



Photos: Bernie Connelly (Soroka), Will Fagan (Toussaint, Allard), Bob Chadwick (Wright), Karl L. Moore (Wilson).

FOLLOWING THE TREND SET IN 2018, THE SUCCESS OF THE ATLANTA BRAVES AND GWINNETT STRIPERS WILL HINGE ON A GROUP OF TALENTED PITCHING PROSPECTS

**W**hen the Atlanta Braves won the National League East Division in 2013, the club utilized 21 pitchers, including just four rookies: David Hale, Cory Rasmus, Julio Teheran, and Alex Wood. Five years later, the Braves used 35 different pitchers – an astounding 15 of them rookies – on their way to the 2018 NL East title.

Call it the new normal for the Braves, who are now reaping the benefits of a stockpile of young arms acquired since a rebuild started in 2014. Promotions of minor league pitchers have increased in part due to injuries, but more as a product of the organization's new philosophy to provide extra rest for both starters and long relievers, and at times employ a six-man rotation.

"The extra-day rest is big now in what we're doing," said Braves manager and reigning NL Manager of the Year Brian Snitker in January. "To have numbers you can run up here and do that, and

stretch those guys out, it's key. As we've seen, the pitching depth is really very important."

Atlanta's 15 rookie pitchers included the cream of their prospect crop. Eight members of the Braves' MLB.com 2018 preseason Top 30 Prospects list reached the Majors, including Kyle Wright (No. 2), Mike Soroka (No. 3), Luiz Gohara (No. 4), Kolby Allard (No. 6), Max Fried (No. 7), Touki Toussaint (No. 11), Bryse Wilson (No. 13), and A.J. Minter (No. 15). All but Minter spent time with the Triple-A Gwinnett Stripers last season.

That group was put to the test early and often in 2018.

Gohara, expected to have the inside track to the No. 5 starter spot, suffered a left ankle sprain during Spring Training and spent most of the year battling injuries. His setbacks thrust Soroka into the spotlight, after the 20-year-old right-hander went 2-0 with a 1.99 ERA in four April starts with the Stripers.

Soroka proved ready for Major

League competition as he went 2-1 with a 3.51 ERA over his first five starts, but he too was hampered by injury. Right shoulder inflammation sent him to the disabled list on June 20, and he missed the remainder of the season.

The rest of the regular season saw the promotions of Gwinnett pitchers Fried (1-4, 2.94 ERA in 14 games, five starts), Toussaint (2-1, 4.03 ERA in seven games, five starts), Allard (1-1, 12.38 ERA in three games, one start), Wilson (1-0, 6.43 ERA in three games, one start), Wright (0-0, 4.50 ERA in four games), Chad Sobotka (1-0, 1.88 ERA in 14 games), and Wes Parsons (0-1, 7.20 ERA in one game), among others, to help fill crucial spot-start and long-relief roles.

"It's exciting and it means there's a lot of guys capable of doing the job," said Wright, the Braves' 2017 first-round pick who was called up for his Major League debut in September. "I've heard a lot of the older guys talk

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Photos: Karl L. Moore (Parsons), Will Fagan (Gohara, Fried), Bernie Connelly (Sobotka).

about how many guys it takes to really win at a high level. It truly does, it takes 40 guys. Last year it took close to that. A lot of guys came up and did their job, helped the team win. It shows the Braves are willing to trust us to go out there and do that.”

That trust in rookie hurlers extended into the postseason, when Fried, Toussaint, and Sobotka were all surprisingly included on the Braves’ NLDS roster instead of other, more experienced relievers. All three pitched in high-leverage relief situations against the eventual NL champion Los Angeles Dodgers, combining to go 1-0 with a 4.70 ERA in nine appearances.

“A lot of these guys were in the playoffs,” said Braves general manager Alex Anthopoulos. “I know that was a bit of a surprise at the time, but we just took the talent, we took the stuff. I think the playoff experience is going to be big for those guys as well, they’ve all been through it, there’s a confidence.”

Heading into 2019, Anthopoulos and the Braves are hoping the confidence gained by their young pitchers carries over. Atlanta entered Spring Training looking to fill their No. 5 rotation spot with one or more of their internal prospects instead of signing a free agent starter.

With Gohara and Soroka once again slowed by shoulder issues, a competition emerged between Fried, Toussaint, Wilson, Wright,

and Allard.

Allard was named Gwinnett’s Pitcher of the Year for 2018 after going 6-4 with the International League’s third-lowest ERA of 2.72 in a team-high 19 starts. Even with a Triple-A All-Star selection and Major League debut under his belt, the 21-year-old

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**-STRIPERS LEFT-HANDER KOLBY ALLARD**

left-hander will still have to stand out among his talented teammates.

“It is a competition, but it doesn’t really feel like that,” said Allard. “Everyone realizes that, no matter what happens, it takes more than 25 guys to win a World Series. No matter how things play out, whether you get a ton of time or a little time, whether it’s myself or it’s someone else, I think everyone is going to have a big part (this) year and we’re all just pulling for each other.”

No matter who wins a job on Atlanta’s Opening Day pitching staff, as last year’s example shows, the competitions will continue long after Spring Training ends. The sheer number

of pitchers vying for big league spots should ensure a deep and talented Gwinnett rotation all season long.

“There’s a lot of good pitchers, they have to pitch somewhere,” said Braves bullpen coach Marty Reed. “There’s only what, 13 spots at the big-league level? If you’re not one of the top 13, you’re going to be down in Triple-A. For those guys, the best way to approach it is to go down there (to Gwinnett), perform well there, and you kind of force our hand up here.”

Anthopoulos is confident that any member of last year’s rookie class could emerge as a key contributor to the pitching staff this season. If the 2018 roadmap is any indication, the success of the Braves in 2019 will depend on it.

“We do think guys like a Soroka, a Fried, obviously a Toussaint, Wright, Wilson, all these other guys, we wouldn’t be surprised if they go up like a (Mike) Foltyniewicz a year ago, or a Sean Newcomb, and have big years,” said Anthopoulos. “They have the stuff, they have the experience, they’re going to get better. And I know sometimes everybody wants the established star starter, but like I said at this time last year with some of these young, talented players, they just need to get an opportunity and we won’t be surprised if they have good years. We have that upside.”

**BY DAVE LEZOTTE**