SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

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Southland sold its bullpen and kept Ojeda

BY **GERALD MABRY** · SOUTHLAND TRIBUNE

The general manager put a sign in the window this week. On the league's trade block, beneath a list of 18 names, Anthony wrote: "Southland's shelves have been restocked." And then, of the one man the shoppers keep walking past: "Really surprised that no one wants Ojeda."

The shelves were restocked because they had been emptied. On July 19 Chris Kempner went to Chicago, Jean Dupont and Danny Kimball to Denver, and Barry Richards and Jon O'Rourke to Virginia. On August 2 Malachi Lott and Nick Hill went to Big Horn. Southland paid half the salary of nearly every one of them to get the deals done, and in most cases sent cash along as well, which is how you move a 36-year-old starter with a 5.81.

What came back is draft picks and minor leaguers: Big Horn's second- and fifth-round picks next year, a Rochester sixth-rounder from Chicago, and four young players, including Ryan Morgan, a third baseman hitting .359 at Frisco before Denver sent him here, and Chris Enriquez, a pitcher Denver had listed as available "in the right deal." Apparently this was it.

I said in May I believed about 40 percent of this front office's plan. I am up to about 45. A club that actually sells at the deadline, rather than standing still and calling it patience, is at least a club doing the thing it says it is doing. That is new here, under any of this franchise's names.

The team those pitchers leave behind is 46-59, seventh in the Topaz and 17 games behind Kansas City. It has lost five straight and eight of its last 10, and this morning is its worst record of the season. The staff's earned run average is 5.08, last in the league. So is its WHIP. So is the number of runs it has allowed. The rotation was 32nd in May; it has climbed to 31st, which in this town counts as a parade.

And yet. This lineup has hit 151 home runs, tied with Denver for the most in baseball, while batting .235 and striking out more than anybody. It remains the most honest offense in the league. Francisco Ojeda has 28

of those home runs, sixth in the league, and 291 for his career. Ben Becker, who was hitting .141 when I last wrote, is hitting .195 with 21 home runs, which is progress of a kind I cannot describe with a straight face.

So, Ojeda. He is 31, in the last year of a one-season deal, nine home runs from 300, and nobody will trade for him. I asked Anthony in July whether he would get there in a Southland uniform.

> *"Ojeda is unwilling to sign an extension at this point," he said. "We are willing to discuss with him."*

I believe that one about 90 percent. It has the ring of a man who has already had the conversation.

Emmanuel Martinez, the first pick of the 2030 draft, is 11-3 with a 3.63. He had seven of this club's 20 wins in May and has 11 of its 46 now. He is 24 and makes the minimum and he is the reason to come to the ballpark every fifth day. George McDaniel, the 21-year-old I described in May as learning to pitch in front of everyone, has a 10.63 earned run average and 58 walks in 62 2/3 innings, and is still learning.

Anthony told me in May, "We are making strides towards being competitive. Perhaps there was a more direct way to get there that would have taken less time but the future is bright." The first half of that I dispute. The second half I have been checking.

Because the thing I wrote about in May, the farm system finally worth watching, is still there. The affiliates have the ninth-best combined record in the league, their best finish in years. The league's own list of its top 100 prospects has six of them, which ties Southland with Myrtle Beach and trails only three clubs.

Christian Lombera is the one to write down. He is a 23-year-old shortstop at Seattle, one step from here, hitting .277 with eight home runs and a .358 on-base percentage. The league's list has him eighth. DSA Reports, in its list dated July 19, has him 13th. When he arrives he will be the second reason to come to the ballpark, after Martinez, and I have not been able to write the words "second reason" about this franchise in a long time.

Behind him, Blake Lee, an 18-year-old catcher, is 25th. Zack Maurer is 38th, Steve Boettcher 61st, Chad Brown 79th and Bill Meger 96th. DSA also has Alvin Phillips, who has 10 home runs at Seattle, 17th.

Six names on one list. In St. Louis there was always one name, and he was always two years away, and then he was traded or hurt. I was going to write that six is too many for all of them to disappear. I wrote that in May too. We will see.

Fifty-seven games left, 27 at home. Thirty-nine inside the Topaz, six apiece against five contenders and Memphis. The pitching staff that faces them will be younger, cheaper and, I suspect, worse, and nobody in this front office will be surprised by any of it.

The sun came out a little this week. It came out in the minor leagues, where it usually does. Up here, the forecast is unchanged.