ARIZONA REPUBLIC-JOURNAL

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Hot Firebirds shop rotation, Morales included

BY **AUGIE SALCIDO** · ARIZONA REPUBLIC-JOURNAL

Robby Morales is 9-2 now. He was 6-0 when I last wrote about him, a 31-year-old nobody much wanted in January, pitching on a one-year deal for $8.7 million, and he has kept doing it all summer... a 3.09 earned run average, 111 strikeouts and 24 walks in 116 innings. He has been the steadiest thing in this ballpark since the first week of April.

And this week his name went up on the trade block, along with nearly everyone else who takes the ball every fifth day.

I want to tell you about the two weeks that led there, because they were the most Phoenix two weeks I can remember.

On July 9 the Firebirds started losing and did not stop until July 20. Eight straight: three before the break, then a sweep in Myrtle Beach and two more at home to Cincinnati. Then on July 21 they beat Cincinnati in 10 innings, went to New Orleans and swept, won two of three in Tampa, and took two of three from Galveston at home, the last of them a 4-0 shutout last night. Eight and two in the last 10. It is August, the team is 51-54, and it is three games behind San Juan for the last playoff spot in the Fire Conference.

Three games. I have covered this club for 22 years and I know what three games in August feels like here... it feels like a window somebody is about to close on your fingers.

Because the front office posted the list anyway. Morales. Dan Gonzalez, who has a 2.90 earned run average across 20 starts on a $3.1 million deal. Juan Samayoa. Mike Taylor. Kyler Baxley. Kelvin Bueno and Hunter Christie from the bullpen, and Jose Zavala, Steve Leonard, James Rucks and Tom Smith from the lineup. Almost all of them are on deals that end this year.

I will not write the column some of you want, the one that tells Brendan to sell everything and start over. I have known him too long, and he has started over too many times already. But I will write down what the list says, because it says plainly what nobody has said out loud: this front office does not believe three games is close enough. And the hitting tells you why.

This lineup is 30th in the league in slugging and 30th in home runs. It is 22nd in runs. Bryce Mosely has 21 home runs and 71 runs batted in, tied for seventh in the league, and Javon Kornegay, the kid I told you about in May, is hitting .271 with 11 home runs. Juan Mujica has stolen 41 bases. After them it gets quiet in a hurry.

The pitching is 18th in earned run average now, down from 13th in May, and the bullpen has blown 19 saves, though Jose Hernandez has been a pleasure: a 1.60 over 40 games with 15 holds. Mike Taylor, the Pitcher of the Year winner in the last year of a contract that pays him $27.6 million a season, has a 4.86 across 13 starts. It is hard to trade a man at that number, and harder still at that salary.

Jay Seabolt came up from Tucson, where I told you in May he was the one man down there both good and close. He has played 32 games and hit five home runs, and DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him 66th in the league.

Now, the part of this that belongs in any column about this club, and you knew I would get to it.

Travis Sudduth won two Pitcher of the Year Awards in this uniform. When he left for Big Horn last August, the return was a first-round pick, a second-round pick and two young players, Willie Villalba and Casey Morris. Both of those young players are on the league's own list of its top 100 prospects this summer. Morris, a second baseman at Tucson, is 60th. Villalba, the 20-year-old I told you about in May before his club had opened its season, has a 3.06 earned run average at Yuma and is 90th.

That is five Firebirds on the list, which is a lot for this system. Chris Ma, 20, is 49th. Victor Calderon, a center fielder hitting .328 with 10 home runs at Flagstaff, is 76th. Tristan Miller is 97th. Two of those five names came back for the best pitcher this franchise has had in a generation. That is how Phoenix has always done it.

Fifty-seven games left, 30 of them here. Thirty-nine are inside the Ruby, six apiece against Oahu, Mexico City, Big Horn, San Diego, Vancouver and Spokane.

In 2030 I wrote that a division title was a turning point, and the next year went 78-84. So eight wins in 10 games is eight wins in 10 games... Robby Morales pitches again this week, and it would be a strange and lovely thing if he did it in this uniform.