

Amaro was loyal to a fault

By William C. Kashatus

Ruben Amaro Jr.'s firing as general manager of the Philadelphia Phillies last week is a cold-hearted reminder that Major League Baseball is an unforgiving business. From the moment a general manager is hired, the clock marking his dismissal begins to tick. Amaro lasted longer than most and, despite popular opinion, his seven-year tenure was an extremely successful one.

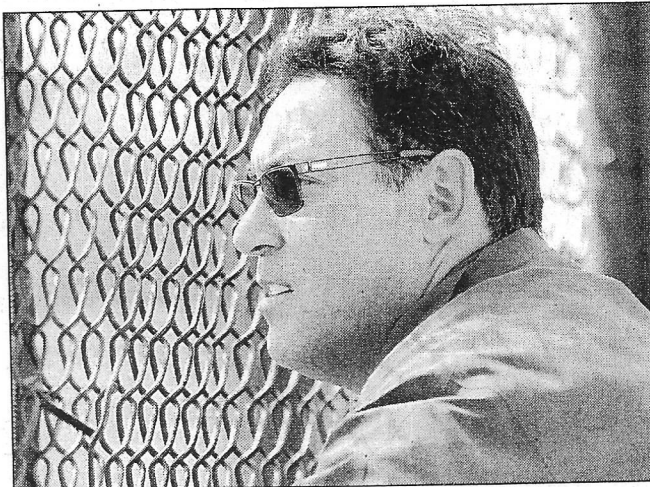
Hired shortly after the Phillies clinched the 2008 World Series, Amaro was charged with extending the team's postseason run for as long as possible. His resume includes three straight National League Eastern Division titles, a return to the World Series in 2009, and the creation of one of the best starting rotations in baseball history, the 2011 "Four Aces" of Roy Halladay, Cliff Lee, Cole Hamels, and Roy Oswalt.

Still, Amaro was vilified by a "what have you done for me lately" fan base for presiding over the decline of a once proud franchise. Specifically for extending the contracts of Jimmy Rollins, Chase Utley, and Ryan Howard — once the star-studded core of the team — and for trading away prospects for free agents Hunter Pence, Halladay, and Lee (twice).

Many fans have a short memory. They seem to forget that all of those moves were roundly celebrated when they were made. Dave Montgomery, then team president, encouraged, if not directed, them, wanting Rollins, Utley, and Howard to retire as Phillies, while also surrounding them with the talent to clinch another world championship.

It certainly isn't Amaro's fault that injuries put an unforeseeable end to those plans. If he is guilty of anything, it's unconditional loyalty to an organization that has always considered itself a "family," and operated that way.

The Phillies tend to cultivate their own and promote from within. Even when a front-office member,



Ruben Amaro Jr. watching minor league players last year.

Yong Kim / Staff Photographer

longtime manager, or coach is dismissed, he is immediately given another role in the organization.

Amaro fit that profile. He is a Philadelphia native whose father, Ruben Sr., was a longtime Phillies' player and coach. Amaro Jr. was an outstanding student-athlete at Penn Charter and a Phillies' bat boy during the glory years of 1980-1983.

After graduating from Stanford University, Amaro was drafted by the California Angels, but found his way back home to Philadelphia, where he became a member of the 1993 pennant-winners.

In 1998, Amaro made a seamless transition to the front office as then-general manager Ed Wade's apprentice. While Wade trained him in the art of contract negotiations, Amaro learned about scouting and player evaluation from Dallas Green, the manager of the 1980 world champions, and longtime general manager Paul Owens, both of whom were retained by the Phillies after they "retired."

When Amaro became general manager, he was extremely loyal to the people he hired. In fact, a general manager's primary responsibility is to hire effective assistants and put them in a position to succeed. That also means firing them when they fail, but Amaro didn't have the heart to do that.

Had the front office adopted a

more sabermetric approach to evaluating players, perhaps the Phillies would have been able to replenish the parent team with homegrown talent. Had Amaro held his assistants in charge of scouting and player development accountable, he wouldn't have been forced to replenish the farm system over the last few months by trading away whatever veteran talent remained on the parent club.

But Amaro is the product of a franchise that has always allowed loyalty and sentiment to overrule the hard realities of running a successful multimillion-dollar business. He's never worked for another organization that has rebuilt itself successfully within the more recent economic and evaluative structures of the game. Andy MacPhail, the new Phillies' president, is different.

MacPhail's experience as general manager of the Minnesota Twins and Chicago Cubs, and as president of the Baltimore Orioles, make him better prepared to rebuild the Phillies. He began that process by making Amaro accountable for his unconditional loyalty to a familial approach that just doesn't work in today's game.

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