

Can Phils do it again this year?

Smart offseason moves have given the team another fighting chance.

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Outside of Philadelphia, the new baseball season fuels the hope of fans that 2009 will be their team's year to win a world championship.

But here in the City of Brotherly Love, fans ruminate about the Phillies' chances of repeating that late October parade down Broad Street. Some even dare to mention a "dynasty," capturing two championships and three or more pennants in a five-year span.

Let's be realistic, though.

Building a championship franchise in the out-of-control era of free agency is a crapshoot. A superstar in one city can easily become a bust in another. Prima donnas with huge salaries often breed contempt in the clubhouse, destroying the chemistry it takes to prevail over a 162-game season grind.

Injuries can also rob a team of its most gifted performers, with starting pitchers often spending at least part of a season on the disabled list.

Sheer luck

Of course, luck is the most important intangible. In order to win a championship, a team must catch a few breaks along the way and then peak during the post-season.

The Phillies' organization understands how difficult it is to repeat. That's why it has given pitching ace Cole Hamels a three-year, \$20.5 million contract, and Ryan Howard a three-year, \$54 million deal, and re-signed a host of other players, pushing the club's payroll over \$130 million. That's "big-market" spending for a team that has traditionally insisted that it is a "small-market" franchise.

The huge payroll is actually a \$130 million insurance policy. It offers the organization the best chance to repeat as World Series champions and retain the fan base it worked so hard to build.

The genius of team president Dave Montgomery is that he's persuaded the majority owners to spend that kind of money at a time when the economy is tanking.

General Manager Ruben Amaro Jr. is to be commended for retaining players who were critical to the nucleus of the 2008 world champions (Howard, Hamels, Jamie Moyer, Shane Victorino, and Jayson Werth), and also many of the key role players (Eric Bruntlett, Greg Dobbs, Ryan Madson, and J.C. Romero).

Chemistry

Those signings ensure that the Phillies' special chemistry will not be disturbed.

Even the new acquisitions appear to make the team stronger than last season's.

Raul Ibanez, Seattle's former leftfielder, brings more consistency — offensively and defensively — than Pat Burrell. He also has a solid, blue-collar work ethic, and at \$31.5 million over three years, he's much less expensive than Burrell.

Pitcher Chan Ho Park has 117 major-league wins and 1,590 career strikeouts with several different teams. If his arm is healthy, he could compete for the last spot in the rotation. If not, he's a one-year, \$2.5 million insurance policy for the bullpen.

Ronny Paulino, an experienced major-league catcher from Pittsburgh, gives the Phillies greater insurance at an injury-prone position.

Just as important, there are no prima donnas in that group. Those signings are good, calculated risks.

There are no guarantees for repeating as world champs, but the Phillies have done everything they can to increase their chances. Perhaps the fans should simply be thankful for that.

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