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This Big Horn staff strikes out nobody, walks nobody, and works

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It snowed on the tenth of April in this valley and the club was 5-5, and it has been a cold, wet spring since, and the Rams are 27-21.

Third in the Ruby, three behind Mexico City, two clear of the last postseason spot in the conference. Sixteen and eight at home. Eleven and thirteen everywhere else.

The payroll is \$195.3 million, third-highest in The Big League and the most any club in this division is spending. It has been the most any club in this division is spending for most of a decade now, and the trophy case in that building holds nine division banners and no rings.

Big Horn went 19-17 against the Ruby and has gone 8-4 against everyone else, which is backwards from how it usually runs here and is twelve games long, and twelve games in this valley is about one cold snap.

The front of this rotation is why the record looks the way it does. Miguel Sanchez, signed on March 3 and 31 years old, is 5-1 with a 2.57 earned run average and a 0.89 WHIP across 10 starts. Nick Williams, who has a Cy Young Award on his shelf and was a fourth-round pick in 2021, is 7-2 with a 2.91 and has walked 10 men in 55 2/3 innings. Two starters, 20 turns between them, and a combined earned run average under 2.75.

The trouble is behind them. Brian Cronk is 1-2 with a 5.01 across the same 10 starts and is signed through 2033 at \$9 million. Jeff Creel is at 4.39. Wally Gullede, at \$13 million, has made five starts and sits at 4.75. Dan Quirk, the 30th overall pick in 2024, spent 38 days on the injured list starting March 7 and has three starts to show for the season.

What is left is a very particular kind of pitching staff and worth explaining, because it is the opposite of how most good ones are built. Big Horn has walked 115 men, second-fewest in the league. It has also struck out 348, which is the fewest of any staff in baseball. Nobody gets a free base and nobody misses a bat. Every ball gets put in play and the defense behind it either catches it or does not.

That produces a 1.16 WHIP, second-best in the league, and six shutouts, and also a 5-8 record in one-run games and a 2-4 record in extra innings, because a staff that does not strike anybody out has no way to get itself out of an inning once it has started to go wrong. That is not bad luck. That is the design showing its edges in the games where the design gets tested.

Sanchez, at one year and \$10.1 million, was the best transaction anybody in this division made all winter. John Underwood is 34, has a 2.45 with eight saves and a 0.86 WHIP, and has walked eight men in 44 innings.

Bill Raymond is hitting .292 with a .538 slugging percentage, 12 home runs and 39 runs batted in, and he has scored 35 runs, which is more than anybody else on this roster. He has three Most Valuable Player awards and four Platinum Sticks and a Great Glove and he is 28 years old and signed through 2035, and there is no argument to be had about whether he is the best player in this division, because he is, and the only interesting question about him is what it has added up to. Which, so far, is nine division titles, eight conference championship series, two finals, both lost to Denver, and no ring.

Brad Battiste was signed on the twentieth of February for three years at \$22 million and is hitting .284 with a .500 slugging percentage, which is a fair return. Brian Freimuth is 25, makes the league minimum, has 10 home runs and 36 runs batted in, ninth-most in the league, and has been the best surprise of the spring. Josh Ferguson is hitting .294.

And Danny Hess is owed \$30.5 million a year through 2034 and is hitting .253 with two home runs and a .321 slugging percentage in 217 plate appearances. Steve Schwarz is owed \$26.4 million, missed 39 days, and has played 24 games. Josh Newman is hitting .184. Antonio Candelario is at .152. Neil Greene is at .130. Those numbers are what a \$195.3 million payroll looks like at the bottom of the order, and they are the reason this club is seventh in the league in runs rather than second.

One trade all winter, and it was Jason Hopkins arriving from Denver for a tenth-round pick. He has a 2.63 earned run average and 21 strikeouts in 13 2/3 innings and has walked two men, which is a great deal of relief pitching for a selection nobody would have missed. Three signings, one of which was Sanchez. Johnny D. has run this baseball team since 2006 and has never been a loud operator in January, and nothing about this particular winter changes that.

Downstairs, at the three levels that have started, Miami is 16-8 and in first and Orlando is 22-14. Huntsville is 17-19, and Huntsville is where this organization actually lives, because Huntsville is the last stop before this valley. Ernesto Sanchez is hitting .297 with four home runs there. John Morris has a 2.35

earned run average across 38 1/3 innings. Steve Fox and Justin Barth are in that same rotation and both are getting knocked around, at 6.75 and 5.58.

None of it arrives in time to matter this year. But a bat and three arms at Huntsville is more than this place usually has at once, and what this place usually has has been enough to win the division nine times.

Two months from now the deadline comes and this club will be in it, because it always is. Whether Johnny D. does anything about the back three of a rotation he is paying \$23.8 million for is not something anybody outside that office knows, and it will not be reported here before he says it himself.

Twenty-seven and twenty-one. Cold spring. Same division, same payroll, same question waiting at the end of it.