

HONOLULU STAR-ADVERTISER

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Paddlers sit two out, 17-31 against winning clubs

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

In May I told you the tide was still coming in and that nobody on this island could say how far up the sand it would reach. The honest answer, ten weeks later, is about this far: 52-53, third in the Ruby, eight games behind Big Horn, and two games short of San Juan for the eighth and last playoff spot in the Fire Conference. It has gone 27-30 since that piece ran. The water came up to the line and has been lapping at it all summer.

Paul said something in May that was worth keeping. "Expecting trouble once we leave divisional play," he said, before the schedule ever left it. He was right, and he has kept being right. Against the seven other clubs in this division the Paddlers are 26-19. Against everyone else they are 26-34. Against clubs holding a winning record this morning, 17-31. They beat the teams they are supposed to beat, 35-22, and there is nothing wrong with that except that the other kind of team is the kind that plays in October.

The summer had its tide in it all the same. On June 10 they were 29-34, as low as they have been all year. Then 19-10 from there, a sweep at Tampa Bay and another at Vancouver, six straight wins going into and out of the break, and on July 17 they beat Mexico City 3-1 and stood 48-44, four over, with the whole second half in front of them. Mexico City won 10-0 the next night. That was the first of seven straight. Denver swept them here and Rochester swept them there, the last of it an 11-inning loss on July 25, and from the top of that streak to this morning the Paddlers went 4-9.

Travis Sudduth came back on July 19, the day after the streak broke. I wrote in May that if you wanted to know what happened to this rotation, his absence was the answer, and I still believe it. He was gone ten weeks. He has made three starts since, six innings in each, seven earned runs in all, and the club lost every one of them: 9-5, 4-2 in 11, and 5-2. Somebody who reads omens would tell you he came home to a losing

streak and brought it with him. I read a lot of omens. Seven runs in 18 innings is a 3.50, and a club that scores two runs behind its ace twice in a week is not losing because of its ace.

The rotation is not the trouble. Oahu's starters own a 3.83 earned run average, sixth-best in the league this season. Bill Esposito, at 35, has thrown 110 innings to a 3.11, and Roberto Garcia has made 13 starts at 2.39. The trouble comes later in the evening. The bullpen's 3.97 ranks 24th. There have been 16 blown saves. The club is 5-8 in extra innings and 11-11 in one-run games, the arithmetic of a team that gets to the ninth inning even and cannot quite get out of it. Pablo Pena has 23 saves, tied for ninth in the league, and a 4.94 earned run average.

And the bats remain the bats: 433 runs, 26th in the league, and a .303 on-base percentage, also 26th. Adam Bills has done what one man can, 11 home runs since May for 23 on the year and 70 runs batted in, tied for 10th in the league, all of it on the league minimum.

Then Loredo. In May I told you he was back and that he had been good, and for 12 games he was. Since May 24 he has hit .187 with six home runs across 57 games. There are 515 home runs behind him, fourth on the league's all-time list, two of them in the last two weeks, and a contract in front of him that runs through 2034, $22.4 million next year and $16.2 million the year after. That contract isn't going anywhere at the deadline, and I don't believe Paul would move him if it could. So he stays, and for the last 57 games the only question is which Loredo walks out to left field: the one with 515, or the one hitting .187.

Which brings us to the deadline, and it arrives with the next sim. So which is this club, a buyer or a seller?

I think it is hard to say, and I think that is the honest position. The case for buying is a two-game gap with 57 to play and a payroll of $127.7 million, 22nd in the league and $15 million under the average. The case against is everything in the paragraph about winning clubs. Huron sits a game above San Juan and has already paid for Jimmy Smith with a 2034 first-rounder and more, which tells you how the clubs ahead of Oahu mean to spend these two weeks. Vancouver, San Diego and Phoenix are one game behind, and all three of them want the same spot.

Back in June the club let it be known, in one word, that it wanted a third baseman. Then came call-up day, and the third baseman came up the hill from Honolulu instead. Curt Schalla, last summer's first-round pick, hit .316 with 11 home runs at Hilo this season and kept hitting at Honolulu. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has him 18th. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him 169th and files him as a designated hitter, which is a polite way of doubting the glove. He has started 11 of the 12 games since at third all the same, and he is batting .275 with a .370 on-base percentage. Frank Allison, who had hit .311 since late May, has started one. That is an answer to the June request, and it did not cost a thing at the deadline. Whether it is the right answer is what the next 57 games are for.

It also tells you where the real money in this organization is kept. Ten of the league's top 100 prospects belong to Oahu, more than any other club in baseball. Oliver Zimmer, the second pick in the whole draft, is second on that list. Gary Walters is fifth, Casey Emerson sixth, and Carlos Navarro, the 20-year-old I told you about in May, is ninth. DSA Reports, which disagrees with the league about plenty, has Navarro, Emerson and Zimmer seventh, ninth and tenth, three of its top ten. That is two summers and 202 losses, paid back in full, and it is the one thing in this organization a contender would pay anything for.

Which is why I do not expect any of it to be sold for two months of a pennant race. A club with that list could buy nearly anyone. A club with 17-31 against winning teams has no business doing it. The two questions I put to Zeus two weeks ago, whether the eighth spot is something he means to build toward and whether Loredo's history or Sudduth's health would decide what he did with the break, are still out there. After 32 years I have learned that he answers with the roster, and the roster he sent to third base on July 19 is 23 years old.

Fifty-seven games, then. Two back of San Juan, three back of Huron, one ahead of three clubs who will each tell you the same thing about themselves. Last night Jimmy Terry hit a home run and Tommy Martin won it in the tenth, and Oahu beat Cincinnati 2-1. It was a small thing. The water does that sometimes just before it turns, and sometimes it does it for no reason at all.