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Rams lose ace Sanchez, rip off 10-2 run

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Big Horn is 60-45 and in first place in the Ruby. The man it signed in March to win games has not pitched since the 19th of July.

Miguel Sanchez sprained an ankle pitching against New Orleans that day. He was 7-2 with a 1.98 earned run average in 20 starts, an All-Star in his first season here, on a one-year deal for $10.1 million. The diagnosis was two weeks.

The Rams have gone 10-2 since.

They were two games behind Mexico City as late as the 25th of July. They took the lead on the 30th, swept Tampa Bay to close the week, and are three games up with six straight wins. Eleven and four since the break. Fifteen and six since the fifth of July. That is not a hot April. I have stopped being suspicious of it, a little.

In May I wrote that this staff strikes out nobody and walks nobody, and that every ball gets put in play and the defense either catches it or does not. Nothing has changed except the size of the sample. Big Horn has the fewest strikeouts of any staff in baseball and the fewest walks. It has the best WHIP in the league, the second-best earned run average, and the second-fewest runs allowed. It has thrown 12 shutouts.

I also wrote that a staff built that way has no way out of an inning once it starts to go wrong, and that it would show in the close games. It has. Big Horn is 13-20 in one-run games. First place anyway.

The back of the rotation I complained about has mostly stopped giving me reasons. Jeff Creel was at 4.39 in May and is at 3.51. The starters as a group have a 3.42 earned run average, second in the league. Nick

Williams is 11-4 with a 2.56 and has walked 19 men in 130 innings. Brian Cronk is still at 4.55, and Dan Quirk at 4.95, and they are the fourth and fifth men.

Johnny said as much in July, before Sanchez got hurt.

> *"SP I'm starting to cool on," he said. "I don't think it's as big of need with guys like Williams, Sanchez, and Creel stepping up. Could look for a similar caliber guy. Still looking for bullpen upgrades and will be shopping aggressively for those deals in the coming weeks."*

Then he did exactly that. On the 2nd of August Big Horn got Malachi Lott and Nick Hill from Southland for its second- and fifth-round picks next year. Southland kept half of both salaries and sent $2 million along with them. Lott has 22 saves and a 2.16 earned run average, with 53 strikeouts in 41 2/3 innings. Hill has a 4.17 and 47 strikeouts in 41 innings.

That is two relievers who miss bats, joining a staff that does not. I suspect that was the point.

The bullpen was not the problem I expected it to be. John Underwood is 34, has 17 saves, a 2.00 earned run average and a 0.89 WHIP, and has thrown 94 1/3 innings, which is a lot of work for one man in relief. The staff has also blown 16 saves, and one man cannot pitch every late inning.

As for the picks, Johnny told me in May what he thinks of those.

> *"Not concerned about picks," he said. "Why use them on teenagers when you can pick up established talent?"*

He also told me in July that Ernesto Sanchez might be coming up. He is up. The 23-year-old first baseman hit .331 with 14 home runs at Huntsville, came to the valley, and is hitting .400 with three home runs in 11 games. He was the league's player of the week. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has him 24th. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him eighth.

> *"We are really excited with his development and think he'll be a great addition to the ball club," Johnny said. That one I will give him.*

The lineup around Sanchez needed a new name. It was seventh in the league in runs in May. It is 18th now. Bill Raymond has 24 home runs, tied for 10th in the league, and 74 runs batted in, fourth. Brian Freimuth has 16 home runs and 20 stolen bases on the league minimum. Brad Battiste has 18 home runs.

Danny Hess, at $30.5 million a year through 2034, is hitting .249 with nine home runs. Steve Schwarz, at $26.4 million in the last year of his deal, went back on the injured list in late May with a back strain and has played 44 games. Those two are $56.9 million.

Downstairs is the part of this organization nobody talks about. The six affiliates have the fourth-best combined record in the league. They have finished in the top eight every season since 2025. Huntsville is 54-39. John Morris, who I told you in May had a 2.35 there, is 11-1 with a 1.95 across 111 innings. The league's list also has Jim Marge, last year's first-round pick, 54th, and Justin Barth 57th. Steve Fox, who was getting hit in May, is closing at Huntsville now and has 14 saves.

Johnny will trade a draft pick for a reliever any day of the week, and the farm keeps producing players anyway, most of them taken in rounds nobody watches. I do not have an explanation for that. Johnny probably does.

Fifty-seven games left, 30 of them at home, where this club is 35-16. Thirty-nine inside the Ruby, six apiece against every club in the division but Spokane, including Mexico City. The other 18 are against the Ice Conference.

The two weeks for Miguel Sanchez are up and he is not back yet. Lott is here. Ernesto Sanchez is here. The payroll is $199.5 million, second in the league. Nine division titles, eight conference championship series, two finals, both lost to Denver.

I asked Johnny in July whether the window was open this year.

> *"Window is absolutely open," he said.*

It is August in the valley and the door is standing wide. We have been here before.