



THE GALVESTON GROTTO

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The cheapest contender in baseball

BY RUTHIE ALCORN · THE GALVESTON GROTTO

Thirty-two and sixteen. Nobody in baseball has a better record. Milwaukee has the same one.

The payroll is \$124.3 million. That is 25th of 32. Seven teams in this league are spending more than \$165 million and every one of them is behind us.

Here is the part we should say out loud on the island, because it is the whole argument this front office has been making since 2018 and it is finally sitting in first place where everybody can see it.

Greg Wilks makes the league minimum and has a 2.34 earned run average in 10 starts. Jeremy Lowry makes the league minimum and has a 2.96. Ricardo Sainz came into this organization as a teenager, makes the league minimum, and has a 1.72 earned run average and a 0.68 WHIP in six starts. Antonio Perez makes the league minimum, has 14 saves, third-most in baseball, a 1.29 earned run average and a 0.67 WHIP. Jeremy Horrocks has a 1.27. Nelson Mata has a 1.61 and a 0.81 WHIP. Jamie McClurkin has a 3.33 and four holds.

Seven pitchers. Six of them at or near the minimum salary, and most of them came up through this system. The staff has the fourth-best earned run average in the league, the third-best rotation, the third-fewest home runs allowed, and 22 saves against five blown, and it costs almost nothing.

That is 14 years of drafting and signing arms and keeping them, and those of us who sat through 2019 have earned every bit of this one.

The two expensive players have been worth it too, which is not always how this goes. Ashton Turner is hitting .357 with a .411 on-base percentage and a .588 slugging percentage, has scored 46 runs, the most of anyone in this division, and has stolen 24 bases. He won a Most Valuable Player award eleven years after this club lost 113 games and he is playing better now than he did then. Lance Fitzgerald is hitting .304 with 10

home runs and 37 runs batted in, eighth-most in the league. Turner took a player of the week award on May 3 and Fitzgerald took one today.

Danny Adams, signed on March 3 for one year at \$9 million, is hitting .286 with 34 runs batted in. That was the one real addition of the winter and it worked.

Now, the objection, because somebody always raises it and this year it has more teeth than usual. We went 23-13 inside the division, where our wins came straight out of Fort Collins and Cincinnati and Denver. Fine, say the doubters, but who have you actually beaten.

Nine and three since the crossover. Nobody has done better against outsiders, though five other clubs have matched it. It is not much evidence, and it is the first answer this club has ever had to that question.

The season itself: 1-2 out of the gate, then a sweep in Fort Collins, then 19-6 through April including nine straight wins from the 18th to the 27th. The club is 18-6 at home, 23-13 inside the division, 9-3 against the rest of the conference, and 10-3 in one-run games. It swept New York four straight to close out this stretch and has won four in a row.

Now the honest part, because 32-16 does not need help and we are not in the business of softening things here.

This lineup has 48 home runs, 24th in the league. Outside of Turner, Fitzgerald and Adams there is very little. Oscar Mitchell has 208 plate appearances and is hitting .179. Matt Martin is at .203. Miguel Chavez, signed in February for \$6 million, is at .206 with a .222 on-base percentage. Matthew Barlage is at .183. Randy Wilkinson has played all 48 games and has no home runs. Five regulars under .245 in a first-place lineup is a real thing to watch, and the 10-3 record in one-run games is the kind of number that usually comes back toward even.

And there are four men on the injured list right now, Ricardo Sainz among them. Stephen Briggs has missed 43 days and Aaron Milstead 26. Aaron Roy and Jose Veras are both on the 60-day list, at 56 days apiece. This pitching staff is doing what it is doing while short-handed, and how long that holds is the question that decides the summer.

Downstairs is thinner than it has been. Red Bud is 16-20 and Shreveport is 16-20 and Lafayette is 9-15. What is there sits in two places.

Justin Tidwell is 20 and hitting .409 with a .727 slugging percentage at Waco, and he is the one to watch. Matt Bolen is at .361 there, Adrian Miller at .376, Marvin Ortiz at .311.

Up at Red Bud we have three arms we drafted and kept. Matthew Tenner has a 2.84 across 31 2/3 innings, Johnny Peterson a 4.13, Cliff Griffin a 7.15 in 11 of them. Dante Marrozzim is slugging .510 at

Shreveport with seven home runs, and Jorge Gonzalez has a 2.09 at Red Bud at 21. And Chris Hein, the 20th pick in this month's draft, has not played a game for us yet.

Eleven postseason trips in franchise history. One championship series, in 2006, and never since. We have flattened and rebuilt twice in the time this site has existed, and every stage of it came out of our own farm system rather than a checkbook, and here is what that looks like at the end of May: the best record in the conference, built on seven homegrown pitchers making almost nothing and one Most Valuable Player we drafted ourselves.

We have been right about the plan for a long time. It is nice to have the standings agree for once.