

Texas finds winning ingredient without Rodriguez

In the first season after the Alex Rodriguez trade, the Rangers sit in first in the AL West early in 2004

By Kevin Baxter
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MIAMI — Texas Rangers general manager John Hart would be the first to admit his team's recipe for success might not be for everyone.

First, you go out and sign a bunch of high-paid stars, bloating your payroll. Then, you finish last, averaging 90 losses a season, four years in a row. After that, you let your high-priced stars leave as free agents, and you trade the best player in the game just to get rid of his salary.

And when it's all over, you wind up with not only the youngest starting lineup in baseball, but with the second-best record in the game as well.

"This isn't exactly how we thought things would go," Hart says.

But it's not entirely new territory, either. The year Hart took over as general manager of Cleveland, the team lost a franchise-record 105 games. Three seasons later, they won 100, starting a run that saw them capture five straight division titles and six in seven years.

And though the Rangers went into the weekend as the second-winningest team, having won eight of their past 10, Hart says they're not the equal of those Cleveland teams.

Yet.

"There are different dynamics," Hart says. "As pleased as we are with our start, we realize that's just what it is — a start."

Young foundation

But it could be the start of something big because the Rangers' nine

everyday players average 26 years of age. And with only designated hitter Brad Fullmer, 29, and left fielder David Delucci — the oldest of the bunch at 30 — eligible for arbitration after this season, this group could be together for a while.

"This is a very, very young team that has a lot of talent," Hart says. "We want to commit to as many young players as we can. Then we'll look up at the end of the year and say this is the core — these are the players we want to build around."

The foundation of that building will be infielders Hank Blalock and Michael Young and outfielder Laynce Nix. All three went into this weekend's three-game series with Detroit batting better than .321, giving the Rangers seven starters over .300 and a team average of .309, the best in the majors by 21 points.

Young, who had 204 hits last season and 450 in 424 major-league games coming into the spring, leads the majors in hits with 46 and was leading the American League in runs and total bases despite playing in the spotlight at shortstop, where he replaced reigning American League MVP Alex Rodriguez. Young, who came up as a second baseman, had played just 42 innings at shortstop before this season, but he volunteered to switch positions to make room for second baseman Alfonso Soriano, whom the Rangers got in exchange for Rodriguez. And he hasn't missed a beat in the field, committing just two errors in 28 games.

The Rangers' young pitchers also have excelled. The team ranks second in the American League with a 3.91 earned-run average, and starters R.A. Dickey, Ryan Drese and Joaquin Benoit — who have fewer than four seasons of big-league experience combined — are 7-1 with a 3.06 ERA. In the bullpen, right-hander Carlos Almanzar, 0-2 in



Alison Woodworth Fort Worth Star-Telegram

David Dellucci and Mark Teixeira (23) have paced Texas to one of Major League Baseball's best records.

18 major-league games the past three years, was 3-0, and Francisco Cordero had 10 saves.

Quality wins

And none of this is a fluke: Five of Texas' 18 wins have come against Anaheim, which has lost 10 times this season and led the majors with 19 victories entering the weekend. Last week, the Rangers swept the Boston Red Sox, who came into the series tied

for the best record in baseball.

All that has left Texas fans — who just a few weeks ago were lamenting the offseason losses of Rafael Palmeiro, Juan Gonzalez, Carl Everett and Rodriguez — thinking about the postseason for the first time since 1999.

Hart, however, is taking a longer-term approach. If the team is still in contention in July, he'll reassess things then. But for now, he says he's building

for a future beyond this season.

"We want to change our organization, the chemistry around our ballclub," he says. "It's been about giving as many opportunities to our young players as we can. We're excited that we're off to such a good start. But none of us are thinking about rushing it."

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