



SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

MAY 24, 2032 · THE SOUTHLAND MASKED BANDITS BEAT

A 6.62 rotation, and a farm system finally worth watching

BY GERALD MABRY · SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

The starting pitchers have a 6.62 earned run average.

That is not the worst in the division. It is the worst in The Big League, 32nd of 32, and the club in 31st place, Spokane at 5.98, is nearly two-thirds of a run better than that. Southland starters have thrown 204 innings, fewer than any rotation in baseball, because they keep not being able to stay out there, and the bullpen has thrown 236, which is the arrangement a team arrives at when the first four innings are a rumor.

The payroll is \$72.4 million. That is also last in the league, and it is \$23 million below the next-lowest club and \$70 million below the league average. So the worst rotation in baseball is also the cheapest, which is either an explanation or a coincidence, and after 28 years of watching this franchise the distinction has stopped feeling important.

Twenty and twenty-eight. Twelve out. Minus-87 in run differential, the worst figure in this division and the third-worst anywhere.

And here is the part that will amuse anybody who has followed this franchise under any of its names. The entire early hole was dug by the seven clubs that know this team best: 14-22 inside the Topaz. Since the crossover, 6-6. Exactly average against everybody who has not had to watch it every year. Familiarity, it turns out, breeds 14-22.

The hitters have struck out 495 times, more than any lineup in the league, and are batting .227, 31st. They have also hit 64 home runs, which is seventh-most in baseball. This is a team that either hits the ball into the seats or does not hit it at all, and there is something almost restful about watching a lineup with no middle to it. Ben Becker is hitting .141 in 195 plate appearances. Manny Ruiz is hitting .225 with 11 home

runs and 31 runs batted in and took a player of the week award on May 10. Both of those men are in the same lineup and both descriptions are accurate.

Emmanuel Martinez is 24, makes the league minimum, and is 7-1. Seven of this club's 20 wins belong to him. His earned run average is 3.69, which on this staff is a different sport.

Behind him: Chris Kempner at 6.14, Barry Richards at 8.07 with 10 home runs allowed in 29 innings, and George McDaniel, who is 20 years old and has a 10.57 earned run average and has walked 24 men in 30 2/3 innings. Somebody decided a 20-year-old should learn to pitch here rather than somewhere quieter, and there is a case for it, and it is being made at his expense in front of everyone.

The bullpen is fine, which is its own small joke. Malachi Lott has 12 saves and a 1.64 earned run average. Jean Dupont has a 1.98. Justin Cruz has a 1.88. Brock Nickerson has 48 strikeouts in 34 innings. Three blown saves all year, the third-lowest total in the league. A relief corps this good on a club this bad is a thing you would design if you were trying to be funny about it.

The winter's transactions, in full, and read them in order.

Six million dollars sent to Somerville on New Year's Eve for Somerville's second-round pick in the 2032 draft. Two teenage pitchers, Perry Servidio at 18 and Ricky Hill at 19, sent to Huron on Opening Day for two fifth-round picks, 2033 and 2034. Tim Doherty sent to Oahu on April 12 for a 2034 fifth. And then Francisco Ojeda and Francisco Bernal, both 31, both signed on March 17 for one season apiece, for a combined \$27.5 million, which is more than a third of the entire payroll and both of whom will be gone in November.

So: the club on the lowest payroll in baseball spent six million dollars it does not have buying a second-round pick, turned three players it did not need into three more picks, and rented two men for a season at a price that would have covered the pick outright. Every piece of that was aimed at the draft just completed and the two after it.

Anthony Sexton has run this club since 2028 and engineered the move. The plan the transactions describe is plain enough: the money goes where the roster is being rebuilt from, and the veterans on one-year deals are there to keep the lineup legal until it arrives. This column believed about 40 percent of that in March and believes rather less after spending an afternoon with the ledger above.

Because here is the part that is genuinely, seriously different, and it has never been true before in this franchise's history under any of its names.

Des Moines is 24-12. Little Rock is 24-12 and in first. Every level that has opened is at or above .500, and the top two are a combined 48-24.

Steve Boettcher was a second-round pick in 2029 and is hitting .391 with a .478 on-base percentage and a .713 slugging percentage at Little Rock, which is Double-A, and he is 21. Christian Lombera is hitting .295

at Des Moines. Zack Maurer is hitting .333 at Springfield. Alvin Phillips has four home runs at Des Moines.

Then the rest of it. Malik Cabey is hitting .441 with a .521 on-base percentage and a .780 slugging percentage at Springfield. Gabriel Morales is slugging .688 at Little Rock with nine home runs. Carlos Cruz is hitting .406 at Des Moines. David Colwell has a .462 on-base percentage at Little Rock.

The arms: Abdul Adel is 22 and 4-0 with a 1.38 at Des Moines, which is Triple-A. Pedro Jimenez, an eighth-round pick last June, has a 1.85 there. Franklin Rivera, the 29th overall pick in 2030, is 20 years old with a 1.88 at High-A. Jon Barbour has a 2.30. Stan Merz has a 1.11 at Triple-A.

Thirteen names, eight bats and five arms, most of them at Double-A and above, in an organization that has never in 31 seasons won a division title and has never once won a second postseason series.

The Steam never had this. In St. Louis there was always one prospect, and he was always two years away, and he was always traded or hurt. Every level that has opened at or above .500, and ten men producing at once, is not something that has happened here in the entire history of the franchise, and the only honest thing to say about it is that it is too many for all of them to disappear.

Which, given everything, is as close to hope as this column is prepared to get in May. The starters have a 6.62 and the payroll is last and the record is 20-28 and something underneath is finally, unmistakably alive.

It will probably rain on it. It usually does.