters and their record was just one game above .500. Hudson was one of three starting pitchers on the DL, Kolb had long since lost his job as closer, Mondesi had been released, and Jordan was struggling. To make matters worse, Chipper Jones, the Braves' most feared hitter, was sidelined by a torn ligament in his foot.

Into the breach stepped a handful of homegrown rookies, who have improbably led the team to a 32–18 record since June 16. In the outfield, Ryan Langerhans and Kelly Johnson have combined to hit 240 BA/.327 OBA/.398 SLG— hardly earthshaking, but still better than the lifeless .231/.283/.345 combined performance of Mondesi and Jordan. At third base, Wilson Betemit has hit .296/.355/.451 in place of Jones, who has missed 50 games with injuries. Catcher Brian McCann, recalled when backup Eddie Perez went on the DL, has hit .280/.350/.419, and with starter Johnny Estrada now sidelined by a cervical strain, he's the new regular. Kyle Davies has put up a 4.56 ERA in 14 starts, proving himself a reasonable stop-gap for a desperate team. John Foster and Blaine Boyer have provided solid middle relief, allowing the bullpen to be reshuffled to cover for Kolb's woes.



JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

GANGBUSTERS Rookie Jeff Francoeur has hit .382 in 28 games since being called up from the minors.

But no Braves rookie has had as big an impact as Jeff Francoeur. Recalled from Double-A when Jordan went on the DL July 7, Francoeur homered in his debut and hasn't looked back. Through his first 27 games, he's hit a whopping .388/.394/.735 with eight homers, reeling off an 11-game hitting streak to boot. True to form, he has yet to draw a walk, but nobody's complaining.

The current crop of rookies has already topped the production level of any of the Braves' previous batches since 1991, and when one stops to consider that lot includes Chip-

per Jones, Andruw Jones, Javy Lopez, Rafael Furcal, Ryan Klesko, Jason Schmidt, Jermaine Dye, Kevin Millwood, and Jason Marquis, that's saying something. The farm system has produced an embarrassment of riches, one which Schuerholz isn't afraid to tap, as his trades of Capellan and Meyer show.

The Braves have an outstanding track record when it comes to trading unproven players. From a pool of 82 prospects traded between October 1990 (when Schuerholz took the helm) to Opening Day 2005, just six went on to achieve a "career of consequence" in the big leagues by totaling 10 Wins Above Replacement Player (WARP), a Baseball Prospectus metric that compares a player to the replacement-level baseline (such as a waiver-wire call-up) but incorporates defense and translates runs to wins. Schmidt and Dye are the two biggest fish to get away, but at best it looks as though another six of those 82 will reach the "career of consequence" level, a remarkably low yield.

Three such trades in which Schuerholz gave up unproven talent have been crucial to patching this year's staff. Last spring, Chris Reitsma was acquired from the Reds for two pitchers, and after a year of middle relief, he's taken over the closer role from Kolb. This spring, the Braves sent second baseman Nick Green to Tampa Bay for Jorge Sosa, who had yielded a 5.14 ERA in three seasons of Devil Ray purgatory. He started the year in the bullpen, where he was issuing more walks than strikeouts. But since being forced into the rotation, Sosa has been more than solid, allowing a 2.77 ERA in 12 starts while posting a passable 1.81 K/BB ratio. And at an otherwise quiet trading deadline, Schuerholz pulled off one of the few notable deals, sending rookie pitcher Roman Colon and minor-leaguer Zach Miner to acquire hard-throwing setup man — and likely future closer — Kyle Farnsworth from the Tigers.

Don't be surprised when you see all these names on your TV come October. They may be new, but they're still the Braves, and they're always around when the postseason fun starts.

Mr. Jaffe is a writer for *Baseball Prospectus*. For more commentary, visit baseballprospectus.com. Peter Quadrino and Mike Groopman contributed research to this article.

