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Nobody told this island the rebuild was over

BY **KAMALEI HOʻOKANO** · HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

You have spent two Aprils being told not to look at this baseball team, and you were right to listen. The record went 58-104 and then 64-98, 202 losses in two seasons, last in the division both times, 34 games behind on each occasion, which is the kind of arithmetic that empties a ballpark in July and keeps it empty the following spring.

So it was a small thing, and nobody made anything of it, that the Paddlers opened this season on March 29 against Mexico City and won 4-1, and then took the series two games out of three. Mexico City leads this division now. The water was already moving that week. It has not stopped since, and eight weeks on, the direction is no longer the settled matter everyone took it for.

Here is where that leaves them: 25-23, fourth in the Ruby, five games behind Mexico City, two games above a line neither of the last two Aprils came anywhere near. That is the whole of it through 48 games, and the road there was stranger than the record lets on.

They were 8-3 on April 10. Nobody on this island had the first idea what to do with that. They gave a week of it back, then won four straight into the 28th and stood 17-10, seven games over, which is the point in the spring where you were entitled to let yourself think about it. Then they went to Spokane, a club that has won 14 games all year, and lost all three, and lost a fourth in San Diego. Four in a row. They would do it again three weeks later, and the timing of the second one is the whole story of this season so far.

Here is the ledger, and it is a cleaner one than it has any right to be. Against the seven other clubs in this division, the Paddlers are 20-16. Against everybody else, all of it since the crossover, they are 5-7.

Zeus L, 32 years in the chair and still the only general manager this franchise has ever had, was asked plainly whether any of this means the club has turned a corner. He did not say yes.

> *"Too early to trust it," he said. "Older roster, not a lot of core leadership pieces or depth. Happy with where we are, but expecting trouble once we leave divisional play."*

He said that before the schedule left divisional play. The trouble arrived about on schedule, which ought to tell you something about how long a man has to sit in one chair before he stops guessing.

What has kept this club upright is not a mystery, and you can read it in the simplest numbers there are. The Paddlers have the sixth-best earned run average in the league this season at 3.59, and they have given up the 12th-fewest runs. What they have not done is hit. Their 202 runs scored are tied for 24th among 32 clubs this season, the team is batting .239, and 43 home runs ties for 28th. A club shaped like that wins about as often as it loses, and it has done precisely that: nine more runs scored on the year than allowed, and a 5-7 record in the games decided by a single run. There is no omen in any of it. It is a team playing exactly its weight, which after two summers of playing well under it is its own kind of news.

Which is why the arm matters more here than it would anywhere else. Travis Sudduth signed on this winter for $45.2 million, having won the Cy Young Award in Phoenix in 2027 and again in 2028 and a third in Big Horn last season. He made eight starts for this club, went 4-1 with a 2.15 earned run average, struck out 40 in 37 2/3 innings, and did not give up a home run in a single one of them. His last start was May 9. He has been on the injured list ever since, two weeks now, and if you have been wondering what happened to this rotation in the middle of May, you have been looking at the answer the whole time.

The hitting, such as it has been, has come almost entirely from a 24-year-old second baseman earning the league minimum. Adam Bills has played all 48 games and is batting .303 with a .372 on-base percentage and a .562 slugging percentage, with 12 home runs and 41 runs batted in. Twelve of this club's 43 home runs are his, and he was named the league's player of the week today. He is making $500,000, playing every inning of every game, and supplying better than a quarter of the power on a roster built around men who were famous while he was still in high school.

And there is Tim Doherty, who came over from Southland on April 12 for a fifth-round pick two drafts from now, a 34-year-old outfielder nobody was meant to notice, and who was the league's player of the week two weeks after that, and who is now on the injured list with the rest of them. Odoardo Carrascalo and Kevon Foster have not appeared in a regular-season game this year at all. There is not much standing behind the front of this roster, and Zeus said as much himself in the same breath he used to say he was happy.

Christian Loredo is the other story, and it is a better one than it looked three weeks ago. He is 37, he owns two Most Valuable Player awards and seven Platinum Sticks, and not one of them was won in this uniform. He opened the season 5 for 10 with two home runs and seven runs batted in across three games, got hurt on March 31, and was gone 36 days.

> *"Loredo will be ok," Zeus said. "He's coming off the IL soon, and it's his first injury to cause missed playing time in eight seasons. He's the literal GOAT of the TBL, and he'll continue to be a shining example to the young developing players."*

He came back on May 10, the same afternoon the schedule turned and the losing started, and he has hit .304 with a .396 on-base percentage across the 12 games since, with one home run. He is back, he has been good, and the club has gone 5-7 with him in the lineup. All three of those are true at the same time and not one of them causes the others, and after 32 years of watching this franchise you learn to leave them sitting side by side instead of tying them into a reason.

There is one more thing worth saying and none of it is happening in this ballpark. Honolulu is 22-14. Antioch is 16-8. At Antioch there are two pitchers, Gary Walters and Casey Emerson, and between them they have struck out 60 men in 56 innings this spring. Carlos Navarro is 19 in the same clubhouse with five home runs. Up at Honolulu, Dan Sowers has a 3.18 and Jonathan Reyes 32 strikeouts across 39 innings.

Four arms and a bat, not one of them past 23, and not one of them has been seen on this island. Two seasons of losing a hundred games bought this as well, more slowly, and this is the part that lasts.

Nobody on this island has watched any of them play. That is generally how it goes with a tide. You notice the water is higher and you cannot say what hour it turned.

The amateur draft class walks in this week, and the second pick in all of it belonged to this club, which is what two seasons like those buy you. They spent it on a pitcher, Oliver Zimmer. A team sitting sixth in the league in earned run average and 24th in runs scored has just used the second selection in the draft on more pitching, and whether that is conviction or habit is not a question anybody gets to answer for about four summers.

Whatever this roster turns into by September, some of it walks in through that door, and the rest of it is already here, two games over, eight weeks in, with the tide still coming and nobody on this island willing to say yet how far up the sand it gets.