

Gleeman: Twins' collapse reveals need for changes as familiar problems pile up

Aaron Gleeman

In the end, the [Twins](#) didn't put up a fight. Actually, in the end, they didn't even make it to the end.

Needing to defeat the [Guardians](#) at least three times, and more realistically four times, during the four-day, five-game showdown in Cleveland just to keep their sinking playoff hopes afloat, the Twins instead lost each of the first three games and four out of five overall. They have been reduced to bystanders in a division race they led for much of the season.

What was supposed to be high drama turned into a first-place team putting a third-place team out of its misery, as the Twins have now lost nine of their last 10 games versus the Guardians. Leading the division by five games in mid-July, and tied for first place as recently as Sept. 4, the Twins will spend the final three weeks of the 2022 season simply playing out the string.

There's no need to analyze playoff odds or compare the remaining schedules for the stretch run. There's no need to worry about the lockout-created quirk that allows the Guardians to finish with six straight home games against the lowly [Royals](#) while the Twins are

on the road against the [White Sox](#). None of that matters because the Twins couldn't play well enough to make it matter.

May was the Twins' last winning month. Their high-water mark was May 24, when they stood 11 games above .500 and led the AL Central by 5 1/2 games. They've gone 46-58 since, stumbling along at a 90-loss pace for four months, during which time the Twins have barely been better than the Royals (44-61) and [Tigers](#) (41-63).

There's no way around the role injuries played in the Twins' struggles. They've placed an AL-high 31 players on the injured list for more than 2,000 total days, and in the biggest series of the season they trotted out half of a Triple-A roster, without [Byron Buxton](#), [Jorge Polanco](#), [Tyler Mahle](#), [Royce Lewis](#), [Max Kepler](#), [Ryan Jeffers](#), [Trevor Larnach](#), [Alex Kirilloff](#) and many others.

That's been the case all season, and it would be silly to deny the reality of how damaging that many injuries can be to a team's ability to remain in contention. But it would be equally silly to suggest the injuries should excuse losing nine of 10 to the Guardians, or four months spent playing like the Royals and Tigers. Injuries are the reason for some things, not the excuse for everything.

If the Twins had put up a fight down the stretch only to finish just short, doing so without many of their best players might be seen as a positive, or at least the mark of a noble effort in difficult circumstances. But to simply collapse, losing almost every matchup to the team you're chasing in a division so awful it made falling out of the race nearly impossible, is beyond excuses.

This team never got healthy, but it also never got the rotation help it

so clearly needed, never adjusted from its [quick-hook management of starters](#) to account for the implosion-prone bullpen, never hit consistently with runners in scoring position and never shored up its shaky, mistake-filled baserunning and fielding. This team may have been better if healthy, but it certainly didn't deserve better.

For the fourth time in six years with a Derek Falvey-led front office, the Twins have a below-average pitching staff, ranking 10th out of 15 teams in ERA after finishing 14th in 2021. That might be acceptable for a young staff on the rise, but the Twins have gotten just 13 starts from 25-and-under pitchers all season and rank as the league's fifth-oldest staff overall.

Trading for [Sonny Gray](#) in mid-March proved to be a sound move, but trades for Mahle, [Chris Paddack](#), [Jorge López](#) and [Emilio Pagán](#) failed miserably and bargain-bin free-agent signings [Dylan Bundy](#), [Chris Archer](#) and Joe Smith [provided little value](#). Banking on young arms stepping up to fill in the many blanks was a flop, as more top pitching prospects got hurt than got to the majors.

It's possible that a healthy lineup could have offset that lack of pitching, but the Twins rarely had their offensive core together at any point, and by the time they arrived in Cleveland they were turning to [Gilberto Celestino](#), [Jake Cave](#), [Kyle Garlick](#) and [Sandy León](#) as regulars, with [Jermaine Palacios](#), [Mark Contreras](#), [Billy Hamilton](#) and [Caleb Hamilton](#) on the bench.

Twins outfielders have hit an AL-worst .202 with a .585 OPS since Aug. 1, including .167 in September, yet they didn't call up top outfield prospect [Matt Wallner](#) from Triple-A St. Paul until their playoff odds were single digits. And they never called up Double-A

on-base machine Edouard Julien to help fill in for Polanco, which would have freed up [Nick Gordon](#) for outfield duties.

Lack of spending is no longer a valid excuse, either. This season's \$140 million payroll is exactly average among [MLB](#) teams and ranks second-highest in the AL Central. Cleveland is likely going to win the division with a payroll under \$70 million, spending half as much as the Twins. It's not the payroll available to the front office that's the problem. It's how they've spent it.

Now they're out of the playoff picture with three weeks remaining, and already facing an offseason with many big questions and few satisfying answers. Why is the front office so unsuccessful at signing and trading for good, healthy veteran pitchers? Why hasn't the long-awaited pitching pipeline produced more young, impact arms? Why can't the training staff keep anyone healthy?

And, perhaps the most daunting offseason question: Why should anyone expect the Twins to be significantly better next season?

[Carlos Correa](#), who leads the team in Wins Above Replacement, is likely to opt out, as has been the case since the moment he signed. Royce Lewis, his natural replacement, is out until midseason. Any semblance of rotation depth relies on Mahle, Paddack, [Kenta Maeda](#) and other injured starters staying healthy. And no one knows how many games to expect from Lewis, Buxton and Kirilloff.

After back-to-back disappointing, frustrating seasons, it's clear that the status quo isn't working. There are huge roster holes that need filling, and big-picture questions that need answering about the front office, coaching staff, training staff and pitching pipeline. This team needs to change the way it does things or it needs to change

the people doing things. This isn't good enough.

(Photo of [Oscar Gonzalez](#) and Nick Gordon: Ken Blaze / USA Today)